



## NEWPORT RESTORATION FOUNDATION

*Founded by Doris Duke*

### **A HISTORY OF THE NEWPORT RESTORATION FOUNDATION**

Founded in 1968 by Doris Duke, the Newport Restoration Foundation (NRF), a non-profit institution, was formed with the express purpose of preserving, interpreting, and maintaining landscape and objects reflecting Aquidneck Island's 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural culture. The NRF owns and operates three museum properties: Rough Point, Doris Duke's Newport Home; The Whitehorne House, featuring the Doris Duke Collection of Newport Furniture; and Prescott Farm, an example of early American landscape and architecture.

Since its founding, the NRF has restored or preserved 83 buildings. Today, the NRF continues to own a collection of 78 historic buildings, including 71 homes that are rented as private residences and maintained by a full-time crew of carpenters and painters. This is one of the largest collections of period architecture owned by a single organization anywhere in the country. More importantly, the majority of these structures are being lived in and used as they have for more than three centuries making them a vibrant part of the community.

Doris Duke, the daughter of a wealthy tobacco industrialist, first came to Newport at the age of three when her parents began to spend the summers here. Some years later in 1922, her father, James B. Duke, purchased Rough Point, the former Frederick Vanderbilt estate. Although the house was primarily a residence for her mother for many years, Doris Duke once again became a frequent visitor to Newport in the 1950s. A growing awareness and concern for the state of Newport's historic architecture led Miss Duke to establish the NRF in 1968. During the next three decades, preservation remained a major focus among her many charitable endeavors.

By the late 1960s, many of the historic buildings throughout Newport were in a serious state of disrepair. Combined with the rising cost to purchase old houses, the cost of restoration was beyond the reach of most homebuyers. The success of earlier efforts by grassroots groups such as Operation Clapboard and Oldport Association to preserve historic homes had placed the best houses with new owners, leaving only those houses in the poorest condition remaining. A typical house purchased by the NRF cost nearly \$20,000 to purchase and an additional \$70,000 - \$80,000 to restore. The restored house was only worth a maximum of \$50,000 in the housing market of the day.

From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, the NRF was involved in an intense period of preservation. At this time the staff included 70-80 trades' professionals, among them carpentry crews, painting crews, and a woodworking mill with a crew. Individual houses were purchased and restored. Land, often with empty cinder block stores and crumbling apartment houses, was also purchased. The NRF demolished these buildings and reestablished 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings on the sites to create a sense of period scale to critical

parts of Newport. Many of the period buildings came from the waterfront areas where significant demolition and redevelopment were taking place. Often time was of the essence, as in the case of one house that had to be dismantled and moved in six days to save it from demolition.

One important NRF project was the purchase and restoration of the Samuel Whitehorne House. The Whitehorne House is one of the few Federal style buildings built during a period of severe depression in Newport that lasted from 1776 until the 1830s. After its restoration, Miss Duke chose to use the Whitehorne House as a museum to display 18<sup>th</sup> century Newport and Rhode Island furniture. Over a period of six years, she acquired pieces by the Townsends, Goddards, and other renowned Newport and Rhode Island cabinetmakers. It was her belief that these remarkable examples of furniture should be on display for public viewing and study in the city of their origin.

Seven buildings from outside of Newport and off Aquidneck Island were purchased by the NRF and relocated to Newport. Today, relocation of historic buildings to a different area is a less common practice. However, the houses were deemed to be of architectural significance and based on the advice of expert consultants, the NRF agreed to the disassembly and relocation of the houses to Newport.

The Newport Restoration Foundation was not confined to the restoration and preservation of individual buildings. One large-scale project was the purchase in 1969 of Prescott Farm on the Portsmouth – Middletown line. The Farm was more than forty acres with a house that was significant for both its architecture and place in the history of the American Revolution. Many options were considered for Prescott Farm, including a Sturbridge Village-style museum.

Ultimately, Miss Duke chose to move several rural structures either facing demolition or in states of neglect including a windmill and other period buildings to Prescott Farm. The grounds are open to the public today and the buildings are open for tours and study. Another area of Prescott Farm contains an enclave of period houses that are leased to tenants. The remaining fields are maintained in crops by a neighboring farmer.

Miss Duke was interested in issues of land use, public space, and what it could do for the community and the individual. The NRF partnered with other organizations and individuals in the creation of Storer Park on Washington Street in 1973. However, Miss Duke's most significant public work with the NRF was the creation of Queen Anne Square between 1976 and 1978. Threatened with the demolition of several 18<sup>th</sup> century homes, Trinity Church developed the concept of creating a park in this congested retail, commercial and warehouse area.

The NRF staff created a plan that saved significant houses, demolished buildings in poor condition or without architecture merit, and relocated some structures within the area. This provided an open public space from Thames Street to Trinity Church. Completed with funds from the NRF and Doris Duke, the upper area was deeded to Trinity Church while the lower portion was deeded to the city for public park use.

As the 1980s began, the NRF had successfully accomplished its goal of preserving at-risk 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture in Newport. Doris Duke believed that long-term ownership of the collection, with the buildings rented to tenants, would not only promote community, but also ensure continued preservation. The NRF has continued careful acquisition of 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings that add further significance to its outstanding collection of vernacular architecture. It has also shifted its focus to sharing its extensive preservation experience through scholarly endeavors and educational public programming.

In 1999, Rough Point was decided to the NRF to be opened as a museum according to the terms of Miss Duke's will. The estate has been kept with all furnishings intact, so that visitors can experience the house as she left it. Rough Point, an English manorial style house, was commissioned by Frederick Vanderbilt in 1887. It represents an early example of the large scale Newport 'cottages' constructed along Bellevue Avenue.

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