

Seesaw battle on fate of historic house

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PORTSMOUTH (AP) -- The fate of a historic house is uncertain as preservationists and concerned neighbors consider a deed that calls for the building's destruction.

Lillian "Billy" Noel, 90, lives in the house, which was built in 1887 and played host to President Theodore Roosevelt and delegates negotiating the Russo-Japanese Peace Treaty of 1905. The house, called **Creek Farm**, is on a peninsula south of downtown Portsmouth. It's near the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion, a historic house of early New Hampshire officials maintained by the state.

Noel sold the house and its 35 acres to the Society for the Preservation of New Hampshire Forests for \$500,000.

The deed allows Noel to remain in the house. But if she moves or dies, it requires the Forest Society to raze or remove the house within two years. The requirement was thought necessary because neither she nor the society can afford to set up an endowment for its upkeep. Now it's unclear whether Noel believes the house should be destroyed.

Alanson Sturgis, neighbor and longtime friend of Noel, said she does not want the house to be destroyed.

"Last summer when I heard the house was to be torn down and that it was her wish, I went and asked her if this was true," said Sturgis. "She said no, it was not her idea and she does not want it torn down."

A spokesman for the society said it would consider saving the house if the deed allowed it.

"If there were a way for us to save the house that would also allow us to stay within our legal contract with the deed, that is something we would certainly look at," said Richard Ober, senior adviser and director of outreach programs for the society.

Noel sent a letter in January to the president of the society, saying she would like the society and the state Division of Historic Resources to work together to preserve the house.

However, in February, she sent another letter, this time written with the help of her lawyer, Charles DeGrandpre.

"Before I sold **Creek Farm** to you at a bargain price, you made clear that the Society would not have purchased the property if I had asked you to retain the house," Noel wrote.

"So far as I am concerned, this property is yours and you should do with it as you wish," the letter said. The letter ends with a request that the society assist Noel in making sure she is not "bothered further" by those attempting to preserve the house.

In an interview, DeGrandpre said maintaining the house would require a \$1 million endowment. He said that despite interest by the state and others in preserving the house, no one has come forward with a viable plan.

He said it's important to remember that regardless of the future of the house, the land around it will remain undeveloped and protected by the Forest Society.

Richard Candee, director of Boston University's preservation studies program and author of "Building Portsmouth," will teach a graduate seminar devoted entirely to the preservation of **Creek Farm**.

"Its importance is not so much to local history," said Candee, "but . . . to the region and the nation."

Aside from being host to Roosevelt and the Russian and Japanese delegates, the house's first owner, Arthur Astor Carey, was an important figure in the summer artistic colony that flourished in the area.

Candee said the house is in excellent condition for its age and has several architectural points of interests, including murals.

"The important thing to do is to get people to realize that this is an important building historically and architecturally," said Candee.

Candee said he and his class will examine alternatives to demolition, including keeping it as an income-producing structure.