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Friends of the Morrill Homestead

State-Owned Site and National Historic Landmark

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Vermont Division for Historic Preservation

The Justin Morrill Historic Site, one of ten State-Owned Historic Sites and National Historic Landmarks, is maintained and operated by the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, which encourages the discovery and appreciation of the state's rich heritage through the stewardship and interpretation of the historic sites. In partnership with the Division, the Friends of the Morrill Homestead fosters an awareness of the life and legacy of Sen. Justin Morrill with programs, events, and public outreach to enhance the visitor experience.

Who's Who on the Board...

JOHN REESE – JACK OF MANY TRADES

If one were to ask, "What does John Reese do on the Board of the Friends of the Morrill Homestead?" The answer would be easy: A LOT.

My first question to John when I interviewed him for this article was "Why?" And his answer was simple: "I do what I do because I'm good at it and I like doing it." So I'll go back to the original question: "What does he do?"

John is the Treasurer of the Friends' Board. Wrapped up in that job are a budget, monthly financial statements, payroll, tax preparation, fundraising letters, and much more.

John's professional background is in marketing - big time. He had an office in New York City and lived in NJ until 25 years ago when his wife Debbie said it was time to move. They put their home on the market, and after a year, found a house in South Strafford near some of Debbie's family. While she held down the fort there, John commuted to his marketing job in NY, spending four nights a week alternating between their two grown children who lived in the metropolitan area. (Clearly this was before the days of working remotely!)



Debbie became very active in the Strafford community and joined the Board of the Friends. John remembers receiving a fundraising letter that was really just a list of interesting things the Friends were doing. There was no personalization, no "ask" for donations, no reply form, no return envelope.

He immediately did what he did professionally and designed an effective direct mail appeal that could be sent to the Friends donor list. And he's been doing it ever since. He has a system. It is as repetitive as a calendar but it is rewarding because it fits a pattern and it works. He is very good at what he does. He pays attention to detail and he likes things to be done well. He is giving back to the community a service that he knows how to do.

John is easy to recognize at Homestead events. He now has a white ponytail and dresses up in red suspenders. He has a big smile and a helping hand wherever needed. And we need him to do many jobs. Thanks, John, for doing them all so well.

Cameron Speth
Vice-Chair, Friends of the Morrill Homestead

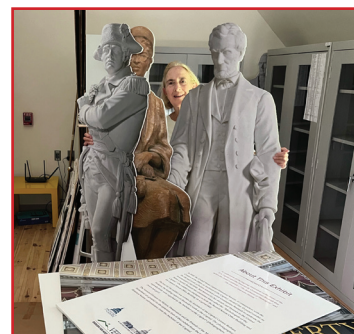
A WORD FROM OUR CHAIR...

Around here, the year 2023 is likely to be remembered for its "bummer of a summer." But we're hoping to resume our full schedule next season.

If all goes as planned, we will be inviting teachers from area schools to bring their classes to the Homestead for visits tailored to their curriculum. We had started this orientation with teachers this past June and hope to be able to begin next May, after the site reopens.

One of our aims is to promote an understanding of the work of Senator Morrill. Another aim is to help students learn more about life in Strafford in the 19th century by visiting the Homestead. Senator Morrill's gardens were very innovative in his time and to this day they draw admirers from near and far. Students and adults enjoy visiting the ice house and learning about ice harvesting from the pond located on the property. And through tours of the house itself, they get a glimpse of life in an elegant Victorian home. Parents and teachers gain an appreciation of how much Senator Morrill did for our town of Strafford and our country.

So, I hope to see many of you next summer at our beautiful, historic site. I also want to remind everyone that the Friends of the Morrill Homestead is a 501 (c) (3) corporation, contributions to which are tax deductible. If you haven't yet joined our donor family – the Homestead's true "friends" – please consider sending a gift our way.



Ingrid Webb
Chair, Friends of the Morrill Homestead

The MORRILL HOMESTEAD Chronicle

News and Information from Vermont's First National Historic Landmark and State-Owned Historic Site
POST OFFICE BOX 98 • STRAFFORD, VERMONT • 05072

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JULY'S RECORD RAINS SHUT DOWN THE SITE

When the rains began on July 10, no-one could have foreseen the impact that they would have on the Justin Morrill State Historic site. But that impact was profound and is still being felt as this issue goes to press.

The historic house itself escaped relatively unharmed. The sump pump in the basement kept up to ensure no major flooding occurred, although the dehumidifiers were destroyed. In addition, the heavy rains accessed the building through the eaves and intricately gabled roofs, reaching the china closet of the dining room on the first floor and two servants' bedrooms on the second floor.

For the Education Center, however, the story was quite different: On July 18, it was discovered that the basement had flooded with approximately 16 inches of ground water.

What caused the flood? The basement of the Ed Center does not have an interior drain, suggesting blockage and excessive water and debris were challenging the capacity of the perimeter drains. This caused water to seep through the concrete foundation into the basement. On July 19, over 17,500 gallons of water was pumped out. Yet, the basement continued to take in 3" to 6" of water daily due to continuous rains in the weeks after the flood.

On August 8, Thorp Diversified uncovered the drainage pipes by removing 9-10 inches of earth within the perimeter of the driveway. All three of the PVC pipes were cut, exposing significant blockage. The pipes were replaced and secured, and the hole was refilled, thereby allowing water in the basement to finally recede. However, there is now great concern the foundation may have significant cracking and fissures and may be unstable.

What were the other damages?

The basement housed items belonging to the Friends, the Strafford Historical Society, and the State of Vermont. Items damaged include some of the collections of the historical society temporarily housed at the site and event materials and equipment (refrigerator and microwave) of the Friends. The state stored one-third of its archives that had been scanned in 2015 and were thus eligible for disposal, and 23 books relating to Morrill's tenure in Congress. Some of the damaged items of the historical society and Morrill's congressional record books were taken by the conservation unit of Dartmouth



Ethan Allen guards the dumpster of trashed items from the flooded basement

Library as part of the Vermont Arts and Cultural Disaster & Resiliency Network and will be conserved by Polygon. Other items belonging to the historical society were dried onsite and taken to its partially renovated building. Books belonging to the state and the Strafford library were moved temporarily to the State Library in Barre.

Where do we go from here? On September 19, the grounds were reopened to visitors. However, all the buildings, including the Education Center, remain closed.

Stevens and Associates of Brattleboro, Vermont has been contracted to complete a full structural evaluation of the Ed Center and floodproofing mitigation consultation with FEMA is pending.

In addition, repairs will need to be made to the banks of the stream that flows through the property. The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources has been contacted to provide direction; and an engineer most likely will be contracted to advise on repairs. Repair of the stream flow and bank are a priority for the safety of all those who access the site.

Victoria Sample
Historic Sites Section Chief
Vermont Division for Historic Preservation



Drawing & Watercolor Campers

www.morrillhomestead.org

HOW WE SURVIVED THE GREAT FLOOD

On the afternoon of July 10 it had been raining heavily all day, and from my home, two miles downriver from the Homestead, I saw the river rise, flood its bank, and fill the surrounding fields. As evening approached, I stood with my neighbor and watched his bridge quietly float away. We knew the river was still rising, even though we could no longer see it in the dark.

I did not sleep well that night, listening to the rain and thinking about the brook that runs through the Homestead. How it must have been raging as it passed only a few feet from the Carriage Barn. The Carriage Barn that held over 80 precious works of art loaned to us from 17 generous artists. What if the brook was now flowing *through* the barn?

At first light, to see if my fears had come true, I zipped down to the Homestead so quickly I forgot to change out of my slippers! It appeared that the water had come up just to the bottom corner of the barn foundation, but not entered the building. Phew, the exhibit was safe! I saw evidence that the brook overflowed on the north (ice house) side but not the south (Ed Center and Morrill's home) side. I didn't look around any further because I was concerned about the condition of the roads to get home (and I was wearing slippers).



Little did I know that would be my last opportunity to be onsite for quite a while. As part of the protocol for declaring a state of emergency, all Vermont State Historic Sites were closed to everyone, even staff and gardeners. First the Homestead was closed until the end of the week, which meant losing the last four days of the art exhibit. Then the closure was extended to the end of the month. Unfortunately, that included both of our children's art camps and a permaculture workshop.

The workshop was canceled and Jennifer Brown's Drawing & Watercolor Camp was moved to a former artist's studio in my back yard. After speaking with Scott and Lindsay Miller, instructors of the Photography camp that was due to start on Monday, we decided the program was too dependent on the site to be moved and could not be delayed because they were expecting a baby in two weeks! I hated to call the camp families with such disappointing news, but they were all very understanding.

There was still the matter of the tens of thousands of dollars worth of paintings on loan that absolutely could not be left in the barn indefinitely. When we approached the state about the exhibit, we were granted an exception to the closure on Tuesday, July 18 for three hours, during which artists could collect their art and I could retrieve any materials or equipment needed for the relocated art camp. Thus, just over a week after the initial flood, the paintings were removed from the barn and I headed into the Ed Center basement to retrieve tables for the camp. only to discover the Friends' refrigerator floating in well over a foot of water. And that was the beginning of the end of our 2023 season.

Two days later we were given another small window of time to sort through all of our equipment, furniture, goods, and supplies that had been sitting in the flooded basement for the previous 10 days (most went into the dumpster) and to remove



Trashed items from the flooded basement

EVERYTHING of ours from my office and the rest of the Ed Center. Board members and other volunteers showed up and we accomplished a lot in a short amount of time. It's amazing how much the Friends had accumulated over the previous 25 years.

As I write this, it's October and the gardens and grounds have been re-opened for visitors, although the buildings and brook side of the site will remain closed. The flowers have flourished without us and so have the weeds! Volunteer gardeners are providing the extra help needed to prepare for winter and the next growing season.

Although we may be frustrated with the state's pace of restoration progress at the Homestead, it's comforting to know that they place the safety of visitors and the preservation of this historic site as their top priorities and they have the expertise and resources to do the job well.

*Tracey McFadden
Director, Friends of the Morrill Homestead*

2023 HAPPENINGS AT THE HOMESTEAD

Last spring the Friends eagerly anticipated a "normal" season full of events and programs at the Homestead. Programming began even before the house itself was open, with two well-attended Pruning & Grafting workshops in March, followed by volunteers gathering to Wake Up The Garden in May.

After the Homestead officially opened for Memorial Day Weekend, the Friends hosted an Open House on a sunny June afternoon, perfect for enjoying ice cream in the gardens. The Open House highlight was a delightful puppet show put on by our own Garden Manager Barbara Paulson of No Strings Marionette Company. It was a joy to welcome so many young families for their first visit to the Homestead.



No Strings Marionette Company

Mid-June was as busy as could be! Neysa Russo led a full-day workshop making handcrafted Folk Art Tapestries of Vermont wildlife using colorful wool. John Freitag led the first of our Historical Walking Tours of Morrill's Strafford Village. Four Winds Nature Institute invited little ones age 1-6 and their families to the Homestead for a fun morning of outdoor Nature Play. Everyone got busy exploring

and experimenting with water, magnifying glasses, sticks, pots and pans, mud, random kitchen utensils, and so much more!



Nature Play with Four Winds Institute

June finished off with the Gallery in the Garden celebration to kick off the Minis For Morrill Auction and open the "Art As Voice" exhibit. July started with an informative Tree Walk led by county Forester David Paganelli.

Then, alas, the flooding came... the site closed... and the rest of our season was washed away, with the exception of a couple of relocated events.

Jennifer Brown's Drawing & Watercolor Camp moved to a former artist's studio on the edge of the South Strafford village. Although campers missed learning about Justin Morrill and exploring his gardens, grounds, and home, they were able to draw animals at a neighboring farm, paint flowers in the town Pocket Park, and dye cloth using natural materials.

To commemorate the 140th anniversary of Senator Morrill's gift of a library to the town of Strafford, the Friends had invited Julius C. Jefferson to speak at the Homestead. Fortunately, we were able to

move his August 13 presentation to the 1799 Strafford Town House, an appropriate venue for an historical talk.

Julius Jefferson, recent President of the American Library Association, is a section head of the Congressional Research Service at the Library of Congress and was appointed by President Biden to the National Museum and Library Services Board. Jefferson's presentation was informative and engaging; historical, yet relevant to today. He made connections between Morrill's gift of the Strafford library and efforts to build the Library of Congress in DC, the 1890 Land-Grant Act, and the influence of librarians at



Mercedes poses for a portrait

Historically Black Colleges by highlighting the accomplishments of four former HBCU librarians. Q & A discussion topics covered a wide range including book censorship, advocating for our libraries, A.I., affirmative action, libraries globally, the VT State Universities' attempt to close their libraries, and many other currently relevant topics.

Although the Friends were disappointed by the cancellation of so many of our community events, we still had many successes in 2023 to celebrate, and look forward to even more in 2024!

JUSTIN MORRILL - A "BOOK-MADE MAN" PART 2

It's not surprising that from the time he was a young man, Justin Smith Morrill collected and used books to shape his life. (For example: he relied heavily on the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing for the building of his homestead and the laying out of his grounds.)

In 1870, Morrill's collection was described in a speech by Harvard History Professor Wibur K. Jordan on the 100th anniversary of the Land Grant College Act as "the library of a most highly cultivated gentleman. It consists of history, biography, letters, fine arts, landscape, architecture, and political economy. But, above all, it is a library which has been read and annotated. From the quarry of these materials the man wrested an education for himself".

Morrill himself never ended his studies and in fact became one of the best educated men of the day. Between 1879 and 1881 he compiled notes based on his years of reading into a small book for his friends.

Self-Consciousness of Noted Persons cited extracts from 171 authors from ancient times to the contemporary, including



Speaker Julius Jefferson visits the Morrill Memorial & Harris Library

Demosthenes, Saint Paul, Montaigne, Sir Walter Scott, Ethan Allen, and abolitionist Owen Lovejoy. It is a work that exemplifies both Morrill's extensive knowledge and how much books were a part of his life.

The will of Louise Swan, Morrill's sister-in-law who inherited the Morrill property, left money to build a library to house some of Morrill's books and collected art works. A new building was erected, and in 1929 the Harris Library collection was merged with the Morrill books in what is now known as The Morrill Memorial and Harris Library.

No longer a library, the building Morrill had donated in 1883 became a community building and currently houses the Strafford Town Office. Today, a dedicated committee is working to restore the building's historic attributes, while at the same time updating it to meet 21st Century standards and the expanding needs of our town government.

*John Freitag
Historian, Strafford Historical Society*

Note: This is the second of two articles exploring how love of books and learning shaped Justin Morrill's life and career. The first appeared in the Spring 2023 issue

SUCCESSFUL GIG HIGHLIGHTS TRUNCATED SEASON

In a season of rain, a few perfect days will stand out as miraculous. This was certainly true of the weekend Strafford celebrated the 4th of July. It began for the Friends on the evening of Friday, June 30 with our annual party for community members, the opening of the Carriage Barn art show, and the live viewing and on-line auction of 62 minis painted and donated by 49 separate artists.

The evening was perfect, the temperature mild, and the gardens and buildings teemed with guests enjoying the great food and good wine... the warmth and joy of conversation among friends... and the work of 17 artists that included 82 paintings and 2 sculptures. Our tradition is to feature two of our artists in an expanded show in the stall area of the Carriage Barn, and this year Mary Louise Pierson and Sherry SaintGermaine filled the space with art that touched the soul of every person who entered the building.

How do the Friends measure the success of the GIG? One way is through cold statistics: some 200 happy guests, a mini auction that raised over \$6,000 for our programs, and many visitors over the next



2 weeks to the show where 6 paintings were sold. By that measure, the 2023 GIG sits on the top tier of our history of events.

A better measure is more holistic; the beauty of art, the good will of friends coming together, the tradition of the Homestead, and a perfect evening on the cusp of Summer created a phenomenon that cannot be measured. Nor can it ever be forgotten in the context of Vermont's rainiest summer and the flooding that followed and shut the Homestead down for the season.

Disasters happen. Rising water will destroy roads and property, and after, when we gather on high ground and wonder what the future will bring, there is one thing we can count on: beauty. Art endures and continues. Nothing can erase what happened on that warm evening of June 30 when time seemed to stop, and our lives were enriched with beauty and art.

*Jon Stableford
Board Member, Friends of the Morrill Homestead*