



Environmental Education on the Potomac

The Ferguson Era: An Overview

Alice and Henry Ferguson acquired the 138.39-acre Hard Bargain Farm property in 1922 as a summer and weekend retreat. At the time, Henry Ferguson was a geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and Alice Ferguson was an artist trained at the Corcoran School of Art. Their purchase included a dilapidated farmhouse, several farm structures, fields, woodlands, wetlands, streams, the Potomac shoreline, a view of Mount Vernon, and a beautiful rolling landscape.

At Hard Bargain Farm, Alice Ferguson pursued a variety of creative, intellectual, and public-interest pursuits. In addition to painting, her passions included amateur archaeology, environmental conservation, and farming. The property continues to be an expression of Alice Ferguson's ideas and remains as she developed it. For instance, she designed, sited, and built the main house; designed and built the road and approach to the house; designed and planted the gardens and grounds around the house; built the log cabin and later modified a portion of it for her art studio; and filled the house with art works she painted or collected.

In 1930, Alice commenced archeological excavations along the Potomac River shoreline. Her discoveries, as well as later interpretations of her discoveries made by archeologists from the Smithsonian Institution and the University of Michigan, provided evidence that this area had been occupied by Native Americans for more than 10,000 years. As a result of these findings, the Accokeek Creek Site received National Historic Landmark designation in 1966.

In the 1920s, Alice and Henry Ferguson built the existing main house and its ancillary buildings. They played an active role in preserving the surrounding natural landscape. After World War II, the Fergusons purchased a 500-acre tract of land known as Bond's Retreat. This area was later renamed Moyaone Reserve after the Native American site Alice Ferguson investigated and believed to be the village called Moyaone. The land was parceled into five-acre lots and sold to individuals who shared the Fergusons' values regarding environmental conservation. Many of these individuals built homes in the area and, as permanent residents, were active in the fight to preserve the Potomac shoreline from industrial development during the 1960s.

Following Alice's death in 1951, Fergie – as Henry Ferguson was affectionately known – became more active in community affairs. He permitted a community nursery school to operate from a cottage on his property. In early 1954, he made it known that he would share the cottage with the community for educational purposes. The community quickly responded. Members of the community met in July and appointed three representatives – Nancy Wagner, Louise North, and Mary Thornhill – as an organizational committee to “proceed with the formation of a non-profit corporation... which shall be limited to exclusively educational purposes.” The new organization was named the Alice Ferguson Foundation (AFF) in memory of Alice, and a charter was obtained from the State of Maryland. The first meeting of the new organization was held November 9, 1954. Fifty-nine individuals were elected members of the Foundation because of their interest in this project.

The Foundation was on its way. Much interest and enthusiasm was evident in the wide range of suggested educational projects. Fergie was so impressed with the response and interest in the new Foundation that he soon announced he would leave Hard Bargain Farm to the AFF, retaining for himself a life interest. AFF would evolve over the years from an organization primarily involved in providing scholarship loans and grants to aspiring teachers in the area to an organization with a primary focus on the use of the Farm, river and nature trails for environmental education.

During its early years, AFF pursued a mission of fostering and supporting the local educational system. In addition, the Foundation supported efforts to protect the nearby Potomac riverfront from a major industrial development by donating its land holdings along the Potomac to the United States Department of the Interior. This land transfer and those of other nearby landowners enabled the Department of the Interior to establish Piscataway Park in 1968. Through a scenic easement to protect the viewshed from Mount Vernon, the remaining AFF property and the private property of local residents of the Moyaone Reserve became privately-owned lands within the overall boundaries of Piscataway Park. Through an on-going agreement with the National Park Service, the Foundation has retained its ability to use portions of the Piscataway Park lands for educational purposes. (The specifics of this agreement are discussed in greater detail in Section 3.5 on “Regulatory Framework”).

Henry Ferguson died in 1966, but he expressed his desire for the Foundation to continue to serve its founding mission. By 1967, the Farm and trails, such as the Max North Nature Trail, were attracting 3,000 students per year, prompting the conversion of farm buildings to education-related facilities and, ultimately, the construction of the Wareham Lodge in 1976 to meet the demand for overnight school trips and other educational uses. The vision, begun by the Fergusons over 80 years ago, has continued through AFF, and Hard Bargain Farm Environmental Center has become a facility that supports a model environmental educational opportunity for thousands of children and adults each year.