

Litchfield House: an endless, endlessly rewarding project

by Cecile Sandven



Welcome to the Litchfield House. (Photo by Marjorie Johnson)

On a rainy Saturday morning, entering the Fritz-Endres's warm kitchen is like stepping into the comfort of grandma's house. Exposed wood beams, wide pine floorboards and herbs drying in the back—the home is much as it would have appeared when first occupied in 1861. As Darrold Endres and Janet Fritz invite me to join them for a cup of tea, Endres notes the weather is keeping him from his projects. But, contemplating a morning off, he smiles and adds, “There’s some welcome to that too.”



An inviting kitchen that, minus the modern appliances, looks much as it might have many years ago. (Photo by Priscilla Stevens)

For 19 years, Endres and Fritz have managed the Litchfield House on the Great Brook Farm State Park, across from the canoe launch on North Road. Under the Massachusetts Historic Curatorship Program (HCP), they have renovated and maintained the house, barn and gardens in exchange for a 25-year lease to live there. They were the first curators under the program, which began in 1995, and has since spread throughout Massachusetts and to other states. Their success has been noted in articles in the New York Times, Boston Globe, and Yankee Magazine, and in a Chronicle segment on TV. The house was also the setting for a 2012 movie.

Endres says the Historic Curatorship Program is “a partnership where everyone benefits and something of value is preserved forever.” Although it has required labor that would be daunting to most homeowners, Fritz adds, “It’s worked for us. This is a lovely town to

live in and the kids have gone to wonderful schools.” The Fritz-Endres have three daughters, the youngest of whom is now a senior at CCHS.

Endres explains that in the early nineties, several state parks in Massachusetts contained homes that were unoccupied and falling apart. Many were historic, and the HCP law was passed in 1994 “to save them for posterity at no cost to the Commonwealth,” he explains. The law allowed the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) to enter into leases with “curators” who assume all the costs of renovation and preservation. There was also a requirement that they “demonstrate benefit to the Commonwealth” by holding open houses and developing programs. At Litchfield, visitors to the state park frequently find an open door, and the Girl Scouts, Junior Rangers and senior citizens are among those routinely invited to the home to view what farming life was like in the late 1800s.

State seeks homesteaders, preservationists

Fritz recounts a 1994 weekend morning in their then-home in Billerica when, reading the Boston Globe, she noted the “Home of the Week” was the familiar Litchfield House at Great Brook Farm. Fritz and Endres had walked in the park and peeked in the windows of Litchfield, wondering what would happen to the historic house no one had lived in for several years. They had enjoyed renovating their 1890 Billerica home, and decided to apply to become the Litchfield curators.

Upon submitting an RFP, they found that ten others had also applied. “We were carefully vetted,” says Fritz. “They wanted to make sure we had the financial wherewithal and a vision for the property.” They were among the three finalists invited to present to the DCR commissioner. “We came with a basket of vegetables and jars of preserves,” says Endres, thus demonstrating, “We are organic gardening and homesteading people.” It worked. They were chosen as the first curators under the new program.

The deal was sealed with a handshake and signature on a single page document, contingent on review by the lawyers. It got the legal treatment, and a document a half inch thick was delivered to the home five years afterward. Because the final lease was signed in 2000, the term ends in 2025, with an option to add five years beyond that.

Historic house needing

lots of work



Curators Janet Fritz and Darrold Endres.
(Photo by Priscilla Stevens)



The living room of the Litchfield House. (Photo by Priscilla Stevens)

The Litchfield House was built by the Adams family in 1861, and a mill was operated on the site. The family had been in Carlisle since the 1600s. Later, the house became part of the Farnham Smith Farm, and after World War II, the Litchfield family lived there and worked for Smith. After the death of her husband Lowell, Olive Litchfield moved out of the home to Carlisle Village Court in 1990. By that time, Smith's property had become Great Brook Farm State Park. With no plan for the historic house, the state locked it and left it to deteriorate for the next five years.

After being chosen as curators, Fritz and Endres were two weeks from move-in when a letter came from the state building inspector indicating the house was uninhabitable. Attached was a list of 13 items that needed to be fixed, including rotten floorboards, faulty water pipes, ceiling leaks, and broken windows. The house was not insulated and doorways were inaccessible.

Fortunately, Endres had grown up on a Minnesota farm, the oldest of nine, "with a hammer in one hand and a screwdriver in the other," he says. He summoned two brothers to fly out from Minnesota, and, with time wasting, they attacked the list. After two weeks of hard work, the inspector returned and signed off on occupancy.

Much more work waited. Furnace, well and electric systems were renewed or replaced, and wood floors refinished. Fritz, who grew up in the suburbs and admits her romantic idea of homesteading came from "Little House on the Prairie" books, discovered a talent for wall plastering. Endres trained his daughters in the fine art of shingling, and both the barn and house received new roofs.

Family, friends, and "like-minded people" often helped out. A 300-foot French drain was installed with the help of Great Brook farmer Mark Duffy. A musty smell in the house led to the discovery that large underlying stones in the basement had to be removed. With a winch and ropes, the stones were manually lifted and concrete poured. The stone <http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr/conservation/cultural-resources/historic-curatorship-program.html> were saved for a patio to be built someday.

Replicating the past

The lease agreement did not limit what could be done inside the house, and the family has made a few concessions to 21st century living, including removal of a wall to expand the kitchen and turning the “birthing room” into an office. But the goal was preservation, and one surviving photo of the house and barn from 1931 provided guidance. Rebuilding the barn required custom cut white pine and it now looks exactly as it did in the photo. The “drying room” has custom-made windows waiting to be installed. Also on the “to do” list for the house are changes to the roofline and restoring of a farmers porch that is seen in the photo. “There’re always projects,” says Endres.

A few years ago Olive Litchfield visited the home and took delight in seeing it restored. Even the chair rock, was there, a replacement for the original rock in the shape of a chair which had served the Litchfield kids as a seat when waiting for the school bus. That rock now resides on Lowell Litchfield’s grave, a piece of the property always with him.



Plaque on the front of the house. (Photo by Marjorie Johnson)

Farming life on view



Kiwi vines cover an arbor. (Photo by Priscilla Stevens)

Restoration of the grounds has also been an on-going project, with the goal of replicating farm life of the late 19th and early 20th century. A large organic vegetable garden provides food for the family and excess to give away. Twenty-nine chickens live under the barn, recently replaced when a fisher cat ate the flock. Blueberries, raspberries, grapes, kiwis and currants are harvested. Fifty fruit trees were planted, including apples, apricots, quince and Asian pear. Zinnia and over 350 perennials from the former Blanchette’s Nursery “demonstrate the beauty that would have existed,” says Endres, while Lily the cat keeps an eye out for stray rodents. A Zen garden may not be historic, but provides a welcome retreat, and in another bow to modern necessity, a deer fence surrounds the one-acre property.

The lease signed in 2000 states a Fair Market Rental value for the property, and the Fritz-Endres must document purchased material and sweat equity (at \$20 per hour) at least equal to that value. They keep records and submit a lengthy annual report, which always shows investment well beyond the requirement. Once a year, Kevin Allen, HCP Manager, comes out to review progress

and agree on next plans. Says Endres, “He’s generally pretty delighted with what we’ve done here.”

Another of the lease requirements is to hold open houses at least twice a year and plan programs for the community. The Fritz-Endres hold two formal open houses, and frequently invite passersby to tour. “We’re outside a lot,” says Endres, “and if someone comes by and is curious, we’ll say ‘Want to walk around?’” Adds Fritz, “We think of ourselves as having the door open.” The state recently attached a new sign to the house. “Now every weekend someone comes by and the sign catches their eye,” says Fritz. “We try to be hospitable and welcoming.”

In addition to programs with the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and Junior Rangers, seniors are frequent invited visitors to Litchfield House. Until last year Endres was a nursing home manager and Fritz worked as a psychologist at the Chelmsford Schools. Endres often brought his seniors to the property, and they took great pleasure in the memories that surfaced. “Many grew up on farms, with Victory Gardens and chickens,” he says. For those seniors who couldn’t travel, week-old chicks arrived at the nursing home.

**Curator program
a 20-year success**



Janet Fritz (momentarily) relaxes in the kitchen at the Litchfield House. (Photo by Priscilla Stevens)

As the first HCP curators, Fritz and Endres take pride in the success of the program. The lease agreement they forged with the state became the standard as curators were added throughout Massachusetts. Their real world insights helped mold a workable contract beneficial to all. For example, it was evident that long lease times were necessary to encourage curators to make expensive investments. Endres points to a \$36,000 Title 5 septic system he paid for, “but the Commonwealth owns it.” The only value to the curators is their usage.

The website now lists 16 curated properties, including many smaller homes and some substantial mansions. The Bradley Palmer Mansion in Topsfield and the 35-room Crosby Mansion in Brewster are both restorations managed by curators, where weddings and other events help pay costs. The program has also spread to other states, including Vermont, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware. Endres recently attended a 20-year birthday celebration for the Massachusetts program and reports that the founders still consider it “one of their greatest accomplishments.”

The state could not have done better than to start the HCP program with the Fritz-Endres—possessing the needed skills, generous with their time and energy, optimistic in outlook and committed to leaving a legacy. While many would wonder at the care and attention given to a property that is not their own, for Endres the calculation is simple; “We’re getting a way of life and preserving a property of immense historic value.”

Website of the curator program:

<http://www.mass.gov/eca/agencies/dcr/conservation/cultural-resources/historic-curatorship-program.html>

New York Times article:

<http://www.mass.gov/eca/docs/dcr/stewardship/curator/nyt-hcp-article-08-30-2007.pdf> Δ

