Property of ‘Adirondack Woodswoman’ is left to state

By Rick Karlin, Capitol bureau
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Anne LaBastille, who spent a good deal in her life alone in a cabin in the Adirondacks and wrote about it in an acclaimed “Woodswoman” books passed away in 2011.

Now comes news that her 32-acre property will be given to the state, added to New York’s inventory of protected lands in the Adirondacks.

Here are the details:

The trustee of Dr. Anne LaBastille’s estate donated her 32-acre “West of Wind” property on Twitchell Lake in the western Adirondacks to New York State, Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Acting Commissioner Basil Seggos announced today. LaBastille, the famed writer and conservationist who died on July 1, 2011, envisioned her land be managed to: “...preserve the natural, ecological, and historical integrity of my 30 acres of North Country wilderness, where writers can find inspiration in the Adirondacks” and her cabin be protected.

“Dr. LaBastille was a true conservationist, and I’m proud to have the opportunity to work with the trustees of her estate to ensure the permanent protection of her beloved property,” said DEC Acting Commissioner Seggos. “Through this addition to the Forest Preserve, her land will now be a place for future generations to visit and honor her appreciation for nature and the Adirondacks.”

Anne LaBastille inspired many through her writings and her life’s work dedicated to conserving the most vulnerable wildlife and wild lands. Her autobiographical Woodswoman, published in 1978, chronicled her journey from an urban New Jersey girl dreaming of life in the wilderness to cabin dweller on a remote western Adirondack lake. She lived without electricity, running water, or even a road to her 12ft x 12ft “West of Wind” cabin she built in 1964.

Michael Carr, executive director of The Nature Conservancy / Adirondack Land Trust said, “The donation of Anne LaBastille’s property to the Forest Preserve is especially meaningful. It honors her legacy as one of the Adirondack Park’s most effective and inspiring advocates.”

An award-winning author and conservationist, LaBastille published a dozen
books including four in the Woodswoman series, over 150 popular articles, and 25 scientific articles. Her ground-breaking work researching and protecting the then-endangered (now extinct) Giant Grebe of Lake Atitlan in Guatemala earned her the prestigious World Wildlife Fund’s Conservationist of the Year gold medal in 1974. Over her 50-year career, she worked hard to raise awareness of critical environmental issues including acid deposition in the Adirondacks, loss of biodiversity, invasive species and climate change in the decades before threats were widely recognized. Dr. LaBastille served as a Commissioner on the Adirondack Park Agency from 1976 to 1993.

David Gibson, Managing Partner of the Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve said, “When one thinks of the global reputation of the Adirondack Park and its place in the spectrum of the World’s protected, cared for spaces, few have done more than Anne LaBastille. Now, her beloved part of the Adirondacks formally becomes part of “forever wild,” just as she is forever remembered as having so positively altered the public’s and world’s perception of this place. We salute all those who have worked together to transition her property and her legacy into our historic, shared landscape, the Adirondack Forest Preserve.”

LaBastille was a pioneer for women in conservation fields. She was the sole female in her wildlife classes at Cornell University where she earned her B.S. and Ph.D. degrees and was hired as Cornell’s first female professor in its Department of Natural Resources. One of her first jobs was as a wildlife tour leader for the Audubon Society – its first woman leader. She was the first woman to conduct research at a Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit in the U.S., and among the first female licensed guides in New York.

LaBastille penned in her will “I’d like our grandchildren to...not lose sight of preserving the silence, beauty, the serenity – in short, the essence of wilderness experience...As the land is now, it shall be in the next century...no indoor plumbing, electricity, television, or telephones. Woods trails and lake ice for walking, no road to the property. Simplicity.” Although she did not will her beloved piece of the Adirondacks to New York State, the trustees of her estate proposed donating her land to New York State to protect her property and obtained necessary Court approval to make the gift to the state’s Forest Preserve.

The “West of Wind” cabin has been donated to the Adirondack Museum. It was carefully dismantled in the winter of 2014-15 and the logs transported across the ice and trucked to the Museum. The logs had been purchased 50 years before from a logger and floated down the lake for the cabin construction. The cabin will be re-constructed and on exhibit in the new Adirondack Experience area of the Museum is scheduled to open in 2017.

David Kahn, Executive Director for the Adirondack Museum said, “Dr. Anne LaBastille’s cabin will be featured in the Adirondack Museum’s newest exhibition, The Adirondack Experience, opening in May of 2017. The exhibition
will feature 18,000 square footage of interpreted space, taking the visitor on a journey from the earliest inhabitants of the Adirondack region, to the establishment of the Park itself. Visitors will be able to explore the cabin and its contents digitally, delving into her life in the Adirondacks, her work as an environmentalist, and her role in the Adirondack Park Agency. Since announcing the acquisition of the cabin, the Adirondack Museum has regularly received inquiries about when the structure will be available to the public, reflecting public interest in Dr. LaBastille and her legacy.

Through a funding gift from her Estate, the LaBastille Memorial Writers Residency has been established through the Adirondack Center for Writing to provide a “writers retreat in honor of other nature writers who lived and wrote in log cabins which encouraged me to follow in this eloquent tradition,” envisioned by LaBastille.

Nathalie Thill, Executive Director Adirondack Center for Writing, said, “The Adirondack Center for Writing is deeply proud to offer the Anne LaBastille Memorial Writer Residency. This two-week program provides space and time for writers to work in a gorgeous setting, a godsend to an emerging writer. Having the residency take place on Twitchell Lake is particularly meaningful, as one of our residents said, “seeing the land and learning more about how Anne LaBastille lived, I can now picture how she achieved all she did in her work. We are very grateful to the Anne LaBastille Estate for this unique and exceptional opportunity.”

Leslie Surprenant, executor of the estate, said, “As a longtime friend of Anne’s, entrusted by her to serve as the executor of her estate, it has been an honor and a tremendous responsibility to fully realize her bold vision and to build a lasting legacy. This gift from her estate to the citizens of New York is a wonderful tribute to her and to her love of the Adirondack wilderness. This with the donation of her cabin to the Adirondack Museum, and partnering with the Adirondack Center for Writing’s to bring writers into the awe-inspiring setting in which she lived and wrote will continue her enduring Adirondack legacy.”