



A Little Piece of History

Family falls in love with piece of Connecticut's farming heritage

By Joanne Negri

The original owners of our farm are buried in the backyard. That is, in the backyard of their time, which included many more acres than the five allotted to our property today.

Family gravestones stand quiet and tilted, hidden away in the woods along a nature trail that we often walk with our two chocolate Labradors. In our Georgian colonial home, built around 1780, 14 children were born to Ichabod and Lucy Brown. Old maps record the area in North Stonington, Conn., as the "Brown Homestead."

We knew nothing of this when we came to view the property—it was love at first sight when we entered the driveway and saw the simple symmetry of the house and the open pasture sloping down to the woods.

Open fields are a welcome sight in our part of Connecticut and the boundary of mature trees gave us almost total privacy. I fell in love with the huge, stone fireplaces, complete with pot hangers and beehive oven, while my husband fell in love with the ancient stone walls.

We had recently married and sold our respective homes to buy something a bit further out of town with more space—perhaps we would get a dog. The old farmhouse was structurally sound, but a bit tired and seemed to cry out for some tender loving care.

On an instinct, we jumped in with both feet. I can't say that we knew how much work it would take, but the past three years have witnessed an evolution of the house, the land and ourselves.

The land reconstruction is an ongoing process. Construction of a complete new septic system was necessary and left us with a muddy moonscape. The following spring we removed the boulders that had surfaced during the freeze and thaw of winter with a crowbar. The upside of this construction was a clearing of an original pasture that scrub and weeds had claimed. This will become home for some goats to supply milk for my husband's cheesemaking. In some areas, grass refused to grow because of an excess of crabgrass killer applied by the previous owners, so we seeded with white clover as a soil improver. By the summer, we had a soft, clover lawn buzzing with bees!

My husband and I had held stressful, corporate jobs and were seeking a slower and more natural way of life. Buying the farm was a catalyst; we both now work for ourselves—he in carpentry and I as a garden designer. Our skills have been sorely stretched in the restoration of our home and so has our budget. We learned to take a self-sustaining approach.

Vegetables and herbs now flourish in raised beds, which my husband made from reclaimed cedar planks. Overgrown raspberry canes were brought back to productivity with some well-composted chicken manure and this year we enjoyed our first asparagus spears. In the fall, we preserve our harvest: Squash hangs in net bags in our north-facing pantry while tomatoes are boiled with oregano and basil and frozen, providing winter's supply of sauce. On a frigid night in January, nothing beats a warm pudding topped with raspberries saved from the summer garden.

Broiler chickens were our next food project; a hoop house made from hog panels with sled runners for mobility allowed us to pasture raise them in our fields by moving our flock to a fresh patch of grass each day. The hoop house does double-duty in spring as my coldframe for seedlings. The outbuildings were quickly put to use; the larger one became my husband's workshop with attached chicken coop. Fourteen heritage-breed, layer hens arrived in June and soon settled in to roam the fields and cackle outside our kitchen door for scraps.

No flower gardens existed, so we removed some straggly yews and dug in countless wheelbarrow loads of compost to the poor, sandy soil. Little by little, a new perennial will find a home in the border along the side of the house; the design is pretty, cottage-garden chaos. We dug a small pond to attract wildlife and within days our first frogs appeared, followed by dragonflies, pond skaters and snails.

Wildlife doesn't hesitate to move into a suitable habitat—we use no pesticides or fertilizers. The log piles my husband makes to season our firewood serve as shelter for birds and mammals in winter; we've added nestboxes and all have become occupied.

This year our property was certified as a Backyard Habitat with the National Wildlife Federation. Broad-wing hawks,



white-tailed deer and wild turkeys with young in tow are just some of the creatures that have paid us a visit. During summer evenings, bats circle in search of insects, and toads and salamanders live in our basement. I used to give presentations about budgets and deadlines, now I talk about local wildflower conservation using photographs taken on our farmland.

Our small town lies within one of the last remaining “dark spots” in the Northeast megalopolis: the multi-state sprawl of cities and towns along the eastern seaboard whose lights can be seen from space. We turn off our lights to enjoy the night sky, thanking our lucky stars that we live here and are revitalizing the land.

I love our home and often imagine what the lives of Ichabod and Lucy were like in the 1700s; I wonder how they kept their large family fed and warm (as one of eight children myself, I recall the struggles we had).

Along with the house came old photographs taken around 1850 during the building of an addition (our present-day kitchen). More fascinating are the photographs of the farm when the land was clear-cut—hardly a tree in sight! The pictures also show how the expertly constructed stone walls have weathered the centuries at Brown Farm.

We are happy to look after a piece of Connecticut’s farming heritage and that the history of our farm is still in the making, slowly, over time.

Joanne Negri will receive apparel from Mahindra for submitting her Reader Resumé.