

Opinion: The American Horticultural Society is selling River Farm. Its future looks brighter.

Opinion by John F. Seymour

June 11, 2021 at 9:00 a.m. EDT



John F. Seymour, a longtime Arlington resident, is a former volunteer at River Farm.

In the early 1970s, in the midst of the Cold War, one of the Potomac River farms once owned by George Washington was nearly sold to the Soviet Union for use as a retreat for embassy dignitaries. To prevent the sale, philanthropist Enid Annenberg Haupt donated \$1 million to the American Horticultural Society (AHS) to allow the organization to purchase the property for its headquarters. Now, nearly 50 years later, AHS has announced its intent to sell the property, River Farm, for \$32.9 million.

When it listed the property for sale, the AHS likely had no inkling of the fierce opposition the sale would provoke in its neighbors and every local, state and federal official with even a remote connection to the property. To date, those opposing the sale or threatening legal action include Fairfax County, various Virginia senators and delegates, at least one congressional representative and the Virginia and D.C. attorneys general. The sale is also opposed by half of the AHS board of directors. Opponents maintain, with considerable passion, that the AHS cannot lawfully sell the property because Haupt's donation intended it to be maintained as a center for horticultural excellence open to the public.

Facing litigation, eroding public trust and dissension within its own ranks, AHS now seems poised to transfer the title to Northern Virginia's regional parks authority, known as Nova Parks, and the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust for management. State Sen. Adam P. Ebbin (D-Alexandria) and Del. Paul E. Krizek (D-Fairfax) are also working to secure several million dollars in public funding to help the effort. Although the precise nature of the transaction, future uses for the property and the role of the AHS remain unclear, the proposal almost certainly augurs a brighter future for the property.

As a novice volunteer at River Farm, I had hoped that the property might, like those managed by the United Kingdom's Royal Horticultural Society, include a grand public garden displaying the best of American horticulture. Or perhaps, like the National Arboretum, the AHS might have a research institute dedicated to plant genetics with greenhouses and heirloom plants and seeds. Or maybe, I thought, it would host a library, like Dumbarton Oaks, to advance knowledge and trends in garden design (maybe with green frosted reading lamps).

I also hoped that, in light of the site's prior ownership by Washington, and before him, its inhabitation by a number of

that available reports reinforce a picture of enslaved life at River Farm in which difficult labor was expected of even the most aged slaves, and the reproductive capacity of young women — or girls — was valued as their principal asset.” The large population of child slaves at River Farm, according to the NPS, was “a by-product of Washington’s encouragement of his female slaves to procreate.” Washington’s overseers recorded the births of child slaves alongside the births of livestock — each child added to Washington’s wealth. Perhaps, I thought, AHS staff have unearthed and preserved colonial artifacts that could help contribute to our region’s growing understanding of slavery and our fraught racial history.

To my disappointment, River Farm had none of this. Although set in an undeniably bucolic 27-acre setting on a bluff overlooking the Potomac, no signs or displays established a historical context. The main house itself might be any slightly shabby Northern Virginia headquarters of a small nonprofit. The display gardens, too, were randomly sited and unimaginative. Selection of shrubs and perennials appeared to be guided more by donations from the AHS’s corporate sponsors than any overall aesthetic vision. The site’s best horticultural feature, accenting the long, gentle slope to the Potomac, was a wildflower meadow installed to replace an aging turf lawn. When new, it hosted masses of pollinators. Over the years, however, the meadow has devolved into an almost impenetrable thicket of woody invasives. The AHS has justified its proposed sale of the property, in part, on its inability to bear an estimated \$3 million in deferred maintenance. Even casual observers might consider that more than a tad low.

None of this is the fault of the AHS. Its staff members are talented and, to the volunteers, unfailingly courteous and generous with their knowledge. But they’re not historians or archaeologists. And Haupt’s donation did not fund an endowment. In light of the AHS’s modest membership base, ever-increasing maintenance costs and the loss of wedding and other special event funding arising from the coronavirus pandemic, the organization can hardly be faulted for concluding last fall that it had no option but to sell the property.

It remains to be seen what will become of the property, even if negotiations with Nova Parks are successful. Perhaps it will become a model of biophilia in action, with spaces designed to foster a greater appreciation of nature and encourage daily interaction and interest in the natural world. Recently, Arlington County and Reston have joined the Biophilic Cities Network and pledged to promote abundant and accessible opportunities to connect with nature for its citizens. Perhaps even more important, new stewardship might promote archaeological and historical surveys of past occupation and use to shed light on our own past, helping to promote racial understanding and reconciliation.

Whatever the outcome, the AHS’s ownership of the property over the past 50 years, even if fairly characterized as benign neglect, has at the very least preserved an opportunity for future public use and preservation. In the end, that may prove to be its modest, yet honorable and enduring, contribution to American horticulture, historical truth and neighborhood civic life.

Read more:

[Letter to the editor: Selling River Farm would be a terrible mistake](#)

[Letter to the editor: Let’s save River Farm](#)

[Letter to the editor: Don’t ruin the view from Mount Vernon](#)

Updated June 9, 2021

Discover more of the stories that matter to you.

Select your interests



Opinions by Post columnists and guest writers:

Sophia A. Nelson | John Warner and John Hager: Two Virginia statesmen who loomed large

Mark J. Rozell: Glenn Youngkin's difficult pivot

Mary Vought: Calling foul on the Alexandria Little League's seminar on race

Norman Leahy: On the Virginia Democratic primary ballot: Dual candidacies and progressive priorities

Andrew Macdonald: Urban stream renewal is not helping the Chesapeake Bay

Tanya Finch: Greed is destroying forests and the environment in Northern Virginia

Opinions by the Editorial Board:

VMI must act on a report revealing its 'racist and sexist culture'

So far, Glenn Youngkin is mastering the duck and the dodge

John Warner was the kind of Republican the country needs now

The Post's endorsements in Virginia's Democratic primary

Read more Virginia news coverage | Sign up for the Afternoon Buzz newsletter for news about the D.C. area in your inbox each weekday