

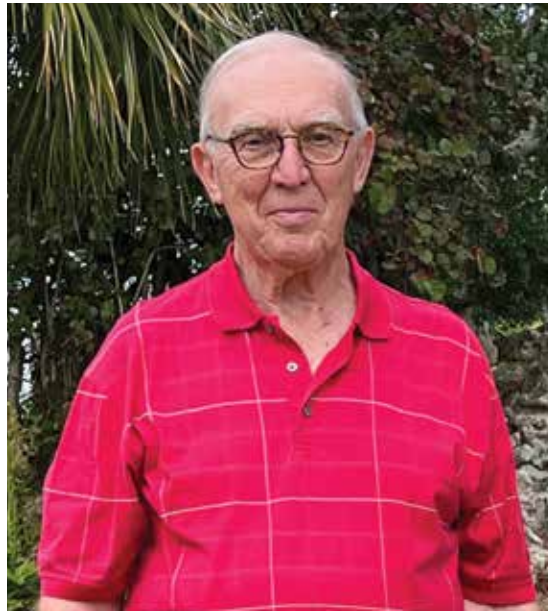
Keister Evans: Bringing the AHS to River Farm

by Mary Yee

This year, the American Horticultural Society (AHS) celebrates a half century at its headquarters at River Farm. Keister Evans, who served as the AHS's executive director from 1970 to 1976, was there when the Society moved from an office building in Alexandria, Virginia, to its new home on what was formerly one of George Washington's farms by the Potomac River. It was under Evans's watch that the AHS, then a small scholarly organization, transformed into the AHS we know today. Evans, who is now retired and lives in Oxford, Maryland, spoke to Mary Yee, managing editor and art director of The American Gardener, about the River Farm–AHS connection. [To see a video talk by Keister Evans on the early days of the AHS at River Farm, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=--gawWyDBDI.]

Why did you think it was necessary for the American Horticultural Society to relocate to River Farm?

I had come from the American Rose Society, which had an extensive demonstration garden in Columbus, Ohio. It was easy to understand that an organization that focuses on horticulture and gardening should have a place where both could be demonstrated. We looked at a number of estates. By coincidence, it came to our attention that the Russian Embassy was interested in buying Wellington—now River Farm—which was being put up for sale by its owners, the Mathesons. We were very excited to see a beautiful estate that already had gardens. We got in touch with a realtor who was involved in the sale to see if Mr. [Malcolm] Matheson [Sr.] would be willing to sell Wellington to us, and he agreed.



The official opening of River Farm as the AHS's headquarters created quite a stir in May 1974. Can you tell us what you remember and why the event was significant?

The Cold War was probably the catalyst for all the publicity we got, because the property could have been purchased by the Russians. We had good connections with the White House and were able to arrange a top-drawer event. President Nixon had originally planned to attend the opening day ceremony, but because of [the] Watergate [scandal happening at the time], Mrs. Nixon came instead, arriving in a horse-drawn coach. And of course Mrs. Haupt was there as well. We had the Marine Band there and the Secret

Service was all over the place.” [Editor’s note: As guests of honor, Nixon and Haupt unveiled a ceremonial plaque and planted a dogwood tree together.]

The selling price was \$1 million. How did the AHS come up with the funds?

One of the AHS officers, Fritz Close, a former chairman of Alcoa Corporation in Pittsburgh, was very well connected and knew Enid Annenberg Haupt. She was known for her interest in horticulture and had supported other horticultural endeavors.

AHS President David Leach, Fritz, and I went to see Mrs. Haupt in New York in the late fall or winter of ‘72 and she was excited about making River Farm the headquarters for the AHS with a \$1 million donation. Right after, our attorney, Bill Braun, and I went down to Florida to visit Mr. Matheson about buying the property. We had the official settlement at River Farm in February 1973.

You were involved in the recent successful community effort to prevent the sale of River Farm. Why was it important to you?

After I left the AHS, I didn’t have much connection with it until I heard from a friend in late 2020 about the AHS Board putting River Farm up for sale. I was shocked. I didn’t think it could ever be sold. I had been directly involved with River Farm from the beginning, so I contacted local officials to give any help I could to stop the sale by reiterating Mrs. Haupt’s intentions to protect River Farm in perpetuity and keep it open to the public.

Even today the property is so precious because it’s the last large parcel of George Washington’s farms that survives undeveloped. There’s a lot of historical value there. We couldn’t have dreamed of a better home for the AHS.