

# Don't Sell Us Down the River

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The American Horticultural Society's (AHS) decision to sell off its River Farm headquarters in Alexandria, Va., hardly seems in keeping with its mission to "blend education, social responsibility and environmental stewardship with the art and practice of horticulture."

It begs the question: how does one promote horticultural excellence when

the land upon which its very

6 ❖ MOUNT VERNON GAZETTE ❖ JUNE 3-9, 2021

FROM PAGE 6

It appears the AHS is now re-writing that covenant, claiming high operating expenses, outworn facilities, and COVID-restricted attendance as part of its motivation to sell at a price of \$32.9 million.

Multiple stakeholders have since stepped forward to keep the property intact and open to the public — The Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, NOVA Parks, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, senators, congressmen.

Millions of dollars have been raised and put on the table in an effort to keep River Farm open to the public.

Lately, serious negotiations have been entered in to, along with assurances from the AHS that it holds the highest of intentions. Several board members have changed their original position about selling the property. It gives one reason to hope.

"You can't save River Farm," my neighbor assures me. It's prime real estate. It's business."

This makes no sense—certainly not to us members of the Mount Vernon Garden Club, and to others in the Greater Washington Area's 63 garden clubs.

To us, the issue is foundational. Beyond the 18 species of butterflies, the 10 species of dragonflies, and 32 species of birds who call River Farm home, as well as the Bald eagles and ospreys flying along its shoreline, we gardeners know that in order to protect nature, one must first fall in love with her. For that, a sense of wonder needs to take root—one experienced, not witnessed in 2D photos or viewed on Zoom.

In selling historic River Farm, AHS not only falls short of its environmental stewardship, but also shears itself of its own, horticultural roots. By removing its headquarters from the grounds of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate, where he garnered a reputation as the "father of American agriculture", the AHS denies his influence in helping usher a vital branch of horticulture onto the world stage.

Faithful to the scientific method and committed to growing an agri-based economy, Washington transformed his beloved property into an experimental laboratory, working in lockstep with fellow planters, nursery-

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mandate rests is being sold?

Enid Haupt, arguably America's foremost horticultural patron, contributed \$1 million to purchase the 27-acre Potomac riverfront property back in 1973, thereby laying the foundation for the AHS's national headquarters. There were no deed restrictions or covenants placed on River Farm. Haupt asked only that admission be free and the grounds remain open to the public, in keeping with her similar philanthropic gifts to other public gardens. Nature to Haupt was religion, one best shared with others.

SEE DON'T SELL, PAGE 7

men, seed merchants and naturalists, part of a group of influencers who formed perhaps, the largest plant and seed exchange in American history, leaders of the original farm-to-table movement, their enthusiasm underwritten by an abundance of land and the diversity of flora and fauna it supported.

They learned as they went, creating schools, institutions, agricultural groups and horticultural societies, eager to educate America's citizenry. In a country lacking any national identity, leaders like Washington understood that serving the public good served the principles of self-determination so vital to any democracy. Against king and country, ours was the better value system, our shared prosperity the best revenge against Old World tenets of privilege and exclusivity.

Enid Haupt recognized the value of River Farm. So, too, does its exclusive listing agent, describing it as a "Once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to own 27 plus acres of riverfront property in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area ... an estate renowned for its unobstructed views of the Potomac River and impeccably maintained gardens."

In its proposed \$32 million dollar reboot, the AHS promises to reduce a

horticultural story to fairy tale — the property Haupt funded for public benefit privatized to those best able to afford the view.

In contrast, Britain's Royal Horticultural Society never sold off its heritage. On the contrary, despite all measure of challenge, the world's leading plant charity has grown from one to four historic gardens, presiding over the growing appreciation of nature amidst a time of global urbanization, environmental degradation and habitat loss.

Engaging Millennials and Z/Alpha generations into a new relationship with horticulture will be a grand task — one likely to require multiple stakeholders on multi-levels, much in the same way Washington nurtured a diverse community of gardeners and growers, everyone jointly staked to a common faith in opportunity.

This is America, money doesn't talk, it roars. Which is why it's crucial that non-profits like AHS pay their debt forward, not divest themselves of any hard earned capital.