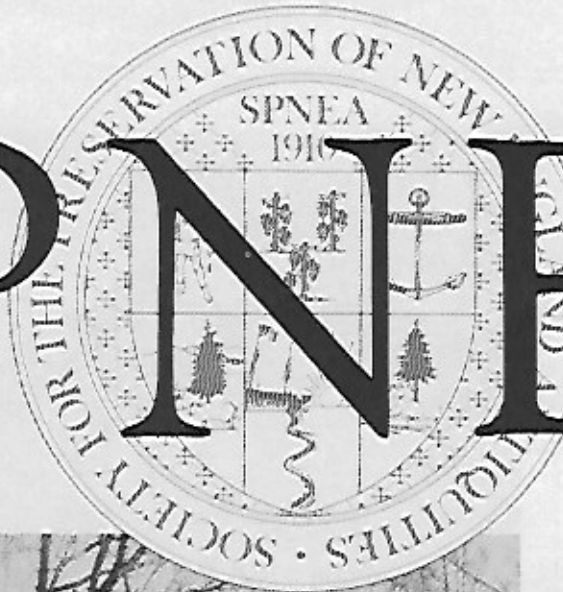


SPNEA



SERIES 50 SPRING 1990
SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION
OF NEW ENGLAND ANTIQUITIES



FREEGRACE MARBLE FARM, C. 1800. SUTTON, MASSACHUSETTS

FREEGRACE MARBLE FARM: A VISION MADE REAL

When the Freegrace Marble Farm in Sutton, Mass., was sold last October at public auction, the life work of Leona Dona to preserve an antique farm hung in the balance. Mrs. Dona first moved to the Marble Farm as a bride more than 58 years ago and fell in love with the place, which she and her husband farmed. Her interest in the Farm led her to research its history and to study the traditional uses of the rushes, vines, and herbs that grew there. These she

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would gather for her cooking or to make wreaths and other decorative items, which she would sell to supplement her income.

She long ago established a tradition of sharing her love of the property with neighbors, school children, scout groups and anyone interested in the land and its history. She would take the children on nature and history walks to show them woods filled with ladyslippers, a hand-dug well with well sweep, Indian artifacts, an old stone bridge and other relics of the Farm's human occupation over the centuries. As she puts it modestly, "I'm just a typical old farmer—I was put on this earth to preserve and to share with people."

In recent years, Mrs. Dona began to look for a way to ensure that the Marble Farm would always be preserved and accessible to the public. But in 1988, her hopes were threatened when a public auction of the property to settle a property dispute was ordered. The 63-acre farm, with a late-18th-century farmhouse, barn, and outbuildings, only twenty minutes from downtown Worcester, seemed likely to be purchased for development.

At this point, Richard Harris, a retired manufacturer living in nearby Grafton, who himself had come under the spell of the old place and its inspiring proprietor some 25 years ago, heard about the impending sale and began to organize support for Mrs. Dona's cause. He was joined by Robert Price, of Holden, Mass., an attorney with long-standing interest in land conservation. Determined to help Mrs. Dona preserve the property, the two men approached several non-profit agencies and foundations for



THE CHARACTER OF THE OLD BARNYARD WILL BE PRESERVED THROUGH PRESERVATION DEED RESTRICTIONS.

help and finally turned to SPNEA's Stewardship Program.

Thanks to support from the Stoddard Charitable Trust and the George F. and Sybil H. Fuller Foundation, this ad hoc group of preservationists was able to arrange for SPNEA to buy out the interest of the other owner and, with Mrs. Dona's donation of her share of the property, to consolidate ownership under SPNEA. In the space of the 15 minutes that the auction lasted, Mrs. Dona's lifetime's ambition was realized.

Acquiring the Farm will permit SPNEA to perpetuate Mrs. Dona's vision, creating a public walking trail at the property's perimeter; ensuring continued access for educational groups and scholars; and transferring ownership of the historic burying ground to the Town of Sutton to assure public access and maintenance. SPNEA will prepare detailed preserva-

tion and conservation deed restrictions to protect the woodlands, open fields, stone walls and other elements of the agricultural landscape as well as the historic integrity of the buildings. Eventually the farmhouse and outbuildings will be sold, with preservation restrictions administered by SPNEA; any proceeds from the sale after expenses will be applied to similar preservation projects in Worcester County. The fields and woodlands will be preserved for educational and recreational use, and SPNEA will seek additional funds to establish these programs and administer the land.

In the meantime, Mrs. Dona will continue to live at the Farm under a life tenancy agreement, teaching young people to love nature and learn from history, and making her decorations of wild grasses, secure in the knowledge that her vision will endure.

SPNEA News is published three times a year and is sent free of charge to SPNEA members. For subscription and membership information please call (617) 227-3956.

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