For the summer of 2014, I worked as a Land Intern for the Land Trust for Tennessee, located in Nashville TN. The Land Trust is a not-for-profit organization that works in land conservation across the State of Tennessee. Their primarily conservation tool is a document called a Conservation Easement. The easement is a voluntary agreement between a landowner and a Land Trust (or other qualified individual or organization), which will place limits and restrictions on the development of that land in perpetuity. Basically, the landowner will negotiate terms with that Land Trust to determine what sorts of things they, or any future landowner, will be able to with the land. The easement is a powerful tool to stop development in its tracks, while preserving the natural beauty of the State of Tennessee.

Now the Land Trust for Tennessee primarily works in an agricultural capacity – providing easements for farmers who may have a lot of history with their land, or simply don’t want to see it built over. Because many of these plots do not have staggering and obvious conservation value (we are not saving Yosemite, or Yellowstone), the Land Trust has to make a case that the farmland is, in fact, valuable and requires conservation protection. We do that by identifying features of the land that are worth conserving, such as prime agricultural soils, stream and waterway health, endangered or protected species, and historic significance.

My work this summer touched almost every area of this organization, though I primarily worked with Meredith Hansel in the Land Protection department. I was quickly acquainted with GIS mapping software, as early on I was tasked with various mapping
projects. These basically included going through old baseline documents (these are the drafts of the actual easements, including all of the survey and environmental data) and updating any sort of mapping information that existed before online mapping software became available (the organization was formed in 1999).

Pretty soon, I began work on the actual drafting of these baseline reports, using GIS software to gather all of the necessary conservation features of land in process. The baseline report would eventually be paired with the drafted conservation easement (the legal document) and both documents would go into the Land Trust’s records once completed. I drafted three baseline reports in my time at the Land Trust.

The process of drafting a baseline report actually comes pretty far into the process of closing a conservation easement with a landowner. Before any baseline information can be entered, the Land Trust representatives must visit the actual site to visit with the landowner in order to discuss his or her intentions with the parcel. I visited several landowners in various stages of the easement process. As a part of the baseline documentation, a Land Trust representative needs to take pictures of the property (the baseline report should give anyone looking back on it a snapshot of the state of the property at the time of the closing, as a comparison for future changes) which I completed for a property in process.

My later weeks at the Land Trust were spent on a more creative project. In conjunction with the new website that the Land Trust launched on July 1, I was tasked with telling the stories of a select group of landowners. The first round of stories were shorter vignettes compiled from interview transcripts of MTSU graduate students in 2004
as a part of an Oral History project. I sifted through each interview, and pieced together a short, two-paragraph verbal snapshot of each landowner. In the last two weeks of my internship, I had the opportunity to visit two of our landowners, Karen Guy and Steve Cates, at their respective homes (now protected by the Land Trust) and interview them. The resulting pieces were longer, probably simply because I enjoyed talking to these amazing individuals a great deal. They were both fascinating, and it really brought to mind the incredible influence the Land Trust has had on people’s lives. Steve Cates told me that the day he closed with the Land Trust “was a perfect day.”

For all that I learned during my time with the Land Trust (GIS, farm-know how, event planning etc), the single most valuable thing has been how important it is to choose a worthwhile career. Every person that works with the Land Trust is completely committed to his or her job. They each invest an incredible amount of time and effort into each task, and they truly believe in the work that they are doing. There is some kind of happiness that comes with this kind of work that I have never really seen before in another work environment, and it is infectious.

Working with the Land Trust for Tennessee has been a fantastic experience, and I would recommend the internship to anyone with an inkling for environmental concern or even just interest in non-profit work. As far as logistics go for this particular internship, I lived with a friend around the Belmont/Vanderbilt area, which was within a ten-minute drive. This is where I would recommend a future intern to stay due both to its proximity, as well as the area’s great amenities for food and the Nashville experience. Earlier in the summer I did not expect to have a car available, leaving me with either a bus ride ranging
in the 30-45 minute range (the bus system is not ideal) or a bike ride in a similar time frame, but I would absolutely recommend a car for the future interns awarded this internship.