



One of the conditions Elizabeth Beall Banks put on the sale of her land to Johns Hopkins was that she be able to stay on the land and raise her 80 head of Black Angus cattle until she died. (Photos Frank Johnston -- The Washington Post)

Land Advocate Elizabeth Beall Banks Dies

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Elizabeth Beall Banks, 93, a teacher and land advocate who sold her family's 138-acre farm to Johns Hopkins University for its Rockville biotechnology research center, died of pneumonia Jan. 17 at her home on the farm.

Miss Banks, who had taught for 36 years in the Montgomery County grade and junior high schools, sold the property for \$5 million in 1989, a fraction of its real value. The only conditions were that the school replace her drafty old house with a modest new home, where she could live and raise her 80 head of Black Angus cattle until she died. The university could develop 30 acres as long as trees buffered her from the development, she agreed.

"She loved this land so much. We all agreed it would never be sold to a developer. When Johns Hopkins came along, we felt it was a great opportunity for all of us," said her sister, Beulah B. Newell.

The farm, known as Belward, had been in her family since the mid-1800s, purchased by her great-grandfather, Ignatius Beall Ward. Miss Banks, who was born on her family's farm in Howard County, moved to the Rockville farm at age 15, when a tornado ruined her father's farm.

She attended Maryland State Teachers College at Towson (now Towson University) and began teaching at the Rockville Academy in 1931, when it housed the county's primary grades. She continued to teach in the county's grade schools, and in later years she taught junior high school students with special needs. She retired in 1967.

Each day after school, she would change into her overalls and ride a horse or drive a tractor. She baled hay, shoveled out the horse stalls and fed and watered the cattle. The family's Brown Swiss dairy cows gave the richest milk in the county, she bragged.

Miss Banks inherited most of the farm in 1958 from her mother and an aunt who lived in Canada. The aunt, knowing how much she loved the land, trusted her to keep the farm from commercial and residential development.

She once threatened trespassing developers with a shotgun. Another time, she erected a 6-by-12-foot sign urging commuters stuck in traffic to complain to county officials, whose phone numbers she helpfully provided in large type. When bulldozers started to knock down trees in the wooded buffer she depended on, she and a friend hugged the century-old tree trunks and blocked the dozer.

She sold the land to Johns Hopkins because she admired the university. Some of its male students wooed her when she was a young woman. Her mother was treated at its medical center when her lung cancer was diagnosed in 1962.

So when some of the trees in her buffer were knocked down, she got a stop-work order. "It breaks my heart," she told a Washington Post reporter in 2001. "When they started cutting down those trees, it was like they might as well have put a knife in my heart." The dispute was settled, and Montgomery County, which acquired some of the land from the university, planted more trees in the buffer.

Miss Banks, who continued to farm the land until her death, set up a scholarship fund for Johns Hopkins medical students, and greeted her own former students, who would stop by the farm from time to time with their children. The children, her sister said, loved to visit the Black Angus, the two miniature horses and the donkey. Miss Banks was a longtime member of the Maryland Farm Bureau.

The 30 developed acres are now home to Human Genome Sciences Inc. The land, some of which will be retained as open space, is set aside for research and academic development, said Dennis O'Shea, a Johns Hopkins spokesman.

"Miss Banks was an extremely generous person and she had vision for the future of this property," O'Shea said. "She has been a very important part of the history of Montgomery County and her gift will be an important part of its future, as well."

Survivors include her sister of Holland, Pa., and a brother, Roland L. Banks of Charlottesville, Va.