

In New Jersey, Two Preservation Battles

Historians hope to save Pitney Farm and the Doris Duke mansion



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The pre-Revolutionary War main house at Pitney Farm. Photo: Peter Foley for The Wall Street Journal

By

Kate King

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Preservationists are mobilizing in Hillsborough and Mendham to save the former homes of two prominent New Jersey families from demolition.

In northern New Jersey's Mendham Township, historians are fighting to prevent the public auction of Pitney Farm, whose fruits and vegetables fed George Washington's troops during the Revolutionary War.

About 20 miles south, in Hillsborough, residents are campaigning against a request to tear down the former home of Doris Duke, the American Tobacco Co. heiress and philanthropist.

The town of Mendham bought the Pitney property and its buildings in 2009 for \$4 million, intending to use it as a town hall. It later discarded the plan as unfeasible and moved to sell the land.



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The Doris Duke Mansion. Photo: Duke Farms Foundation

Duke Farms, a private charitable foundation that owns and operates Ms. Duke's 2,742-acre estate in Hillsborough, said her home, as renovated over time, has little historical significance and would need \$10 million to \$20 million in restoration work.

Pitney Farm and Ms. Duke's former home aren't listed on national or state historic-preservation registers. That leaves their fates up to local officials.

In Mendham, the nonprofit group known as Friends of Pitney Farm worries that if the site goes to auction, a developer will buy it and bulldoze its buildings, most notably a farmhouse where 11 generations of the Pitney family lived from 1722 to 2013. The family produced Revolutionary War and Civil War soldiers, a co-founder of the law firm now known as Day Pitney, and a U.S. Supreme Court Justice.



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The brass door knocker on the main house at Pitney Farm. Photo: Peter Foley for The Wall Street Journal

"This building encapsulates 300 years of New Jersey history," said Caroline Jacobus, who serves as the group's secretary.

Friends of Pitney Farm wants to lease the property from the town, and on Tuesday night presented a business plan to the township committee. That committee, however, voted 3-2 to consider new zoning necessary to subdivide Pitney Farm ahead of a possible sale. The rezoning requires approval from several town boards, giving Friends of Pitney Farm multiple opportunities to lobby for the property's preservation.

"This property is uniquely designed to have a very good, long-term revenue stream," Ms. Jacobus said. She said the farm could produce income from renting its four cottages and charging fees for hosting weddings and artist studios.

Erik Sletteland moved into the Pitney Farm house in the 1960s at age 9, when his mother married his stepfather, Duncan Pitney. His parents would host jazz parties that stretched late

into the night. "There were always a lot of interesting characters running around," Mr. Sletteland said. "It was wonderful."



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The long neglected greenhouse at Pitney Farm. Photo: Peter Foley for The Wall Street Journal

Pitney Farm encompasses 12.5 acres, most of which were bought using state open-space grants and are therefore protected from development. The 5.1 acres the town is exploring selling, however, contain the farm's historic structures, preservationists said.

Township Committee member Sam Tolley said selling the land would help the town pay off the roughly \$2 million it still owes from when it purchased the farm while still maintaining 7 acres of open space. Pitney Farm "has an atmospheric look to it, but behind that, in my opinion, is just a lot of rot and age and expense," Mr. Tolley said.

"I think it's a great balance to save a large portion of it and sell the rest."

In Hillsborough, the estate where Ms. Duke grew up and indulged her love of animals and orchids attracts thousands of visitors every weekend. The property is now a nature preserve, open free of charge, but few have glimpsed inside the 67,000-square-foot mansion the billionaire heiress occupied until her death in 1993 at age 80.

"Yes the estate is beautiful," said Bridgewater resident Elisabeth McConville, who worked as Ms. Duke's assistant and art curator for 20 years. "But I always thought the icing on the cake would be to go into the home where she actually lived."

Ms. Duke's father bought the building, originally a small farmhouse, in 1893, then over the years vastly enlarged it.

The costs of restoring and operating the mansion outweigh any historical significance and value it would add to Duke Farms' mission of environmental stewardship, said Executive Director Michael Catania.

Duke Farms has filed an application with the town to demolish Ms. Duke's residence. That would allow Duke Farms to open to the public 50 acres surrounding the home, which are now fenced off and include a meditation garden, lake and boathouse, Mr. Catania said.

Hillsborough preservationists maintain that the building is historically important and have formed an advocacy group they have named Doris: Demolition Of the Residence Is Senseless.

An online petition protesting the demolition has collected more than 3,000 signatures, said group member David Brook.

As in Mendham, the local historians said they would propose a business plan to save the property. It would involve renting out the building for events as a way of recouping restoration and operating costs.

The Hillsborough Historic Preservation Commission is scheduled to vote at its Sept. 24 meeting whether to grant Duke Farms' demolition request, said Chairman Arnold Radi, who declined to say how he plans to vote.

Write to Kate King at Kate.King@wsj.com