

September 8, 2021

Sutton Select Board
4 Uxbridge Rd
Sutton, MA 01590

RE: Freegrace Marble Farm

Attached please find:

1. Reservation of the Marble Farm: A Preliminary View by Martyn J. Bowden: This historic assessment of the farm and its major elements was prepared in support of the filing for National Historic Landmark and National Historic District status (Reservation Marble Farm)
2. Application for National Historic Landmark Status (NRHP 10.10.89)
3. SPNEA Spring 1990 Newsletter (SPNEA Announcement)
4. Freegrace Marble Farm Preservation Restriction Agreement (FGM Deed Restriction 7.19.21)
5. Map of Burbank/Sibley intersection (Sibley Burbank Map)
6. Photo Album 1 – Contains photos taken and cataloged by Keith Downer (Chairman Sutton Historical Commission (link in email)
7. Photo Album 2 - Photos of House, structures, damage to walls and repair in progress from Koopmans truck damage (link in email)

Dear Select Board:

Back in May 2021, I approached Jim Smith to request 10 minutes of time on the Select Board agenda to discuss the Freegrace Marble Farm and the current issues associated with the Burbank Rd/Sibley Road interchange. This was done on the recommendation of Jen Hager. My request for inclusion on the agenda was denied and Jim suggested that I either appear in the Public Forum section of the meeting, or put my thoughts together in writing and forward them to the Select Board. Initially, I was confused as to why a material public safety issue in the middle of the Freegrace Marble Farm National Historic District would not qualify for a spot on the Select Board Agenda, but I often forget that most town residents have no idea what it is, or why it is so significant.

The purpose of this letter is threefold:

1. Provide an overview of why the Freegrace Marble Farm is so relevant and historically significant
2. Discuss potential future uses and further weaving into the fabric of Sutton
3. Provide an overview of the Sibley/Burbank Intersection issues.

The Freegrace Marble Farm was originally settled in the 1720s as one of the original 30 homesteads in Sutton and its first operating farm. A very detailed overview of the farm and its historic significance is contained in the paper written by Martyn Bowden and the National Register Application. (both attached) I will limit the discussion in this letter to a high level overview but would be willing to assemble any additional information that the Select Board feels would be helpful in fully understanding the Freegrace Marble Farm's value to the community.

The Freegrace Marble Farm National Historic District consists of 53 Acres and approximately 2,500 feet of frontage on Sibley and Burbank Roads. (see Sibley Burbank map attached) The land sits on all three sides of this intersection and both roads are designated as Scenic Roadways. The Freegrace Marble Farm Circa 1731 is on the **National Register of Historic Places**, is a **National Historic District**, and is subject to a Preservation Easement managed by **Historic New England**. (www.historicnewengland.org formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities) Freegrace Marble was one of the original settlers of Sutton and it is currently the only National Historic Landmark residentially occupied in Sutton. Freegrace Marble's marriage to Mary Sibley was the first in Sutton. Freegrace was a mason by trade having worked on such notable projects as the Statehouse in Boston. He had 12 children, lived to be 93 years old and served on the Board of Selectmen in 1727. Some of the major elements of the farm include the following:

- **Freegrace Marble House:** The estimated date of construction is between 1731 and 1792. The original house may have been in a slightly different location, and possibly rebuilt as a result of fire. Based on the construction of the basement, and some of its architectural elements, I believe that the current home sits on its original foundation and was significantly renovated/refined as the funds became available to do so. Historic New England believes that it is one of the most "intact" Colonial Period homes in the country. The amount of original material that remains is amazing.
- **"36 Square" Barn:** One of the most common barn designs of the Colonial period. It is constructed of native chestnut and white oak. It was the preferred agricultural structure of the period and they were built all over Sutton. Unfortunately, they were only built to last approximately 200 years and those remaining in Sutton are being lost at an alarming rate. On Boston Road alone, a few years back one was taken down and there are currently 2 others in the process of falling down. The barn that is part of the farm has been extensively repaired under the watchful eye of Historic New England. All work to the structure has been done "In Kind" and the white oak necessary to complete the repairs was sourced locally from Bob Shaw – over 12,000 board feet. There is still a bit of work remaining on one of the rear elevations and it needs to be painted but it is once again in active use supporting farming activities. I have completed all of the work, with the exception of the roof, myself.
- **Carriage Shed:** There is a 3 bay open carriage shed adjacent to the main barn. I have completed the necessary structural repairs and a new roof will be installed in the next few weeks. It also could use a coat of paint.

- **Ice House:** Located on Sibley Rd, the icehouse used to store ice blocks harvested from the Sibley Reservoir.
- **Marble Cemetery:** Located in the cemetery are approximately 150 years of Marble family members, a Native American Chief and potentially a number of other Native Americans in graves marked by small undated stones. Those buried in the cemetery include four Revolutionary War Veterans.
- **Native American Stonework:** Every piece of the property reflects the influence of Native Americans. A few years back, I had the privilege of walking the farm with Doug Harris, a Tribal Historic Preservation Officer with the Narragansets. His specialty is Ceremonial Landscapes. During his time on the farm he made 3 observations:
 1. The farm was a center of Native American activity and a very heavily traveled area
 2. There is an area of approximately 5 acres that he stated was “highly ceremonial” which is anchored by a stone cairn over 70 feet long; it one of the larger ones within the Nipmuc territory. Ceremonial stonework of this type, in the surrounding areas, regularly dates back over 4,000 years.
 3. “Freegrace built a house.” This was one of the more humbling experiences of my life. What he meant by this was that the land was already cleared and in agricultural use when Freegrace arrived. The Nipmucs were prolific builders and responsible for the construction of the majority of the stonework on the property. I had a very different view of the farm’s evolution in which the Native Americans played a very minor role. My history books let me down!

Following Doug Harris’ survey, I began to work with Keith Downer (Chairman Sutton Historical Commission) and his daughter, Emma, identifying and cataloging significant items. We have identified a total of 5 large cairns interconnected by stone walls adding further credence to the “highly ceremonial” observation by Mr. Harris. Our objective, after fully cataloging what we have identified, is to reach out to Universities with Native American Studies programs to see what resources may be available to figure out what went on here. I am confident it will be a very interesting story! We have also found that the wetland stone features on the farm are replicated throughout Sutton. Sutton has a very rich Native American past.

One of the first structures built on the property was a stockade to protect the local settlers from Native American attacks. I believe that any differences that may have existed early on between Freegrace and the Native Americans were very quickly resolved. This is evidenced by the shared cemetery and all of the major Native American features remaining in a completely undisturbed state. I believe that Freegrace understood the significance of the features and went to great lengths to avoid impacting them.

- **Potential Archeological Sites:** Potential sites of interest would include the initial homestead (if different from the current location of the house), the stockade, the distillery and several Native American areas of activity. I located the foundation of the distillery while completing the work to reclaim the farm's pond.

Agricultural land and supporting structures are currently in use as they would have been since the original settlement of the farm. It is the collection of all of the previously referenced features that make the farm so special. Individually, the features are noteworthy, collectively they are nearly unprecedented. In the attached paper written by Martyn Bowden he cites the following:

Recent recognition of the predominance in the eighteenth century of the single-story farmhouse, together with a desire to show how the eighteenth century farm looked, led Old Sturbridge Village in the 1970s to bring in the single story Pliny Freeman farm to be their centerpiece of their reconstruction of the New England farm in the early republic, 1780-1810. Old Sturbridge Village's commitment to reconstruct what we New Englanders have almost lost – the typical farm complex of the colonial era – is the clarion call to preserve a classic example of one of the very few surviving farm complexes of an average farm family in the eighteenth century, before it disappears. (referring to the Freegrace Marble Farm)

I have also attached a copy of the SPNEA Spring 1990 Newsletter. It explains how the farm was made part of their Stewardship Program. Due to a court ordered auction of the farm, as part of a divorce settlement, Leona Donna was at risk of losing ownership. Leona and a group of advisors/investors came up with a plan to purchase the farm at auction, and recognize her dream of remaining on the farm while placing it into a conservation/preservation program to assure that it would remain "as is" indefinitely. With the financial assistance of the Stoddard Charitable Trust, George F. and Sybil H. Fuller Foundation and individuals like Ted Kennedy, Leona Donna's lifelong goal was realized.

I have attached a copy of the farm's Preservation Restriction Agreement. As you will see when reviewing the agreement, the farm and all of the noted elements will be preserved in perpetuity. Essentially, other than repairs and maintenance, nothing can be altered and the property cannot be subdivided. Historic New England is the successor organization to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. The Freegrace Marble Farm is part of their Stewardship Program. The program supports preservation activities at approximately 100 sites. Each property is assigned a Stewardship Manager that insures compliance with the established covenants. Inspections are conducted at least annually. Following the inspection, the Stewardship Manager issues a report outlining required maintenance and repairs and a time frame for their completion. Working with Historic New England has not presented any issues to date. We are both looking to accomplish the same objectives.

Current and Potential Future Community Uses

Given Sibley and Burbank Roads being designated Scenic Roadways and the amount of frontage the Farm has on these streets, they are very popular with pedestrians and cyclists. The pedestrian traffic is steady and in addition to residents living on these streets a large number come from the Villas or meet up with friends and park at their houses to walk together. The scenery is spectacular and has been the subject for several award winning paintings created by Michael Graves who brilliantly manages to capture it on canvas.

Lambing in the spring is also a community event and the farm comes alive with these new additions to the Freegrace Marble Farm family. There is nothing cuter than a baby lamb. Neighbors know that if the barn doors are open they are welcome to enjoy this amazing event. Pre COVID, my favorite time of the day was when the school busses let the kids off and they raced to the barn to spend time with the moms and their babies. There are few if any other places in Sutton where this agricultural experience can be followed and touched. If you haven't noticed, the Sutton farm experience is becoming an endangered species.

Prior to COVID, I was a member of the team that put Sutton's Comprehensive Housing Plan together. Michelle Edelstein was also a member and on a few occasions we discussed the potential for senior programs at the farm.

- Bird Watching – There are several Red Tail and Cooper Hawks that hunt the pastures and the diversity of other bird species is tremendous. They can all be viewed from very accessible areas.
- Native American Stonework walk – Now that the woods have been mostly cleaned up and existing trails have been improved it would be safe for such an activity.
- Hangin with the Sheep – Many of the town's seniors grew up in Sutton at a time when it was not uncommon to have to milk the family cow before going to school. Farm animals and pastoral settings used to exist all over town, but are becoming increasingly rare especially ones that provide access.
- Lunch/Dinner/Cocktails/Snacks at the Pond – The work to reclaim the pond came out amazing! It is a beautiful place with easy access.

I do not have children in the Sutton school system so I am unaware how the topic of local Sutton history is addressed. Working the farm into a curriculum would be a natural. There is even the potential to advance the efforts being made to better understand the Native American presence through research, additional cataloging and archeological work.

The option that is of greatest interest to me (I am sure Leona Donna would agree) would be to use the farm in support of 4H activities. The 4H in Sutton is an amazing organization. I have had several conversations with Paul Dunn and one of the issues with 4H is that the kids age out. We would create a hybrid that addresses this issue and provides access to adults interested in the program. This idea would require a significant investment in a facility and a long term commitment. Given the current issue with the Burbank/Sibley Road interchange and some

other rumored abutting activity, I am not currently in a position to make that commitment because I am questioning my future at the farm. Watching it get run over is a very unpleasant feeling!

Sibley/Burbank Rd Intersection

Living at the intersection of Burbank and Sibley Roads, I see what goes on here every day. You know you have a problem with an intersection when if there was a three way, head on collision, you would not be able to determine who was at fault – think about it. At the intersection, the width of pavement of Sibley Rd is 13 feet, it sits between 2 stone walls and passes a few feet from the house on one side and a similar distance from the ice house on the other. To further complicate safety concerns there is a steady flow of pedestrian traffic – it is a beautiful area to enjoy the outdoors.

With the completion of Stratford Village in Millbury and Galaxy Pass in Sutton there has been a significant increase in traffic volume. Burbank Street/Burbank Rd/Sibley Road has become a very popular alternate route for those traveling to and from the intersection of RT 146 and Boston Road. The Montessori school on Burbank increased the size of their school adding another 25 students that could generate as many as 100 trips per day. The Millbury Planning Board has approved a 180 unit mixed use project at the end of Burbank St. (the old mill building) A large abutting parcel on Burbank Rd was recently sold and is slated for development and I understand that a parcel of land (also a certified abutter) with access from 146 is being proposed as a large 40B apartment complex. How will they access 146 North?

The damage to the stone walls at the intersection is constant and if you read the attached conservation easement you will see that it is my responsibility to maintain them. The damage to the walls primarily stems from oversized delivery trucks with unskilled drivers who disregard the sign at the end of the street alerting them of the issue. Since moving into the house full time in July of 2014, there has been a minimum of 7 police reports filed relating to damage to the wall that frames the barn complex courtyard. I do not even bother to file them for the retaining wall across the street as the damage is constant. When you manage to stop one of the oversized trucks and ask if they saw the sign at the end of street they all acknowledge that they did but respond “I understand but I have a delivery to make.” If someone on Burbank or Sibley orders a pallet of pavers from Home Depot there will be a tractor trailer trying to get through the intersection. They do not fit. A Koopmans tractor trailer ran over the wall on Burbank that ties into the large barn’s foundation knocking out the stone supporting its corner. Three days later Koopmans sent another truck the exact same way: luckily I was able to stop this one. (In Photo Album 2) I have included pictures of the intersection that show typical damage, trucks that I managed to stop and the jacking of the barn that was required to reset its foundation. I have also attached a picture of one of the oldest houses in Hingham that had a car drive into it this summer. That house was further off the road and had a curb and sidewalk in front of it. Unfortunately, colonial houses tend to be close to the road and in the way.

The danger to cars occurs when two vehicles enter intersection at the same time. There is no room to pass and depending on the direction they are coming from, visibility can be nonexistent. The mechanics of the intersection do not work now and as traffic comes online from the previously discussed sources, the situation will certainly deteriorate further. The additional traffic increases the probability of 2 or more vehicles entering the intersection simultaneously. Every time this happens one has to back up to let the other vehicle through. The greatest risk is to pedestrians of which there are many. In the winter, when people are walking on snow restricted roadways or in the morning/evening with limited light, or both, the risk gets even greater.

I have cc'd both Chief Towle and Jen Hager to this presentation as they both have firsthand experience with the issue. Whenever damage occurs, the first call I make is to Dennis. As you can imagine, I get quite worked up over this senseless damage to historic property. Without exception he shows up, allows me to vent, and somehow manages to talk me off the ledge. I would be very surprised if he did not completely agree with my assessment of the intersection from both a property damage and public safety perspective. Jen Hager is the second call that I make. I plead with her to assist me in driving the process of solving the problem with sensitivity to the historic elements of the farm. Like Dennis, she is always very sensitive to the issue and agrees that it needs to be addressed, but the conversation never goes any further. Jen can also provide some insights as to the additional traffic impacts that will be created by the previously referenced projects. The most frustrating part of the situation is that based on historic information, when the wall is repaired there is a 100% chance that it will be significantly damaged again within a year. (could be the next day) To date it has been restacked twice and currently needs to be done again.

I do not know that you can fully understand how hard it is watching something that is so historically important, and that you love with all of your heart, literally getting run over. If the future of the Freegrace Marble Farm means anything to Sutton, something needs to be done.

I could go on, but to fully understand the magnitude of the issues you need to walk it and see what happens as traffic flows through it for yourselves.

Summary

The Freegrace Marble Farm has done everything that it can to accommodate the demands of the growing community around it. Although it has been here for nearly 300 years and has managed to survive and thrive, it is actually a very delicate collection of very meaningful historic artifacts. Being the Steward of such an important piece of Sutton and American history is a tremendous responsibility and recognizing Leona's dream of its preservation just adds additional pressure. Just because there is a conservation/preservation agreement in place does not assure its future. Impacted historic properties, like this one, begin a slow death once the impacts result in them being sold on the cheap. Unless they are fastidiously maintained they begin a slow process of death by decay.

I realize that problems like this one do not get solved overnight but they never get solved if an effort is not made to address them. I would ask the Select Board to consider the following approach:

1. Read this narrative and the attachments. I have tried to be brief but there is a lot to discuss.
2. Come tour the Freegrace Marble Farm and experience it for yourselves. This will enable you determine if it is a relevant part of Sutton's history and worthy of your attention. Hopefully you will agree that any proposed alteration to the intersection will not result in additional pressure being placed on its historic elements.
3. If we get past point 2, we can commit the plan to paper. I have included Ryan Fattman on this email. A few years back he came to meet me at the farm to discuss the issue. He grew up down the street and is very familiar with what the farm is and why it is important. He was confident that if we had a plan that solved the problem to the benefit of the farm, and an idea of what it would cost, he would be able to significantly contribute to or cover the cost of making the necessary repairs through available grants.
4. Execute the plan

My personal goal is to spend the rest of my years on the farm constantly improving it so that it is perfect shape to be passed on to the next steward. In order to recognize this goal, developing a public/private partnership with Sutton is critical. I would hope that providing the necessary support to a privately maintained, tax generating, conserved/preserved extremely relevant historic asset is a sufficient motivation to capture your attention. Any investment made by the town to secure the future of the farm will produce a perpetual return.

I do not care if this discussion is in a public forum or done another way. If it is done in a public forum I would appreciate it if the specifics of the Native American elements and the 4H plan are not discussed. In the last two years, I have had to ask three individuals metal detecting the property to leave. Historic New England has told me that this is actually an increasing problem on historic properties. As for the 4H, I would not want a public discussion to potentially put their current arrangement at risk.

I would appreciate it if you could acknowledge receipt of this information and tell me how you would like to proceed with the discussion.

Sincerely,
Jamie Marran Freegrace Marble Farm

About the Current Steward

The first time that I saw the farm was in November 2009. I was visiting my sister in town and she thought I would be interested. It had been for sale for a long time and its condition reflected that the prior owner had lost interest long before it was put up for sale. The pastures were well on their way to becoming woods, invasives had claimed the wetlands and woods, the

big barn was about to fall down and the house was in need of significant structural repairs. Despite all of this, I immediately fell in love and bought it that afternoon. It's hard to explain but there are areas of the property where the air has a certain density to it – it is definitely a very spiritual place.

At the time, my intention was to use it as a second home and get to work on a plan to restore it to its former glory. (doing all of the work myself) Unfortunately, the requirements of my job kept me from having enough time to accomplish any of my initial objectives. I was a senior executive with a Fortune 500 company in a global leadership position in their Construction Group. The position required extensive travel and a 24/7/365 schedule. Given that my greatest personal priority was the farm and my job was clearly standing in the way, I decided that my only option was to retire which I did effective 12/31/13. The last project that I worked on prior to retiring was the replacement of the Tappan Zee Bridge – a \$4 billion + design/build proposal. I represented 2 of the 3 invited joint ventures. I have extensive experience in transportation and infrastructure and have worked extensively with traffic data. I understand the mechanics of traffic and how to address bottlenecks, alignment issues..... it is what I did for a living.

Following my retirement, I was able to get to work on the farm. The first priority was to get it back to being a farm which by definition requires animals. Pastures were reclaimed/cleared, fencing and shelters built and animals added. All done without herbicides or fertilizers. It is currently the home of a USDA registered flock of Icelandic sheep and to date have had over 100 lambs. The business model is not great – I sell them for \$250 and they cost about \$500 to make but they are very important contributors to the land reclamation and aesthetics. All of the structural issues with the buildings have been addressed, the farm pond has been restored and the wetlands and woods are thriving. It is truly a passion project. It is a 100% complete collection of a subsistence farm that used to dominate the Sutton landscape – it is now 1 of 1 and truly irreplaceable. It stands as a monument and provides a very clear view back through Sutton's past to its original founders – the Native Americans. Freegrace Marble was one of the original Sammies and his legacy deserves the consideration necessary to keep the memories alive.

Approximately 5 years ago, I was driving home from my sister's house where we watched the Superbowl. It was a blustery winter night and as I pulled up to the intersection of Uxbridge and Boston Roads all I could see was the Beehive with the blue tarp blowing off the roof and Polly's Antiques (314 Boston Rd) which looked very tired and crying out for some help. It had already been for sale for a few years but had no takers. It quickly became apparent to me that without copious love, Polly's was headed down the same path as the Beehive. I bought the building the next morning. Like the Freegrace Marble Farm, Polly's has a soul. A condition of the sale was that the name - Pollys Antiques - went with the property and that Linda Sinicola would continue to operate the gallery after it was renovated. While the building was being renovated, I reached out to April Brown to see if she would be interested in being part of the Polly's team

and fortunately she agreed. The three of us met and it was determined that the gallery would feature images of the town and handcrafted items made by Sutton residents. The business agreement between us was that as long as I was proud when I walked through the door, and we stayed true to our “local content from local talent” plan I did not care about the financial return. The numbers work out about the same as the sheep – every \$2 spent returns \$1, but being part of something that is important to so many people is priceless! Best of all, I am lucky enough to have forged a strong friendship with 2 awesome people, Linda and April. In the next month, I will be replacing the roof on the porch and main structure and replacing/repairing the soffits and fascias.

In addition to my Stewardship roles, I am also a proud member of the Sutton ZBA and Conservation Commission.