

A Little Piece of History



The original owners of our farm are buried in the backyard, which in their time included many more acres than the five now allotted to our property. Family gravestones stand, quiet and tilted, hidden along a wooded nature trail that we walk often with our two chocolate Labradors. In our Georgian colonial home, built around 1780, fourteen children were born to Ichabod and Lucy Brown, old maps record the area in North Stonington Connecticut as the “Brown Homestead.”

We knew nothing of this when we came to view the property – it was love at first look as we entered the driveway and saw the simple symmetry of the old house and the open pasture sloping down to the woods. Open fields are a welcome sight in our part of Connecticut and the mature trees and hedgerows that garnished the boundaries of the property gave us almost total privacy. It was just the kind of oasis we had been looking for to downshift from our busy lives and to be able to putter, unobserved, to our own rhythm – if we could discover it.

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, plant a garden. The old farmhouse was structurally sound, but a little tired; it cried 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, land and ourselves.

My husband and I had held stressful corporate jobs and were seeking a slower, more natural way of life as we moved into our forties. Life begins now doesn't it? Buying the farm was a catalyst. We both now work for ourselves, he in carpentry, and I as a garden designer. Our aim has been to really *live* in our home and become connected to the community we live in, instead of using our home as a dormitory from a remote and demanding office. We volunteer for local groups involved in preserving nature and cultural history, and spend time getting to know the people around us, many of whom were born in the area. Our skills have been sorely stretched in the restoration of our new home, and so has our budget. We learned to take a self-sustaining approach out of necessity. We both have a practical bent and enjoy the trials and triumphs of fixing up the property with whatever materials are readily at hand.

All the possessions and junk we had acquired over the years suddenly appeared in a new light – what could we use this stuff for? If the answer is “nothing practical” off it will go to Goodwill. Rather than buy new paint for decorating, I had child-like fun mixing my own custom colors using discarded paints we had bought for our previous home. A friend's old carpet underlay has become the perfect weed-blocking path between our vegetable garden beds.

Restoration of the land at the farm was a challenge and is an on-going process. Construction of a new septic system was necessary before we could move in and left us with a muddy moonscape. The following spring we levered out boulders that had surfaced during the freeze-thaw cycle of winter. Soon we had reclaimed an original pasture from scrub and weeds. This will become home for some goats to supply my husband's cheese-making. In some areas of our lawn, grass refused to grow because of an excess of crabgrass killer applied by previous owners, so we seeded with white clover as a soil improver. By the first summer we had a soft clover lawn buzzing with bees!

No flower gardens existed when we first arrived. My heart ached for one to nurture. We removed some straggly yews and added countless wheelbarrow-loads of compost to the poor sandy soil. Little by little, hollyhocks, foxgloves, apricot mullein or a sweetly scented rose have found a home in the new border in front of the house. The overall result is pretty, cottage-garden chaos.

We dug a small pond to attract wildlife and within days the first frogs appeared, followed by dragonflies, pond skaters and snails. Wildlife doesn't hesitate to move into a suitable habitat; build it and they will come. The log piles my husband makes to season

our firewood serve as shelter for birds and mammals in winter. We have added nest boxes— all quickly became occupied. Recently we have had our property 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. In the summer evenings, bats circle in search of insects, toads and salamanders find a home in our basement.

Once the bones of the garden were in place, raising broiler chickens became our next project. A hoop-house with sled runners for mobility, allowed us to utilize our fields to “free-range “ them, by moving to a fresh patch of grass each day. The hoop house does double duty each spring as my cold frame for seedlings. The outbuildings were quickly put to use, the larger one became my husband's workshop with attached chicken coop. It wasn't long before fourteen heirloom, layer hens arrived on the farm and soon settled in to roam the fields and cackle outside our kitchen door for scraps.

Vegetables and herbs now flourish in raised beds my husband made from reclaimed cedar planks. Overgrown raspberry canes were brought back to productivity with some well-composted chicken manure, and we will soon cut our first asparagus spears, having tended them for the requisite three seasons. Each 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 mid-winter nothing beats a warm pudding topped with raspberries saved from the summer garden.

There are times when I think that we are swimming against the tide, trying to live a simple life in a relatively affluent area of the state where everyone seems to be working more in order to have less time to enjoy the fruits of their labors. Our small town also seems to be making a stand of its own. As a mostly rural community of fewer than 5000 people, it 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 this land that has sustained so many generations before us.

In my previous life, I used to give presentations about chemistry, budgets and deadlines. Now I talk about local wildflower conservation, illustrating with photographs taken on our farmland. I love our home and often imagine what the lives of the Ichabod and Lucy were like in the 1700's-- how did they keep their large family fed and warm? (as one of eight children myself I recall the struggles we had growing up). Did they all work the land? Which vegetables and fruits did they grow and how did they store them for the cold winters? How many fires must have been lit in those massive stone grates, with the cooking pot left steaming over the flames. I think of this when I sit down on my rickety little stool to prepare a warming blaze for us and the dogs.

Along with the house sale came some tantalizing old photographs of the home captured in time, more than a hundred and fifty years ago. Some pictures were taken

during building of an addition to the farmhouse (our present day kitchen) probably around 1850 or so. The soft gray images of the house under construction look rustic, harsh, almost shabby; the work must have been hard. Most fascinating are views of the farm when the land was clear cut – hardly a tree in sight! Two men stand purposefully for the camera, each holding a horse in plow harness in what is now our reclaimed field. Enormous boulders loom from the soil they are about to till, those men were hardy souls. The pictures also show clearly how the expertly constructed stonewalls have weathered the centuries at Brown Farm.

Here, we live more consciously and feel more in touch with the earth and with the seasons. We are privileged to look after a piece of Connecticut's farming heritage and to know that the history of our farm is still in the making, slowly, over time.



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