

Historic Soil Conservation at Malabar Farm, 1939-1972

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The soil conservation movement of the 1940s and '50s was one of the most important historical events in the 20th century, yet is often overlooked in discussions about future sustainability. A wealth of information was written about soil conservation during this time which is not readily available to the general public today. The goal of this research was to compile some of this underutilized information about historic soil conservation, focused specifically on Malabar Farm in northeast Ohio, and to emphasize the importance of this history in current sustainability discussions. Archival research was conducted primarily in the Louis Bromfield Collection at the OSU Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, with additional archival research at the Ohio History Center and a site visit to Malabar Farm State Park. Pulitzer prize-winning author Louis Bromfield established Malabar Farm in 1939, experimented with new soil conservation methods, and demonstrated how these innovative techniques could make worn-out land productive once more. By giving tours of Malabar Farm and writing several books about it, Bromfield used his literary fame and fortune to inform the general public about conservation agriculture in a way that could not be done by university experiment stations. After Bromfield died in 1956, the farm was managed by non-profit organizations until it became an Ohio State Park in 1972, which it remains to this day. This historic soil conservation movement had such a profound effect on modern agriculture that today its results are often taken for granted. Many farmers do not understand the importance of soil conservation and are beginning to revert to the unsustainable practices that caused catastrophic soil degradation in the past. It is critical to remember the lesson learned at Malabar Farm: to give soil health top priority in farming in order to maintain productivity and prevent collapse of the agricultural system.