

A 19th Century Family Farm Becomes a 21st Century Public Treasure

A UNIQUE BEQUEST

The enduring wish of one of Charleston's great preservationists – the late Emily Ravenel Farrow – became a reality this September, when her beloved Ashem Farm was transferred to the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission for a passive, public park. In a novel approach to land conservation and preservation,

Mrs. Farrow had left her family farm in a bequest to the Lowcountry Open Land Trust upon her death, with the intent that Ashem not only be preserved, but also be open to the public, for others to enjoy and learn from the land she loved.

Long a mysterious oasis of green locked behind an iron gate on Old Towne Road in West Ashley, the property next door to Charles Towne Landing was originally protected by a conservation easement that Mrs. Farrow donated to the Historic Charleston Foundation in 2005. The easement permanently limited the potential subdivision and development of this valuable acreage, situated within the city limits of Charleston.

On April 26th, much as she had lived her life, Mrs. Farrow bravely met her death at age 96. Towards the end, she had the wisdom and determination to shape the best future possible for the one possession she loved more than anything, her land. And while Mrs. Farrow acutely understood how the land had molded her – physically, intellectually and emotionally – hers was not a selfish love. She had always shared the beauty and lessons of Ashem with countless people in myriad ways; and she was determined to continue sharing the land's gifts, even after she was gone.

FARMER'S DAUGHTER

As Mrs. Farrow stated in an interview with Charleston's Ashley Hall School (her alma mater) not long ago, "I've had a wonderful



life. I've been blessed." There was no question that she considered one of these blessings to be Ashem, given to her and her sister upon their parents' death.

For nearly a century – from 1915 to 2011 – Mrs. Farrow lived at Ashem, with some time spent in New England and in downtown Charleston. To say she was a "country girl at heart," or was "endowed with a love of the land," may sound trite and passé today. But Mrs. Farrow was smart and humble enough to recognize the profound, essential relationship that every human being has with the earth, especially as she observed Ashem's impact on her as a child and as an adult.

Mrs. Farrow's father, Charles Jervey Ravenel, was first and foremost a farmer, growing soybeans and vegetables on his family lands along the Ashley River and Old Towne Road, just outside the City of Charleston. In the early days, farmers in the area often would use the river for transporting crops to the city. Mr. Ravenel and his wife, Emily Legare Simmons Ravenel, raised two daughters at Ashem, Legare and Emily, and taught them to be expert horsewomen. Mr. Ravenel planted live oaks on the farm that are now more than one hundred years old. Mrs. Ravenel, an avid gardener, laid out scores of azaleas and flowering bulbs.

LEARNING FROM THE LAND

In the first part of the 20th century, most of the land above the Old Bridge on the west side of the Ashley River was under agricultural cultivation. The bridge itself was a wooden plank structure and the Old Towne Road was mostly dirt. The Legare and Simmons families, cousins of the Ravenels, farmed the neighboring properties. Today, these lands comprise well known West Ashley neighborhoods, such as Lenevar, Wespawnee, Northbridge Terrace and Orange Grove.

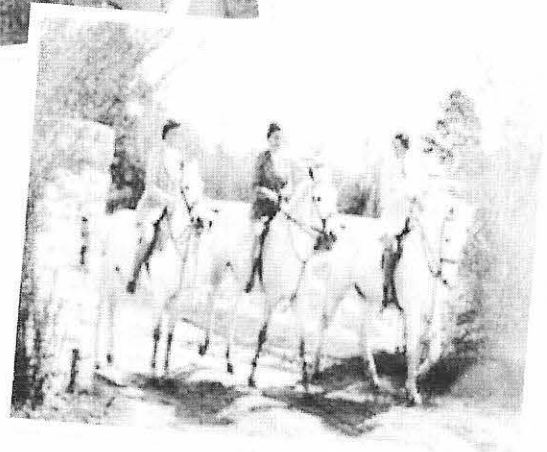
The evolution of these farmlands from countryside to suburbia had a profound effect on Mrs. Farrow, especially as Ashem became more and more an island in the midst of an expanding metropolitan Charleston. As was stated in her obituary last April, "Miss Em [a name used by family and friends] liked to brag that she had lived from the privy to the moon." While this statement reflects her quick wit and good humor, it also reveals the reality of the tremendous change she witnessed during her lifetime.

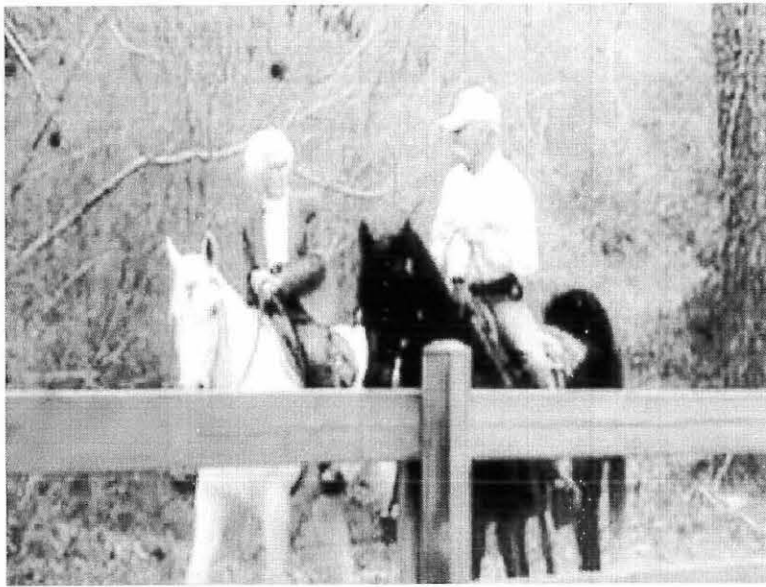
The farm at Ashem kept Mrs. Farrow deeply rooted and connected to generations of Ravenels before her and provided a concrete connection to her wide network of family and friends living in the area. She had 19 first cousins, including Julia Legare next door, whom Mrs. Farrow would visit by horseback at what is today Charles Towne Landing, which lies just across Old Towne Creek from Ashem.

Mrs. Farrow talked about how the farm and houses at Ashem had "withstood a lot" over the years, and had taught her how to



*Images of
Emily Farrow on
horseback and the
house at Ashem.*





Pictured here is Emily Farrow still riding in her later years, as well as views of her protected properties.

adjust and persevere – whether in the face of hurricanes, wars, the Great Depression, or the endless cycle of life and death. As a farmer's daughter, perhaps her close proximity to life's realities made her treasure life even more. She was deeply devoted to the people she knew, and also to the wild and domestic creatures with whom she shared Ashem.

ISLAND OF RURAL TRANQUILITY

Mrs. Farrow was especially fond of “her favorite foxes” – the red and gray foxes that still roam Ashem today. And she adored her cats, especially “Tiddlywinks,” who as a kitten was first discovered in the branches of the family's Christmas tree one year and who lived with them until she died at the age of 13. In fact, Mrs. Farrow felt so personally connected to the natural world that she gave wild creatures their own particular names, even naming individual plants after friends.

And, of course, there were her horses. During the throes of the Depression, Mrs. Farrow assisted her father in establishing the St. Andrew's Parish Riding Academy, which she said helped to sustain Ashem “when farming was slow.” Having parents who were both accomplished equestrians made it “natural for me to love horses,” stated Mrs. Farrow in a 2008 interview. And she shared this love of horses with the hundreds of children and adults she taught to ride, including the artist Alfred Hutty, who in return, taught Mrs. Farrow to paint.

Ashem's three horse barns could board 20 to 25 horses at a time. In addition to giving riding lessons, the Ravenels and Mrs. Farrow would stage two-day horse shows at the farm, which was outfitted with a riding ring and jumps. At the age of 15, Mrs. Farrow rode a stallion named King Edward, who was reputed to be the son of the legendary American Saddlebred, Bourbon King.

Fast forward to 2005, when she gained national attention by riding her horse on her 90th birthday. Today, the annual Ashley Hall Horse Show awards the Emily Ravenel Farrow '33 Alumnae Cup in her memory.

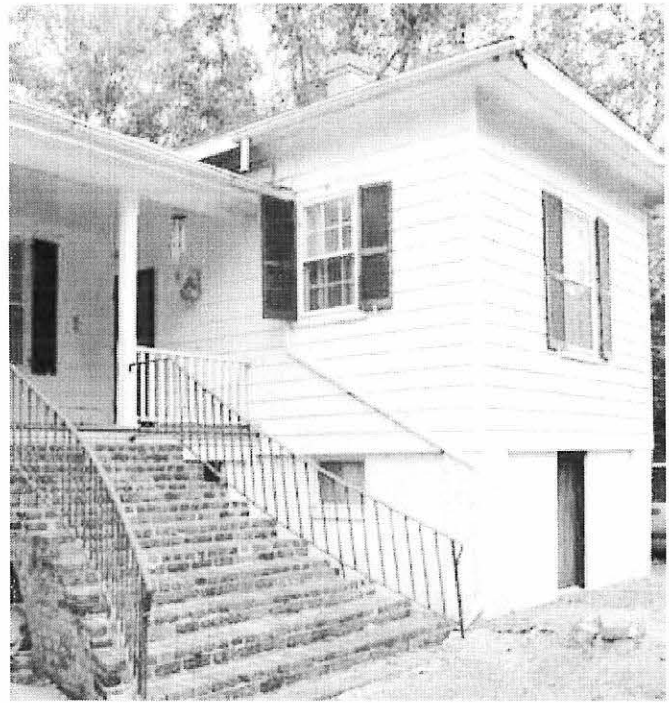
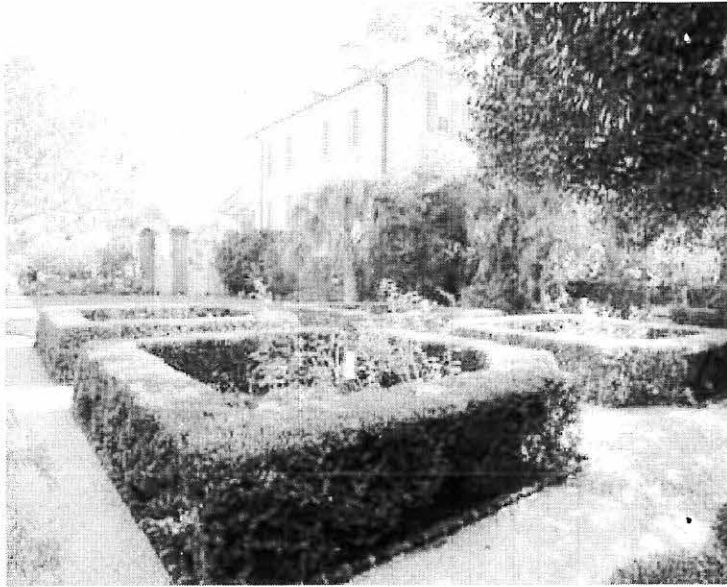
A PRESERVATION ACTIVIST IS BORN

Mrs. Farrow loved the idea of people enjoying and learning from a place and its history, just as she had all her life. But as a well traveled and well read lady – her library was extensive and wide ranging – she was conscious of the rapid change occurring on once familiar landscapes. Whether close to home or traveling abroad with her dear friend, painter Alicia Rhett, Mrs. Farrow saw clearly the potential threats facing Charleston's historic structures and rural lands. Without bold action on the part of individual citizens like herself, the powerful forces of greed and complacency would take hold of her birthplace and destroy its way of life forever.

It was in 1947 that Mrs. Farrow wed John Ashby Farrow; and in the 1950s, the couple adopted two sons, David and Michael. During that time, the Farrow family bought and moved into 64 South Battery in downtown Charleston, a pre-Revolutionary National Historic Landmark, considered one of the finest two-story frame residences in America.

Mrs. Farrow described herself as “an ordinary country gal” when she moved into 64 South Battery. But such a modest statement belied her keen sensibility and appreciation for the grandeur and significance of the structure she was now steward of, especially in the context of the greater historic Charleston peninsula.

Mrs. Farrow embraced her new role as historic preservationist, and from 1950 until 1961, served on the Historic Charleston Foundation's Board of Trustees, during which time the Foundation purchased the Nathaniel Russell House and established the



nation's first revolving fund for neighborhood rehabilitation purposes. In 1964, Mr. and Mrs. Farrow were among the first to offer their home for inclusion in the Foundation's Festival of Houses.

Over the ensuing years, the Farrows donated nearly 100 examples of decorative art and fine arts from their personal collection to the Historic Charleston Foundation, many of which are displayed at the Missroom House (the Foundation's headquarters) and the Nathaniel Russell House. After her husband's death, Mrs. Farrow continued to donate artwork and furniture from their collection to the Foundation, as well as to the Gibbes Museum of Art and the Charleston Museum.

Shortly before Mr. Farrow's death in 1984, Mr. and Mrs. Farrow agreed to sell their landmark 64 South Battery Residence to the Historic Charleston Foundation, thereby saving it from becoming a condominium development or a commercially run inn, as was feared likely. This judicious decision by the Farrows enabled the Foundation to sell the circa 1772 house to preservation minded buyers, who then granted a protective easement that preserves the historic house in perpetuity.

SAVING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

Mrs. Farrow's decision to forego additional personal gain in order to guarantee the permanent protection of 64 South Battery for future generations was both a natural outgrowth of her Ravenel family heritage, as well as a defining moment in the development of her vision and commitment to saving the historic and natural fabric of her birthplace.

By the 1990s, Mrs. Farrow had moved back to Ashem full-time. While she had never really left the farm – she and Mr. Farrow frequently shuttled between Ashem and 64 South Battery – she was delighted to be fully ensconced there again, in the midst

of her beloved plants and animals.

In addition to re-immersing herself in the life of the farm, it was also time to apply to Ashem the same permanent preservation tools that had saved 64 South Battery in 1984. Already, Mrs. Farrow had seen well intended wills and family trusts – designed to preserve long-held lands all around Charleston – broken and violated by subsequent generations and beneficiaries. She was determined to avoid such a fate for Ashem once she was gone. Instead, she would employ the most current and permanent legal tool available to protect land – the conservation easement – similar to the historic preservation easement applied to 64 South Battery.

So in 2005, Mrs. Farrow donated a conservation easement to the Historic Charleston Foundation, permanently limiting the potential subdivision and use of the increasingly valuable acreage comprising Ashem. Having been annexed into the City of Charleston years before, the 44 acres that Mrs. Farrow put under easement were ripe for development. By voluntarily and permanently giving up development rights to Ashem, both for herself and for her heirs, she was ensuring its preservation forever.

HISTORIC PARTNERSHIP

But Mrs. Farrow went even a step further, to not only ensure Ashem's preservation, but to guarantee that the greater public would continue to enjoy and benefit from her land. Not only did she

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Caretaker Bruce Bailey (above) and the beautiful vistas of Ashem.



restrict Ashem's development through the donation of a conservation easement to the Historic Charleston Foundation, she then named the Lowcountry Open Land Trust as the beneficiary and recipient of Ashem upon her death.

In an agreement between the Emily R. Farrow Revocable Trust and the Lowcountry Open Land Trust, Mrs. Farrow authorized that upon her death, the Land Trust would receive Ashem. With Mrs. Farrow's blessing, the Land Trust, in turn, agreed to sell the property to the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission for use as a preserved, public park – honoring the terms of the existing conservation easement on the property and Mrs. Farrow's wish to preserve her land in perpetuity for the benefit and enjoyment of the citizens of Charleston.

The initial conservation easement on the Ashem tract specifically stipulated that there would be no more than three subdivisions of the property and that only traditional uses would be allowed, such as farming or equestrian and recreational activities. By so substantially limiting the development and use of the property, the market value of Ashem was reduced by more than 60%, hence lowering its purchase price in the transfer from the Land Trust to PRC.

Thus, in September of this year, the County Park and Recreation Commission purchased the 44-acre Ashem tract from the Land Trust at a deeply discounted purchase price (due to the conservation easement) of \$3.4 million. The Lowcountry Open Land Trust, now in its 25th year, will use the proceeds of the sale to

enhance its land conservation and stewardship programs, which currently protect 83,332 acres of land in the Lowcountry of South Carolina.

PRC's pledge to preserve Ashem as a public park further enhances the protection of Mrs. Farrow's land by removing the possibility of it ever being subdivided and sold. In addition, PRC will add an adjacent 11-acre tract along Old Towne Road (which the agency acquired last fall) to make for a combined total of 55 acres of new county parkland, right next door to 664-acre Charles Towne Landing State Park. Thus, each of these transactions – with the Historic Charleston Foundation, the Land Trust and PRC – enhances the protection, conservation value and public benefit of Mrs. Farrow's bequest, in perpetuity.

A VERY PUBLIC BENEFIT

"A gift of this magnitude is transformative," says Land Trust Executive Director Elizabeth Hagood, "both to the Land Trust and to Charleston. The commitment of these community groups to work together to honor Mrs. Farrow's intent and make her dream a reality is a remarkable convergence of shared vision and expert capacity.

"Given Ashem's proximity to Charles Towne Landing, its wealth of historic and natural resources, its waterfront access, and its location in the heart of metropolitan Charleston, the new park will serve as a tremendous asset to the area's citizens. The outcome is not only a testament to Mrs. Farrow's devotion to the public



good, it is also a result of her lifetime of civic engagement and connection.”

PRC Executive Director, Tom O’Rourke concurs, “It has been an honor to represent the citizens of Charleston County in acquiring this property for their perpetual enjoyment. We are excited to work with our neighbors in West Ashley, and our partners – the Lowcountry Open Land Trust and Historic Charleston Foundation – to protect this property forever as Mrs. Farrow intended.”

NEW VISION FOR ASHEM

According to Mrs. Hagood, PRC will first literally “dig in” at Ashem, undertaking an archaeological survey of the entire property. Public input will later be sought on the best use for the passive park. During this public master planning process, the goal will be to realize the best expression of Mrs. Farrow’s vision. PRC will also conduct a waterfront access study for kayaking and canoeing, given Ashem’s deepwater access to Old Towne Creek, a tributary of the Ashley River.

“Ashem has long attracted people who sought inspiration, meditation and recreation from the splendor of the land,” adds Mrs. Hagood. “Soon, when the iron gate of Ashem is once again opened wide, citizens will find sanctuary beneath the long, graceful canopy of live oaks. They will also enjoy a stroll down to Old Towne Creek to refresh themselves in the very spot that DuBose Heyward claimed as his favorite fishing hole.”

2012 AND BEYOND

Likewise, the Land Trust will engage in a formal, strategic visioning process in order to fully maximize the impact of the proceeds from the sale of Ashem. As Land Trust board president Batson Hewitt explains, “We must and will use this wonderful opportunity to increase our land conservation efforts both in acquisition of strategic conservation easements and public education. This was Emily’s main hope for her bequest and its legacy.

“It is vitally important that the public understands how critical the preservation of open spaces is to wildlife corridors, water and air quality, and how that relates to quality of life here in the Lowcountry,” Mr. Hewitt adds. “Emily Farrow recognized this value decades ago. We are humbled and greatly appreciate the opportunity this kind and generous lady has afforded the Land Trust on behalf of future generations.”

In death as in life, Emily Ravenel Farrow’s passion and love for the land lives on. Thanks to the foresight of this brave, thoughtful lady, a Charleston treasure has been preserved forever, and a lasting legacy has been established for land protection in the Lowcountry – all for the delight and benefit of generations to come.

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LOLT Executive Director*