

Historic home in the balance

Fate of Creek Farm house debated

By James Buchanan

jbuchanan@seacoastonline.com

PORTSMOUTH — As the tug of war to save one of Portsmouth's most historic homes continues, some opponents of its destruction say the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF) was not forthcoming in its fund-raising efforts to purchase the property.

Asked Friday about issues regarding the fund-raising to purchase Creek Farm — located along Sagamore Creek and accessed from Little Harbor Road — SPNHF spokesman Richard Ober requested time for SPNHF to respond in writing.

On Monday, SPNHF President Jane A. Difley sent the following statement to the Portsmouth Herald:

"The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests acquired Creek Farm in September 2000 because of

the rare opportunity to secure for the public one of the last pieces of open space on Portsmouth's waterfront. This project is under careful review by the trustees and staff to insure that the property entrusted to the Society by Mrs. Noel is managed consistent with our mission and capabilities and Mrs. Noel's expressed conditions.

"We are aware of the concerns regarding the house that have been raised in recent months by some historic preservation advocates. At the present time, however, it is clear that our obligation to carry out the terms of the deed must be honored. The Society continues to communicate with selected individuals and groups in the historic preservation community who have shown an appreciation for the delicacy and constraints inherent in this mat-

See CREEK FARM, Page A7

From Page One

Land preservation group criticized over Creek Farm

CREEK FARM, from Page A1

ter. In the meantime, we intend to honor Mrs. Noel's request that this issue not be debated publicly. We respectfully ask others to do the same."

SPNHF purchased the property from its former owner, 91-year-old

"At our meeting in December, (SPNHF) told me that all the people they collected money from support bringing the house down. But I do not believe they had an open and full discussion with people about bringing the house down."

Martha Fuller Clark
D-Portsmouth

Lillian "Billy" Noel, after a fund-raising effort that included the membership of SPNHF and some area residents.

As a condition of the deed of sale, SPNHF is required to remove or raze the historic home located on the 35-acre property within two years of Noel's death. The potential destruction of the home is the source of conflict between SPNHF and historic preservationists.

The house was designed by Alexander Wadsworth Longfellow — nephew of the famous American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow — and built in 1887. The home and its owner, Arthur Astor Carey, soon became an important feature of the summer artistic colony that flourished along Sagamore Creek at the turn of the 20th century.

The home and its owner also played host to the Russian and Japanese delegates attending negotiations that would lead to the signing of the Portsmouth Peace Treaty in 1905. For his mediation efforts President Theodore Roosevelt re-

ceived the Nobel Peace Prize.

It is this rich history that historic preservationists want to preserve, but a story that contributors to SPNHF for the purchase of Creek Farm may not have heard, argue some who want the home saved.

"It was not told to anyone that they were going to tear down the house, and it was not mentioned in any of the requests for money sent out to the people," said Diane Stradling, a member of Seacoast Cohousing who was asked by SPNHF to contribute. "I am sure there are people who contributed who thought they were saving the house."

While a list of contributors has not been made available, Portsmouth resident Alanson Sturgis, chairman of the Portsmouth Conservation Commission, said he contributed to SPNHF's Creek Farm fund-raising effort thinking it was to save the house.

Asked if SPNHF communicated to him in any way that the house would be removed or destroyed, Sturgis said no it didn't. He also said he had been aware that 30 of

the 35 acres surrounding the house are protected by a conservation easement. "But the conservation easement excluded the five acres around the house, which is what I was hoping to save. I never imagined that they wanted to tear it down," Sturgis said.

Adding to arguments that SPNHF did not fully inform contributors of the history behind the house or that the house would be removed or destroyed is a brochure sent out to solicit funds for the purchase of Creek Farm. The brochure makes no mention of the house, its history or its fate. The brochure does, however, show a picture of the property that includes the house, and a picture of SPNHF president Jane Diefley standing with Noel on a porch of the home.

Also, in a press release issued in December, SPNHF said it has "permanently protected 35 acres of land and buildings on Sagamore Creek in Portsmouth." Toward the end of the release SPNHF says, "Eventually, in ac-

cordance with Mrs. Noel's explicit desire, a residence at the property will be removed."

There is another house on the property built much more recently than the historic farmhouse, which is due to be removed. SPNHF has said it is going to use the other house to aid in maintaining the property.

Rep. Martha Fuller Clark, D-Portsmouth, a historic preservationist, also says SPNHF was not forthcoming with people about the house.

"At our meeting in December, (SPNHF) told me that all the people they collected money from support bringing the house down," said Fuller Clark. "But I do not believe they had an open and full discussion with people about bringing the house down."

James Garvin, state architectural historian for the N.H. Division of Historical Resources, says SPNHF also misrepresented support from him and others for tearing down the house in an attempt to validate SPNHF fund-raising.

"Initially, it was put to us that Martha Fuller Clark approved of demolishing the house, but we now know that she is very interested in preserving the house," said Garvin. "My point is that some people who are quoted as supporting the demolition of the house do not in fact support that. In fact, we have been quoted as being indifferent to the destruction of the house when we most certainly are not."

Fuller Clark says, though, she briefly visited the house with a member of SPNHF on New Year's Day in 2000, and was asked about the house and the possible need to tear it down to save the land. Fuller Clark said if it meant saving the land, tearing the house down would be OK.

As Fuller Clark learned more about the history of the house, however, she changed her mind and has met a number of times with SPNHF in an attempt to

reach a compromise to save the house. But, Fuller Clark said, SPNHF has been unwilling to consider alternatives, saying to her it is under a legal obligation to remove or tear down the house.

"The society has failed to recognize the historic significance of this house," said Fuller Clark. "I don't really think they took the time to look at the building."

SPNHF has said the requirement to remove or destroy the house is the explicit desire of Noel. Friends of Noel and her attorney, Charles Degrandpre, however, say that she does not want the house torn down. Also, Noel sent two letters to SPNHF, the first saying she does not want the house torn down and the second saying that she had been approached by SPNHF about removing the house.

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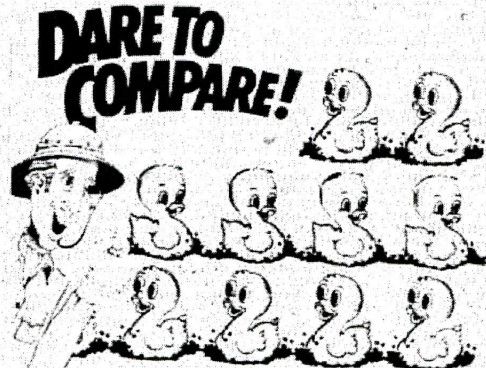
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