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## Prudence Islanders launch drive to restore Farnham Farm

Date December 19, 2003

PRUDENCE ISLAND -- They've preserved Farnham Farm from development, and now members of the **Prudence Conservancy** want to complete its restoration and renovation. First, though, they need money. To that end, the board announced last week that it has launched a four-year, \$425,000 fund drive, \$50,000 of which the board members will chip in themselves.

"Today the historic island site is at a critical point," said Conservancy President Robert Marshall. "Unless attention is given to the buildings they will deteriorate."

Much work has already been accomplished toward the Conservancy's goal of transforming what was once a working farm into an island gathering place and community center.

Working with a \$100,000 gift from Hope Brown, the Conservancy launched work on a community center that will bear her name. That job involves transformation of the main barn's east end into a spacious meeting area.

When it is done next summer (work has paused for the winter -- the contractor is in Florida), the space will include a large meeting and activity room able to hold 60 people, a small kitchenette and a bathroom, all wheelchair accessible.

But the rest of the farm buildings need work, too, the sooner the better, Mr. Marshall said.

The Conservancy intends to hire an architect to help determine how to get the most use out of the main house which is presently divided into small rooms. Much of the roof needs attention and they want to remove vinyl siding and put on new cedar shingles. Also needed are a new chimney and furnace before the building can be heated. Blessedly, the electrical system seems to be in good shape.

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Since the farm shut down, the barn has been closed much of the time which isn't good for those old timbers.

"We need a good, strong ventilation system or those timbers will rot," Mr. Marshall said.

In addition to serving as a meeting place, the farm will serve as headquarters to the Conservancy and to the Prudence Island Historical and Preservation Society, with space for office, exhibits and archives. The Trail Gang, the Conservancy's volunteer crew of walking-trail keepers, will also keep equipment there.

Although there is much to be done, the farm is already being put to good use in the summer months.

A community garden already has a waiting list, with some 35 people showing up regularly to tend small plots.

"That has been a big hit," Mr. Marshall said. People flock there for a variety of reasons.

Some, like him, don't have enough room at home for a gardens. For others there is the social appeal of gardening among friends. Less experienced gardeners appreciate the abundance of expert advice. The soil, which once produced some of the best vegetables and corn around, is rich. And then there is the deer fence.

"It is eight feet tall and as far as I know, no deer have gotten in there yet," Mr. Marshall said.

The plan

Farnham Farm will someday be the hub of island social activity, the Conservancy hopes. It will hold:

- \* Meeting/activity room able to hold 60 people
- \* Historical Society museum, archives
- \* Headquarters for the Conservancy and other island groups
- \* Community garden (already in operation)
- \* Home to summer camps, educational programs, family gatherings

\* Possible demonstration farm

Island's last working farm

The **Prudence Conservancy** bought the Farnham Farm with its 18.4 acres in 1998 at the bargain price of \$250,000 from Bill and Maggie Jiacovelli of Bristol who had inherited the property after the Farnhams died. Prudence's last working farm, the property has been farmed since the 1690s when Conanicut Island residents visited Prudence and grew summer crops. Four generations of Farnhams worked the farm, beginning with Welcome, a textile and railroad tycoon who purchased the property in the early 1800s from Lizzie Dennis. His son Edward, grandson Ralph, and great-grandsons, Todd and Harris, continued farming into the 1970s. The farm was in its heyday during the late 1800s to the late 1950s, when the Farnham family provided dairy products, vegetables, beef, hay, blueberries, apples and pears to island residents and even shipped some to markets off-island.

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