

The classic 18th-century saltbox farmhouse reborn: Field House Farm was fully restored in a completely authentic way, allowing a large family to inhabit the home with the same connection to the land as it had when the Field family built it three centuries ago.



PHOTOGRAPHS: STEVE BLAZO

FROM FAMILY TO FARM

By DUG DICKINSON

One of the many non-human denizens of Field House Farm, where farm animals always outnumber the permanent residents—just as they have for centuries.

How one Madison family evolved from thinking about sustainability to living it

Like many other antiques, the **Field House** has had its share of **near-death experiences**, but was in 2008 **heroically saved** years after having been **abandoned**, in no small part thanks to the Madison Historic Society, which sought to **preserve** and **restore** the home.

Like many homes, the Field House is the product of its inhabitants — in this case, three centuries' worth. Many Field family members were in the military, some were entrepreneurs, lawyers, editors and one, Stephen J. Field, was a Supreme Court justice (1863-97). Succeeding non-Field owners of the home were equally distinguished. Eventually, in the 20th century the home came back temporarily into the family, followed by a succession of families that saw the home suffer sustained periods of “deferred maintenance” — becoming severely compromised

— so much so that the home was scheduled to be burned down in 2003 as a Madison Fire Department training exercise. But its exquisite old bones were just too precious for the fire chief to sign off on the controlled burn, so the house was saved — though for all practical purposes abandoned.

In 2007 Brooklyn entrepreneurs John and Diana Herzog (who have ties to Madison) responded to the Madison Historic Society's active search for owners who could preserve the structure. The Herzogs have a passion for restoring antique

homes, and often use the firm of Gulick & Co. to meticulously renovate homes that embody history, saving historic houses for resale to those who want an antique but not the ordeal of renovation.

The core renovation crew of the Field House included Peter Gulick and John Spradlin — both master craftsmen with a long list of restoration projects decorating their résumés. They approached this project with characteristic zeal, removing and replacing virtually all the exterior surfaces, heating, plumbing and electrical systems,

and upgrading the bathrooms and kitchen to present-day standards.

Ultimately the renovated home was put on the market to recoup the Herzogs' investment. Its new owners are a remarkable family: Stephanie and Greg Lesnik who purchased the house in 2010. With young children and Greg Lesnik's career as a doctor, it would not be unreasonable to think that that level of “busy” would be plenty for a decade or two — but the Lesnik family has an extraordinary vision for their life as stewards of their remarkable site.

Before they found the Field House, Greg and Stephanie had been searching for farms or homes with sufficient land that they might be able to convert into a farm. They traveled up and down the shoreline to fulfill a deeply abiding desire to have a home that was more than just a place to hang their hats.

As Stephanie Lesnik recounts: “We listed our house [where] we were then living and put forth a solid effort in finding a farm. We had been aware of the property on Green Hill Road and, to be truly honest, I told Greg we were not



The heart of Field House Farm: the main kitchen hearth is used for cooking just as it has for centuries. Its exquisite restoration makes it a fully functional art piece of historic craft.

allowed to look at it. I knew we would love it, but probably could not afford it. So, being one to wear my heart on my sleeve, I wrote a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Herzog. In this letter I explained to them who we were and what we hoped and dreamed for our family. I wrote:

"We have written to you with an offer for purchase of this property. We feel that there are few families who would cherish this home and the land upon which it sits, as we would. We envision it as a working farm with sheep, chickens and, one day, a cow named Babe. We read in an article on the restoration process that you had hopes of this home being opened annually for a historic tour. We feel that it would be a shame for people to not be able to see the care has gone into this home. We would welcome an annual historic tour. We would also welcome you and your family to come for fresh eggs, vegetables, and to revisit the bit of history that will remain because of you and your generosity."

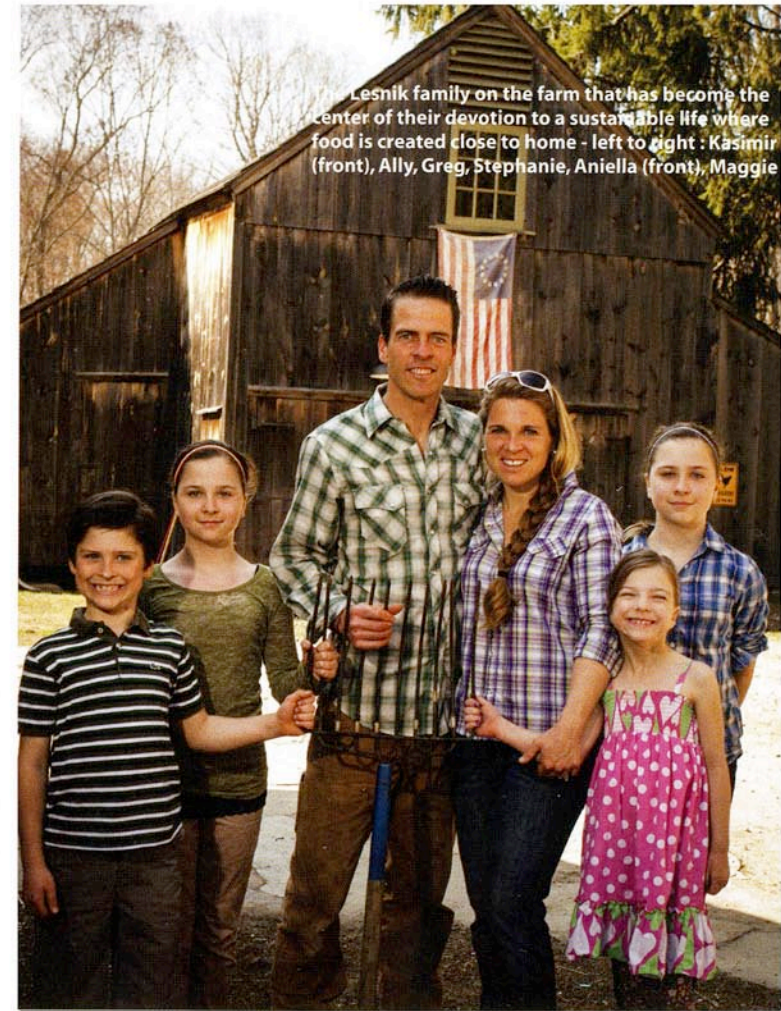
The letter worked: The Herzogs worked out a plan of purchase with the young family that made Field House Farm possible.



Their desire to grow their own food came out of their shared medical careers (Stephanie is a nurse and Greg is an ear, nose and throat specialist) as well as a rejection of what they saw their children eating. With twins plus two other children all born within a decade, the rush to microwave-processed easy answers repelled the Lesniks.

"Something had to change," recounts Stephanie. "We decided then to grow more of our own vegetables and begin to can vegetables and sauces for use year-round. We also got our first flock of backyard chickens for egg production. When we arrived at the Field House, there were six of us, plus four chickens and two dogs. Currently, our barnyard is home to one llama, one donkey, five goats, seven sheep, two cows, many chickens, turkeys and ducks, and intermittently pigs."

Of course, the home's original 18th-century inhabitants, David Field



Lesnik family on the farm that has become the center of their devotion to a sustainable life where food is created close to home - left to right: Kasimir (front), Ally, Greg, Stephanie, Aniella (front), Maggie



Modern appliances and new cabinetry exist in harmony with an 18th-century farmhouse -- creating an uncompromised kitchen.



The family dining room takes over a rebuilt "ell" sharing open space with the kitchen. The expressed timbers and period furniture make the open plan feel at home in an antique home.

and his wife Ann, always used this homestead's acreage to provide food, and the Lesnik family has embraced a 21st century version of farm-to-table that matches the home's architectural revival with a renewed commitment to the land.

Beyond selling the home to make economic sense of saving an iconic building, the Herzogs had subdivided the Field House property's ten acres into four lots in order to sell three of them to potential homebuilders. Now, the Lesniks have reacquired those lots back into the original site's full recombined acreage. This reconstitution is all part of Stephanie's vision: making the Field House into Field House Farm.

Stephanie Lesnik has meticulously researched the history of her home, documenting every owner across three centuries. "People often ask us about the ghosts and spirits that belong to our house," she says. "There are many tales of the spirits of people and animals inhabiting this house."

"Most memorable and relatable to me is the story of the ghost of [Revolutionary War] Captain Timothy Field who is said to walk the fields in his Army dress uniform. The ghost will pace the fields assessing his crops, all the while maintaining his strong and powerful stature of a high-ranking Army captain."

Field House Farm is not for the Lesnik family alone: They have made their home available



The Lesniks walk the talk of living close to the land: Wool from their sheep becomes yarn in-house.

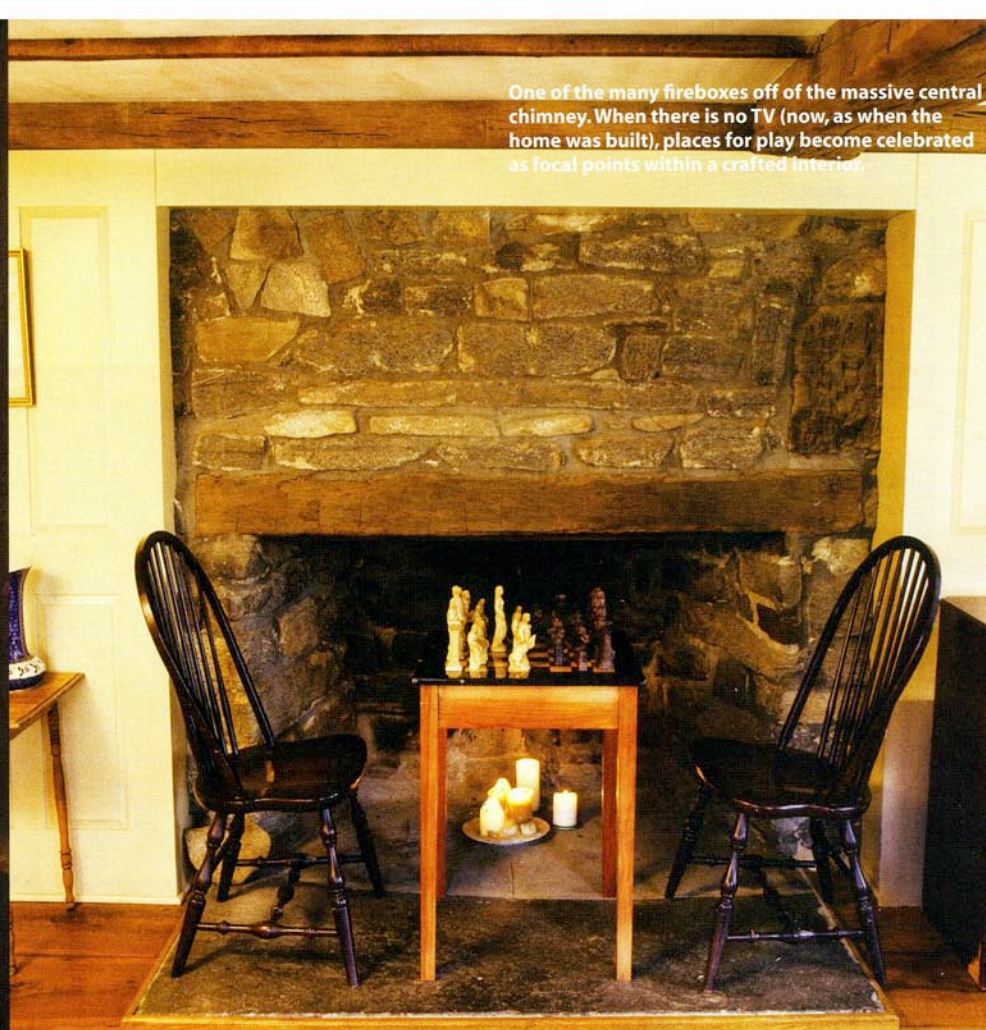
for educators to bring classes, while Stephanie Lesnik has created educational camps for kids. The family also hosts dinners that are open to the public and bring in celebrated chefs and wine purveyors to prepare the food they grow. There are bourbon tastings, harvesting of meat and eggs for sale, and any number of agricultural spinoffs to take full advantage of what it means to use the land in the life of our families. Goats are milked, llamas are used for yarn, maple trees yield maple syrup, beehives create honey, mushrooms grow in their basement. This is in addition to all the vegetables grown in their greenhouse and fields.

Stephanie Lesnik describes the farm's economic model: "The majority of our produce is sold through the farm's Community Sponsored Agriculture program — a commonly used format for delivery of a product from a farm to a local community. People purchase a "share" of the farm and commit financially to the farm in the winter or off season, in return for which they receive weekly allotments of the product from the farm during the harvest time.

"We use this program on a very small scale, providing produce to 30 local families each summer season," she adds. "This financial support allows us to secure our organic seeds and prepare our greenhouse and equipment for the upcoming busy season."



A larder and back stairway serve the same function now as they did almost 300 years ago: servicing the rest of the more public house.



One of the many fireboxes off of the massive central chimney. When there is no TV (now, as when the home was built), places for play become celebrated as focal points within a crafted interior.

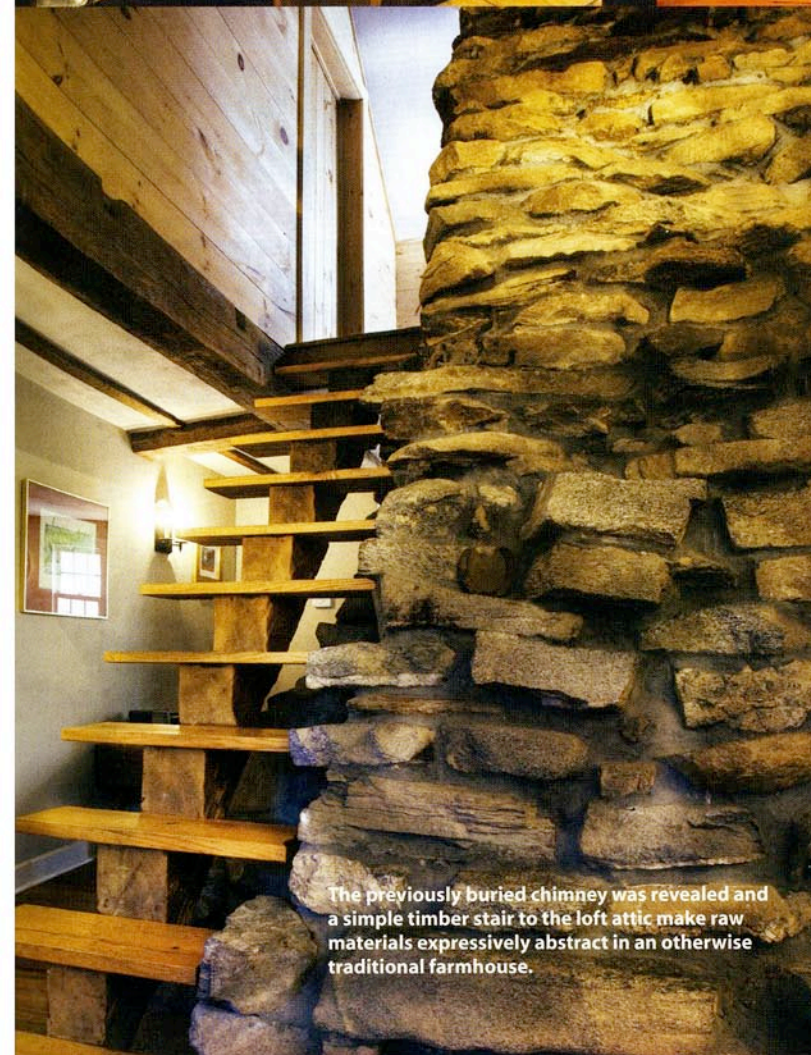
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The previously buried chimney was revealed and a simple timber stair to the loft attic make raw materials expressively abstract in an otherwise traditional farmhouse.

The Lesniks hope to expand Field House Farm's mission of connecting the land to family beyond its ten acres. "Our chicken flock rental program allows families to adopt four laying hens," Stephanie Lesnik explains. "We loan them a small secure coop, and all necessary equipment for the fair-weather seasons, and ultimately the chickens and all equipment are returned to Field House Farm. We also hire handcrafters to sew repurposed bags made from the grain bags from animal feed and knitters to create unique hats and scarves from our fiber and wool yarn."

Much of what this young family does fulfills a mission to convey the reality of how our lives can be fundamentally enriched by regaining the control of what we consume. In so doing the Lesnik children have had their childhoods become a journey of discovery rather than distraction.

The post-World War II growth of American suburbia has been predicated on the separation of the homestead from the workplace. Towns like Madison are "bedroom

communities" because the homes in these hamlets are primarily focused on where families lay their heads — not where they make their bread. But Field House Farm has turned that 20th century paradigm back to a connection to a timeless human reality of living in partnership with the land.

"We are able to live out our dream for our family in a town that we love because people stood up for what they believed was right," explains Stephanie Lesnik. "The destruction of the Field House was prevented because people came together as a united group and fought for something."

It's easy to talk up sustainability, and to preach a hands-off green gospel. But the Lesniks are living their commitment to organic farming principles, hands-on parenting, community involvement and historic preservation in their multi-tasking home. Talk is cheap, but diving into a way of living that many have presumed was irretrievably lost in suburbia is priceless. ❖