

INTRODUCTION TO REDLAIR (Draft)

Haywood, Katherine, and Charles Rankin, Landowners
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Redlair is the name given to 750 acres on the South Fork River in Gaston County owed by Charles, Haywood, and Katherine Rankin and partially protected through agricultural easements held by the Catawba Lands Conservancy (Conservancy). The term unofficially is used to refer to a 1200-acre project area that includes Redlair proper, 350 adjacent acres owned by the Conservancy, and 100 adjacent acres owned by two other landowners (similarly under easement with the Conservancy). The name "Redlair" was bestowed by Jean Cantrell Rankin, on account of the redness of the soil as well as the hair of her husband Forney Rankin and five children, when the Rankin family moved in 1954 back to the region where Forney Rankin's forebears had lived since the early 1800's.

Redlair's qualities are unique in the southern Piedmont and derive from the combination of several factors. The first factor is the river. The South Fork of the Catawba River and the main stem of the Catawba River are the only significant rivers in the Charlotte area. The main stem of the Catawba River was converted decades ago into a series of reservoirs, and with its disappearance its riparian habitat and riverine ecosystem disappeared with it. With the exception of several small dams built to support late 19th and early 20th century power generation and the textile industry, the South Fork remains intact as far south as Redlair and McAdenville, before disappearing into Lake Wylie. The Redlair project area includes four and half miles along the left (east) bank of the South Fork and a mile along the right (west) bank, replete with slopes covered with mountain laurel and flood plains with a distinct riparian ecology or with bottomlands that have been farmed for centuries (including by native Americans, as is attested by archeological work undertaken by the Schiele Museum).

Second is topography. The South Fork cuts sharply between Spencer Mountain to the west and the Catawba watershed-divide along the Hickory Grove Road. In so doing it creates deeply incised valleys with a mountainous character, despite a relief differential of only 200 feet. Because of its extreme hilliness, less of Redlair was put under plow than is typical of the Piedmont. Absence of plow leads to other key factors: Redlair is remarkable for the extent and integrity of its upland hardwood forests, many of which have not been cut for a century and are unusually free of invasive plants. Redlair is remarkable, in particular, for the abundance of the big-leaf magnolia, a regionally rare tree which however thrives and is prevalent in the deep valleys of Redlair. The federally-endangered Schweinitz sunflower is also to be found.

Redlair's uniqueness is further enhanced by its location within a major metropolitan area. To the east, the intersection of Tryon and Trade streets in Charlotte is a half-hour's drive from Redlair. To the southwest, Gastonia's Main Street is a twenty minutes' drive. All other farms and forests of any significant size in between have disappeared.