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Smith-Harris House: Bringing It Back to the Farm

by Kathleen Sasso

In 2015, members of the Smith-Harris House Commission and the Board of the Friends of the Smith-Harris House applied to Connecticut Humanities to participate in their Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations (StEPs-CT).

StEPs-CT is based on a national curriculum developed by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). The purpose of the program is to educate local museums and other cultural organizations to serve their community with professionalism and authenticity.

Once accepted, they became immersed into a rigorous two-year program of training, mentoring, working with other participating historical groups and developing goals, policies, and procedures related to six key categories: Mission, Vision and Governance; Audience; Management; Stewardship of Collections; Stewardship of Historic Structures and Landscapes; and Interpretation. The Smith-Harris House cohort completed the required work, earning bronze awards in all categories and will continue working towards gold.

Through StEPs-CT, the Smith-Harris group applied for and was awarded a Capacity Building Grant from Connecticut Humanities. This grant allowed them to work with a consultant in developing the site's first strategic plan. The group then participated in retreats, met and visited sites of other local history groups in town, and met with East Lyme's First Selectman. New Mission and Vision statements were created focusing on engaging the community in the history of domestic and agricultural life through the education and preservation of the Avery, Smith, and Harris family stories.

A new vision for the Smith-Harris House was developed so that the stories of those who lived there would be the fore-



front of future operations. Part of this process involved rebranding the house and bringing it back to Brookside Farm, as it was known when it was a working farm.

The decision to rebrand also involved changing the name of the house. The intention was to develop a museum that would honor all the families that have farmed the land and lived in the house and highlight the history of farming from 1845 to 1955 in our community.

After much discussion and debate over many possibilities, a final consensus was reached. It was proposed to the East Lyme Board of Selectmen in May that the Smith-Harris House be rebranded as Brookside Farm Museum, with a tagline of "Cultivating the Story: Avery, Smith and Harris, 1845–1955". "Brookside Farm" because there was solid documentation to support the history of this name, "Museum" because it is no longer a working farm, and the tagline clearly states the direction of the new Mission and Vision Statements.

After a full year of extensive research, reflection, and discussion, the Commission and the Friends of the Smith-Harris House are ready to start work on this authentic transformation. The East Lyme Community can look forward to new museum exhibits and programs related to Brookside Farm and the families that lived there. The Smith-Harris House Commission welcomes all to stop by and hear more about the vision and transformation that is planned. ■

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