Hersey Family Farms Studied For National Register

By Liz Hengen
Preservation Consultant

An initiative undertaken by the Andover Historical Society will soon result in listing the Hersey Family Farms on the National Register of Historic Places. The listing will include the two farms long in the Hersey family, those of Guy and James (and now Jerry) Hersey, which span Franklin Highway in East Andover. The project follows on the heels of the recent purchase of a conservation easement to protect the Hersey Family Farm currently owned by Jerry Hersey.

"This is an exciting endeavor," noted Elizabeth Durfee Hengen, the preservation consultant engaged to complete the lengthy nomination form. "The National Register recognizes properties that are significant in local, state and national history, and these two farms are splendid—and increasingly rare—examples of Andover's rich agricultural heritage. Together, the farms comprise 327 acres, with vistas enjoyed by all who travel along Route 11." According to Jerry Hersey, his farm is the only one left in town that raises animals on a large scale. His beef cattle graze in the pastures, and he manages the hay fields of both farms.

Guy Hersey's Farm

Both the Guy Hersey and James Hersey farms date back to the mid-19th century, a period when Andover was primarily an agricultural town. The Guy Hersey farm was formally established by Hiram Fellows ca. 1850, although Hengen has discovered that the farmhouse he purchased dates back several decades (and was perhaps moved to the site). Fellows' cousin noted shortly prior to Hiram's purchase that the land was "wet and valuable only for grass and the quantity of hay cut on it has been constantly decreasing!" Fellows ultimately sold the farm to Carlos Tilton, who farmed here on a largely subsistence level for four decades. He did produce cash crops in butter and cheese.

In 1904 Guy Hersey bought the farm from Tilton, later adding the field across the street to his holdings. By then, farming was on the decline throughout New England, and many local farms had become "part-time," supplemented by family members working elsewhere or by taking in summer boarders. As herds coalesced into larger dairy farms that could meet changing agricultural technologies, fewer families kept milk cows or produced milk, cream and butter. Guy and his wife, Nanny, turned to Devon cattle, producing butter, rather than milk to sell, and raised pigs, which consumed the whey. He was one of the last of the local farmers to rely exclusively on working oxen for all farming operations; he never owned a horse or automobile. He and his sons were a familiar sight on the highway with their cattle and ox carts in the days when automobiles and tractors were rapidly replacing horses.

Guy was an emminently practical farmer. He moved two barns to the site, assembling them in a U-shaped enclave just south of the house. He enlarged the third barn, part of his original purchase of the farm, by adding another bay and raising the roof for increased hay storage. In 1930, he built an additional barn far out in the field to enable him to milk his cows during the summer without needing to bring them back through the fields or along the road, which by then saw steady automobile traffic. He adapted a pig shelter into a shop for his forge that could, at the same time, provide heat to the animals. The barns are full of ingenious handmade devices.

Jerry Hersey's Farm

The assemblage of the James (now Jerry) Hersey farm was more fragmented than that of the Guy Hersey farm, though its initial establishment nearly coincident. Andover native Alfred Weare acquired land and likely built a farmhouse in the late 1830s. However, a lightning strike on July 6, 1874, destroyed the buildings. They were almost immediately rebuilt, but the Weare family soon sold out. The farm passed through various hands until it was purchased by Dimond Shaw in 1907. His widow sold it to James Hersey, one of Guy and Nanny's two sons, in 1945.

James Hersey raised Holsteins into the 1980s, selling bulk milk. A few years after acquiring the farm, he erected a new, large, up-to-date barn and attached milk house across the street to accommodate his growing herd and bought the field east of his farmhouse from his mother. He also acquired a 153-acre woodland lot that extends north toward Tucker Mountain. Today, the dairy herd has been replaced with Hereford cattle under the ownership of James' son, Jerry.

The connected farmhouses, combined with the rich collection of agricultural outbuildings, extensive surrounding fields, pasture and woodland, stone walls, and at least two archeological sites, make these two properties a highly significant agricultural landscape according to Hengen. They represent the shift from 19th century subsistence agriculture to 20th century dairying to cattle raising in central New Hampshire.

National Register listing is an important preservation tool. It heightens awareness and appreciation for valuable historical resources and provides critical information about properties. It also affords protection against encroachment by highway construction and other publicly funded, permitted, or licensed projects.

Because the listing includes more than one property, it will be nominated as a National Register Historic District. However, National Register districts, unlike locally designated districts, do not entail any restrictions on activity undertaken by private property owners. Other Andover properties listed on the Register are Tucker Mountain Schoolhouse, Potter Place Railroad Station, Kenniston Bridge, Cilleyville-Bog Bridge, Gershom Durgin House, and the East Andover Village Center Historic District.

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Boynton Law Office
9 Johnson Lane, Suite 102
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Andover, NH 03216-0395
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Facsimile 603-735-5564
Email boyntonlawoffice@tds.net

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