

# ***A Message from the County Executive***



Dear Friends,

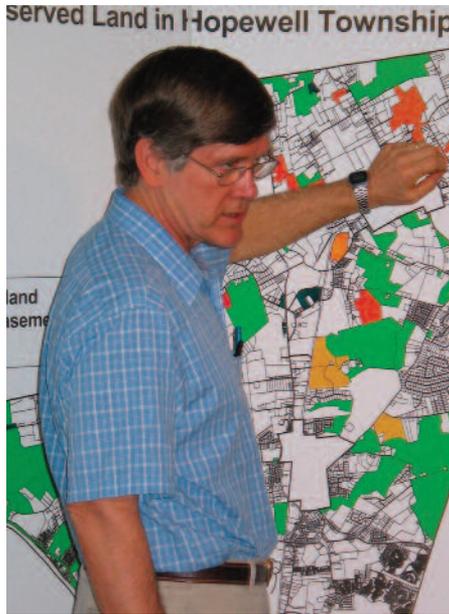
There are few places more beautiful than Mercer County's beloved Baldpate Mountain, featuring the Ted Stiles Preserve. Offering sweeping panoramic views of the Delaware River from its highest point and featuring a scramble of trails for every level of hiker, our mountain is a treasure to be discovered. The Ted Stiles Preserve was named in honor of a man who was a passionate advocate for conservation and outdoor recreation, and whose goal was to inspire people of all ages to discover, understand and respect this diverse, natural environment.

Through this booklet, I invite you to delve into the history of Baldpate Mountain and the Kuser Family legacy. As we look to the future, Mercer County and the Mercer County Park Commission, along with our partners at Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space, will continue to inspire children, families and individuals to connect with this unique and wonderful landscape and encourage efforts to support and protect it for future generations.

Sincerely,

Brian M. Hughes, Mercer County Executive

## *In Memory of ...*



### **Ted Stiles (1945 - 2007)**

President

Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space

1989 - 2007

*"Ted Stiles loved this mountain and spent 10 years working to save it. For about 20 years, he worked to save open space throughout the region as the President of Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space...*

*This preserve is Ted Stiles' legacy - a reflection of his work, vision, and passion which will be appreciated for generations to come."*

(From the bronze plaque dedicated at the first Ted Stiles Memorial Hike on September 16, 2007 by Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space. The plaque is mounted on a stone opposite the Kuser house on Baldpate Mountain.)

# The Kusers at Baldpate Mountain and the Creation of the Ted Stiles Preserve

For most of the 20th century, Baldpate Mountain was synonymous with the name Kuser. Three generations of Kuser family members owned property at Baldpate over a span of 77 years, from 1910 to 1987. Over time, the mountain was referred to by locals and the press as “Kuser Mountain.” What follows is a brief history of the Kusers at Baldpate Mountain, and how their land and house came to be preserved for the public through the efforts of Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space and the group’s former president, Ted Stiles, in cooperation with Mercer County, the State of New Jersey Green Acres Program, and the Township of Hopewell.

## The Kusers at Baldpate Mountain

John L. Kuser, the first Kuser to own property at Baldpate, acquired his wealth in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as one of the Kuser brothers who founded and owned the Trenton Brewing Co. from 1892 to 1899, then merged other local breweries with it to form the the People’s Brewing Co. in the early 20th century. He and his four brothers have been described as “serial entrepreneurs,” and together invested in Lenox China, the Mercer Auto, and other Trenton businesses as diverse as ice, luggage and street cars.

In 1910, John L. Kuser of Trenton and later of Bordentown acquired “350 acres of farmland” on Baldpate Mountain for use primarily as a game preserve on which to raise pheasants. According to a *Trenton Evening Times* report, the land was purchased to “devote the entire tract to a pheasant farm” to raise no fewer than 2,000 to 3,000 pheasants in the first year.\* The pheasants were to be raised “for market and stocking purposes” (i.e., for hunting on game preserves) with “houses” for the birds being constructed.

\* *The Trenton Evening Times*, April 23, 1910.

The article noted the “great market” for pheasants in the United States, developed with the introduction of pheasants from China in the 1880’s.\*\*

Not surprisingly, hunting was another reason for acquiring the site. A single story structure with a wrap around porch near the main house served as a hunting lodge and perhaps home for the gamekeeper.

The 1910 *Trenton Evening Times* article had high praise for the “top of mountain” site, boasting that it “is one of the finest locations in New Jersey. It overlooks the Delaware Valley and rivers in one direction and the high country in the northern section of the State in the other.” That there was a panoramic view of the Delaware River and points north suggests that the top of the mountain had been previously cleared for farming or grazing, which gave the mountain its “bald” top and name. The Times article also notes that the site is located near a train station of “the Belvidere Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company” in Titusville, which may have been a consideration for John Kuser’s choice of location.

When John L. Kuser acquired the property at Baldpate Mountain, a small stone farmhouse where the main house is now located already existed, as did access from Fiddler’s Creek Road. The original stone farmhouse of about 800 square feet, based on its remaining stone foundation, probably dated back to the 18th century. Kuser is thought to have constructed the present day old hunting lodge and later the nearby main house of over 7,000 square feet, with its spacious wraparound enclosed porch. Kuser never lived at the main house, which was used on occasion for family gatherings. Numerous site improvements made by Kuser included the planting of mostly Asian specimen trees along the access road and an orchard, creating a stone walled garden in front of the house, and building aviaries for exotic birds.

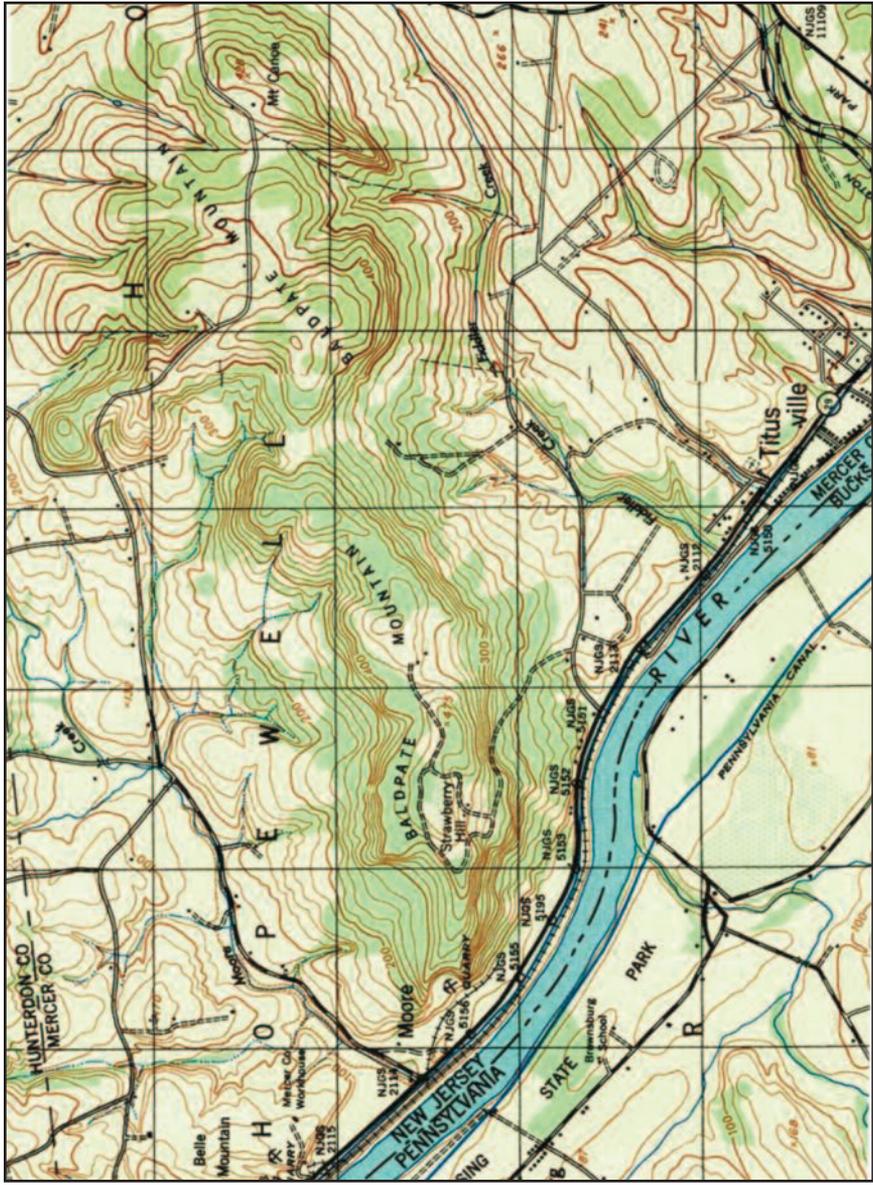
*\*\*Introduced from China in the early 1880’s, the Ring-Necked Pheasant quickly became one of the most popular game birds hunted in the U.S. Young chicks were typically distributed to the game preserves of hunting clubs.*

The story of a second generation of Kusers at Baldpate Mt. begins with the birth of John's two sons, John, Jr. and Walter. The elder son, John Jr. (called Jack) was born in 1898 and younger son Walter has born in 1906. The family lived on a farm called Fernbrook, near Bordentown in Chesterfield Township, N.J. While still living there, son John, Jr. married in 1922 and Walter married in 1932.

With John Jr. starting a family (his first son was born in 1925), it became apparent to John Sr. in the early 1930's that this arrangement was too crowded for two sons to raise their families. So, John Sr., not long before his death in 1937, offered his married oldest son, John, Jr., a choice of raising his family at either his farm in Chesterfield Township or his property on Baldpate Mountain. John, Jr. chose the latter and moved there in 1931 with his wife Olivia and their 6 year old son, John E. Kuser. His brother Walter remained at the farm near Bordentown and, after getting married in 1932, raised his family there.

John Kuser, Jr., who later became treasurer of the Lenox China Company in Trenton, and his family became the first Kusers to live there year around. Shortly after arriving at Baldpate Mountain, his second son Michael was born in 1934. John Jr. lived at Baldpate Mountain until he died at age 66 in 1964, a span of 33 years. With his family living so close to the old hunting lodge, John Jr. may have decided to build another hunting lodge in a more remote location about a half mile away near Sparrow Bird's rented farmhouse and the nearby pond for ice harvesting. Along the driveway to the farmhouse, John Kuser maintained an orchard.

John Jr. and Kusers after him referred to the cleared area around the main house as "Strawberry Hill" for some unknown reason. Perhaps strawberry patches had replaced pheasant "farming" which by that time presumably had ended. The name Strawberry Hill started to appear on a U.S. government topographical maps in the 1930's as being a small section of Baldpate Mountain where the main house was located (*see map on following page*).



1943 topographical  
map U.S. Army  
Corps of Engineers

A map of the area created by John Kuser, Jr. for "sojourners" to his place is prominently named "Strawberry Hill, NJ" which suggests John Jr. having named it so and used it as his mailing address. U.S. topographical maps dated before John Kuser, Jr.'s arrival just showed the name as "Bald Pate" or no name at all.

John Jr.'s older son, John Erdmann Kuser, the third John Kuser in the family, lived there until age 17 when he enrolled at Princeton University in 1942. (He later raised a family in Princeton and had three daughters.) John E. left his mark at Baldpate Mountain by the planting of 1,500 White Pine trees in rows along a ridge at the top of the mountain while in high school. Those mature trees, now over 100 feet in height, remain a prominent feature on the Baldpate Mountain summit.

Michael, John Jr.'s younger son, lived at the house his entire life, first as a child and then as a adult and as a married man from 1972 until his death in 1987 at age 53. Michael and his wife Lynda raised one child, Wendy, who lived with them until her wedding on Baldpate Mountain in 1994. Michael kept many horses at Strawberry Hill and continued the hunting tradition of the Kusers which included hosting a fox hunt club and brunches at the main house.

When John Kuser Jr. died in 1964, his wife, Olivia S.Kuser, inherited her husband's share of the property and lived there with her then 30 year old son Michael until she died in 1970. Upon her death, ownership of the property was split between her sons, Michael and John E. Kuser. Michael's portion included the house and most of the land, some 951 acres. John E. inherited just 129 acres in the Honey Hollow section of Baldpate Mountain. So, what began as a 350 acre purchase by John L. Kuser in 1910 mushroomed through various land acquisitions by John Kuser, Jr. to nearly 1,100 acres.

John E. Kuser, who obtained a doctorate in dendrology (forest science) and taught forestry at Rutgers University for many years until age 76, managed the forested Honey Hollow property soon after inheriting it in 1970.

He thinned out trees to encourage the growth of high value hardwoods for timber sales and cedars to attract deer, engaged a hunting club to hunt deer and build trails, and brought Rutgers students from his forestry classes to the site on field trips for “lab” sessions. In 2001, seven years before he died at age 83, he sold the development rights on the 129-acre property for \$1 million to Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space and the N.J. Department of Environmental Protection. John used the proceeds to found and fund a chair in “urban forestry” at Rutgers, which is now named for him and his wife.

In 1986, shortly before his death the next year, Michael and his wife Lynda sold their land holdings of approximately 989 acres for nearly \$6 million to Trap Rock Industries, which was expanding its nearby quarry operation. They retained a life estate which Lynda sold to Trap Rock Industries in 1998 for \$600,000 so that Trap Rock Industries could sell the property to Mercer County and the State of New Jersey that same year. Lynda continued to live at Baldpate Mt. until she gave up her life estate.

## **Creation of the Ted Stiles Preserve**

In October of 1989, in reaction to signs that Trap Rock Industries was planning to seek expansion of its Moore Station quarry northwest of Baldpate Mountain, some Titusville residents, organized by Pleasant Valley Road property owners Bill and Lynn Bannerman, met at the Union Firehouse to air their concerns and share information. There had been an increase in blasting and the number of trucks hauling crushed stone on Rt. 29 had multiplied. Perhaps more telling was the fact that Trap Rock was extending the fence around the quarry to the area southeast of the quarry zone, which was not zoned for quarry operations at that time. A crowd filled the firehouse auditorium that fall night in 1989 and listened as residents voiced their concerns.

Ted Stiles, the president of newly formed Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space, was there and shared his expert knowledge as to why this ecological gem should be preserved, not blasted away. That meeting, and several more at Hopewell Township Committee meetings, ignited a nine-year movement that culminated in the preservation of Baldpate Mountain.

Most important to the preservation of Baldpate Mountain was over 1,200 acres of land which Trap Rock Industries had acquired for expanding its quarry operation located on the northwest side of Baldpate Mountain. The company's acquisitions, which included 951 acres purchased from Michael Kuser in 1986, started after its 1982 purchase and reactivation of a quarry abandoned 50 years prior. With its acquisitions, the company saw Baldpate Mountain as a massive source of trap rock (diabase) which could keep the quarry in operation for many decades to come since there was no end in sight to the demand for crushed trap rock needed for road and construction projects. Trap Rock's land, which included the summit of Baldpate Mountain with the Kusers' house, was a critical part of Ted Stiles' vision to preserving what he then called "Kuser Mountain."

Trap Rock Industries' desire to expand its quarry operation on Baldpate Mountain had to overcome a major obstacle: Hopewell Township's willingness to rezone the land from residential (with 3 acre lots) to a quarry operation. Its first proposal in 1992 to the Hopewell Township Committee was to rezone 343 acres which would have almost tripled the size of its quarry. In 1994, it came back with another, more modest, proposal to rezone 138 acres. Both proposals met with fierce public opposition.

In 1990, as a first step toward preserving Baldpate Mountain as a nature preserve, Ted Stiles, the new president of Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space and a Rutgers biology professor, put together a plan to preserve Kuser Mountain with funding from the State of New Jersey, Mercer County, Hopewell Township, and Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space.

His plan was the basis on which funding applications were submitted to the N.J. Green Acres Program requesting all parties to receive grants and the County and the Township to receive low interest loans. The total funding request to Green Acres was \$7.4 million to be used for the acquisition of over 1,200 acres on Kuser (Baldpate) Mountain.

In 1991, the following year, the Green Acres Program approved the funding request and negotiations with property owners to sell their land began in earnest by Ted Stiles. But, the monumental achievement in securing \$7.4 million in State funding was about to be undone. In the fall of 1993, the all of the state funding for the project was in jeopardy of being lost. Some members of the Township Committee were having second thoughts about taking on a \$750,000 low-interest state loan. The Township Committee for a short time withdrew its acceptance of State funding for the project in hopes of negotiating a deal with the largest land owner, Trap Rock Industries, to donate most of its land for a park in exchange for being allowed to expand its quarry.

The Township's backing out of the funding agreement with the State was met with overwhelming opposition, led by Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space. Over 3,000 residents signed a petition against the move. By the spring of 1994, the Township Committee, in the face of public outrage, reconsidered its decision and agreed to re-join the other partners in accepting the State funding for acquisition.

Meanwhile, Ted Stiles was busy approaching numerous land owners about selling their property. By 1994, he was able to persuade three owners to sell their land, including one at below market value. One parcel of approximately 150 acres, bordering Trap Rock's land, was the first to be acquired, while two other adjacent parcels on the north side of Pleasant Valley Road totaled 139 acres. All three parcels were acquired with Green Acres and County funds for a total of \$1,865,000.

The 1994 acquisition was a prelude to the much more ambitious and challenging effort, which Ted Stiles then called the Baldpate Mountain Project, to acquire over 1,700 acres on Baldpate including those of Trap Rock Industries, the major land owner. The clash between Trap Rock Industries' quarry expansion plans and the preservationists came to a head in 1994, when Trap Rock asked the Township to re-zone 138 acres to almost double the size of its quarry operation. The request was turned down by the Township Committee, as previously noted, in the face of public opposition to the plan.

After striking out getting the Township to re-zone its land to expand its quarry, Trap Rock soon came back to the Township with another zoning request. This time a proposal was submitted to the Township Planning Board to re-zone over 900 acres for a 227-unit Villas on the Delaware residential development, consistent with existing residential zoning. This proposal, again meeting by public opposition, fared no better than the previous proposal and was rejected. It is interesting to note that plans for the residential development apparently called for excavating the top of Baldpate Mountain to lower the elevation of the development - a scheme which would provide Trap Rock with the rock it coveted under the guise of a residential development. Very clever indeed!

With the rejection of its quarry expansion and residential development plans, Trap Rock Industries was the victim of its own trap, having bought hundreds of acres on Baldpate Mountain without having first secured the ability to use or develop the land. After its residential development proposal was rejected, the company was persuaded to sell all of its landholdings for open space. County Planning Director Leo Laaksonen in 1997 took the lead in negotiating a contract of sale. The successful negotiations and \$11,400,000 in funding, provided by the Green Acres Program (\$8.9 million) and Mercer County's Open Space Trust Fund (\$2.5 million) enabled the parties to close on the property on April 29, 1998. This acquisition preserved the largest tract of open space in Mercer County which was also the largest forested area in the County.

Under the terms of a four party agreement signed in May, 1998, State Green Acres funds for the purchase of the Trap Rock property were to be contributed by Mercer County, Hopewell Township and Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space. The County was to contribute \$5.9 million in grants and loans, the Township \$1 million in grants and loans, and Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space a \$500,000 grant for a total of \$7.4 million. To complete the funding package, the State was to contribute an additional \$1.5 million and Mercer County and additional \$2.5 million from its Open Space Trust Fund.

Based on its contribution of Green Acres funds and Open Space Trust funds, Mercer County became the primary land owner, assuming a nearly 80% interest in the Trap Rock property.

The purchase of land from Trap Rock even included its quarry operation, but as part of the sale, Trap Rock was allowed to continue its quarry operation on approximately 170 acres of land for a period of 25 years at no cost. At the end of that period in 2023, the County will be able to redevelop the land for recreational use, perhaps with a lake in place of the deep hole now excavated.

The last major piece of land preserved as open space on Baldpate Mountain was 129 acres still owned by John E. Kuser. This natural area was also of historic significance, as a small farming community which may date back to the Revolution and in the 19th century was an African-American settlement known as Honey Hollow. Remnants of house foundations and stone walls hundreds of feet in length, presumably to "fence in" farm animals, are all that still exist. At Stiles' request, after years of negotiations, John Kuser agreed in 2001 to sell a conservation easement on his property to Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space and the NJ Department of Environmental Protection for \$1 million to permanently preserve it in its natural state except for the right to build one house on up to 10 acres. The purchase was made with Green Acres and County grants.

Five years after his 2008 death, John Kuser's estate sold the Honey Hollow property in fee to Mercer County and the State of New Jersey for \$675,700. In 2001, Michael Kuser's estate and Lynda Kuser sold the last remaining parcel owned by Michael Kuser, 14 acres off Fiddler's Creek Road to Mercer County for \$270,000. Another 53 acres along Fiddler's Creek Road was acquired by Mercer County and NJ DEP in 2000 for \$700,000.

The most recent additions to the Ted Stiles Preserve, totaling 231 acres, occurred in 2013 and included: 88 acres of the Hunter farm on Pleasant Valley Road acquired by the County; the 129 acre Kuser easement acquired in fee by Mercer County and NJ DEP; and 14 acres off Pleasant Valley Road acquired by NJ DEP. The acquisitions totaled nearly \$2.5 million. A map showing how all the various parcels combined to form the Ted Stiles Preserve is shown below.



A concept plan for Baldpate Mountain setting forth permitted uses, proposed site improvements and stewardship goals was developed for the Mercer County Park Commission in 2002. It laid out general guidelines for trail development, parking, and the restoration of structures.

Consistent with this plan, the County's Park Commission prepared a Baldpate Mountain Management Plan in 2009. Under the plan, the Park Commission was given the responsibility of maintaining the property. The Plan was prepared in cooperation with the N.J. Division of Parks and Forestry, Hopewell Township, and Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space.

The Ted Stiles Preserve at Baldpate Mountain, including land on the east side of Pleasant Valley Road, now comprises just over 1,500 acres, making it the largest preserved natural area in Mercer County. Ted Stiles, who was the driving force behind the effort to save Baldpate Mountain, died in 2007. His memory lives on with the naming of the Ted Stiles Preserve at Baldpate Mountain by County Executive Brian Hughes that same year.

## **Preserving the Kuser House, Lodge and Garden**

As the majority owner of the Ted Stiles Preserve and the entity responsible for its management, Mercer County and its Park Commission in 2007 undertook a \$1.7 million renovation of the exterior and first floor of the 1920's era Kuser house, which included all new mechanical and septic systems so that the structure could be occupied for special events. In addition, the County fully restored the nearby single-story, single-room old hunting lodge as an educational facility and added public restrooms. The access road from Fiddler's Creek Road was improved and a parking area was created just off the road for hikers using the Summit Trail. Green Acres funds helped to cover the cost of the renovation work and site improvements.

Later improvements included construction of a large patio on the south side of the Kuser house by the Mercer County Park Commission in 2011. The patio offers a spectacular view overlooking the landscape toward the Delaware River. The Park Commission in 2016 renovated the second floor bedrooms of the Kuser house as office space for Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space. Lastly, a few yards from the Kuser house, John E. Kuser's stone walled garden, totally overgrown with weeds, was cleared and re-planted with native plant species by Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space in 2012 with help from volunteers.

Tom Ogren

## Sources:

*Olivia Kuser (daughter of John E. Kuser) and Tim Kuser (son of Walter Kuser) were primary sources for the history of the Kusers at Baldpate Mountain. Other sources were Wendy Kuser Dellapolla, Baldpate Mountain Master Plan prepared for the Mercer County Park Commission, Hopewell Valley News (April 7, 1994, June 2, 1994), (December 1, 1994, and September 6, 2007) issues, Pennington Post (December 8, 1994), Princetononline, (May 7, 2007), files and newsletters of Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space, Fare to Midlands by Henry Beck, recorded deeds in the Mercer County Clerk's Office, www.mindat.org, Wikipedia, Pat Sziber, founding board member of Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space, and Russell Swanson, former member, Hopewell Township Environmental Commission and former board member of Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space.*

*Text edited by Sally Lane*

*Cartography by Michael Van Clef*

*Photography by Tom Ogren*

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## **Ted Stiles Preserve Notable Events**

- Funding approved by State Green Acres Program for land acquisition, 1991
- First parcel of land acquired, 1994
- Over 1,200 acres of land acquired from Trap Rock Industries, 1998
- Baldpate Mountain Resource Inventory prepared for Mercer County Planning Division, 1999
- Baldpate Mountain Concept Plan prepared for Mercer County Park Commission, 2002
- Summit Trail from Fiddler's Creek Road to the summit completed by volunteers, 2006
- Ted Stiles Preserve at Baldpate Mountain dedicated by Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes, 2007
- First Ted Stiles Memorial Hike held by Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space, 2007
- Major renovations to Kuser house/lodge, plus site improvements, completed by Mercer County Park Commission, 2009
- Ted Stiles Preserve Management Plan was prepared by Mercer County Park Commission in cooperation with the Mercer County Planning Division, NJ Division of Parks and Forestry, and Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space, 2009

**Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space**

**PO Box 395**

**Pennington, NJ 08534**

**Tel. (609) 730-1560**