

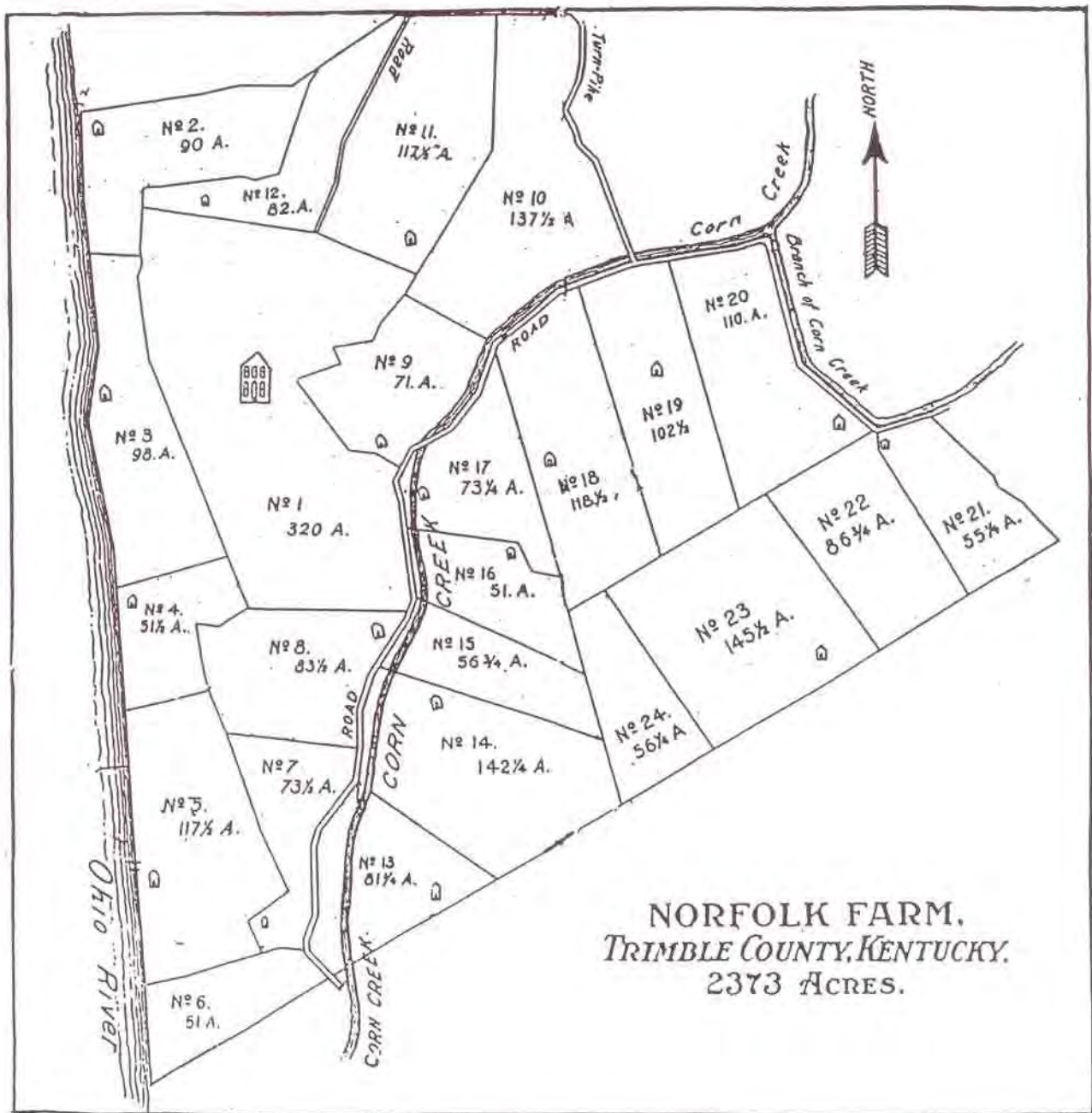
Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

History of Preston Plantation



Author and date unknown

www.nkyviews.com



HISTORY OF PRESTON PLANTATION

Preston Plantation is part of an 8,000 acre plantation acquired by a man named John Howard in 1786. Records indicate that in 1785, John Howard, an aide de camp for George Washington during the French and Indian War, ordered these 8,000 acres of land to be surveyed along the Ohio River between Louisville, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio. Howard, a Captain of the Virginia Militia, was granted this land via treasury

warrant #14267, signed in 1786 by the Governor of Virginia, Patrick Henry. Records indicate that Henry gave the nearly 8,000 acres as a gift.

Little is known of John Howard. Records indicate that he was born in 1733 to a family of British aristocrats, and died in 1834. His father's older brother, the Duke of Norfolk, inherited the family land in Great Britain. Therefore, the family compensated the remaining sons by gifting or purchasing them land along the James River in Virginia. John Howard left Virginia to settle in Kentucky after leaving the Virginia Militia. In addition to the 8,000 acres he acquired in modern-day Trimble County, Howard purchased and settled 1,000 acres of land in Lexington known as Howard's Grove.

The 8,000 acres were originally known as Norfolk Farm, in honor of John Howard's uncle. Howard gave 3,300 acres of his 8,000 acre tract to his youngest



Figure 2
Mary Howard Wickliffe Preston

daughter, Margaret Preston Howard. The remaining acres went to siblings and were consequently divided and sold. In 1804, Margaret married Robert Wickliffe of Lexington, a successful businessman, well-known advocate of slavery, attorney and politician in the Democratic Party. Shortly after Robert and Margaret married, they built a house on Preston Plantation, called "Home Place," which is still standing today. However, the Wickliffes spent a majority of their time living in their home, Glendower, in Lexington, Kentucky.

Robert and Margaret Wickliffe had several children, including a daughter named Mary Howard Wickliffe, born November 15, 1817. Mary grew up living in Glendower and continued to live there until 1850, when, at the age of 33, she purchased Preston Plantation from her parents for the sum of \$1. In the following year on January 17th, 1851, she married her distant cousin, John Preston of Virginia. Preston was involved in politics and later became a Trimble County Senator. The Prestons lived in the "Home Place" during the summer months; the rest of the year they lived in the Galt House in downtown Louisville. They left the management of the plantation to caretaker and relative Martin Roberts, and his son John Roberts.

In Mary Preston's time, Preston Plantation was the largest plantation in north central Kentucky. The farm had beautiful peach groves and produced tobacco as well

as a variety of other products. Even though the Prestons operated the largest plantation in the area, they were not the wealthiest land owners. However, they were certainly more than financially stable and could afford to be frivolous with their money. For instance, sometime in the 1850's, Mary purchased \$5000 worth of roses to be planted near the home; a significant investment even by today's standards. Those rose bushes were thought to have been planted on a ten acre piece of land that also contained the slave quarters. Often, Mary would tour the plantation giving rides and passing out hard-candy to the plantation slaves.

Preston Plantation housed 66 slaves. There is evidence supporting the idea that the Prestons treated their slaves very well relative to the era (see attached overseers letter). Records indicate that most slave families were intact and that few slaves sought freedom. However, one escape in particular was documented and detailed by Roberts, the plantation caretaker. In 1854, one of the slaves on Preston Plantation, Alfred, was loaned out to another plantation, from which he escaped and fled to Canada. In a letter to Colonel William Preston, (see attached) a Senator in Washington and John



Figure 3 Delia Webster

Preston's cousin, Roberts discusses the escape in great detail. In the letter, Roberts is seeking Col.

Preston's assistance in returning Alfred. However, the two were not able to find Alfred and he never returned to Preston Plantation.

While living at Gledower, Mary Preston befriended a young woman her age named Deliah Webster, a known abolitionist and Vermont Yankee. Deliah was living in a boarding home just across the street from Glendower. Some believe that this friendship, started in 1843, influenced Mary Preston and that she subsequently aided fugitive slaves that were crossing Preston Plantation. Deliah Webster's anti-slavery actions were better documented. In 1844 on September 28, Webster helped a minister named Calvin Fairbanks smuggle two slaves out of Lexington to Maysville, KY and across the Ohio River, where they proceeded north. Webster and Fairbanks returned to Lexington and the escaped slaves continued through the Underground Railroad to freedom. On the way back to Lexington, Webster and Fairbanks were arrested for the

theft of the slaves. After a speedy trial, both Fairbanks and Webster were imprisoned in Frankfort. After six weeks, Deliah Webster was set free on the condition that she leave the state of Kentucky. Though she did leave the state, she returned shortly thereafter.

When Mary married John Preston, he inherited her 3,300 acres comprising Preston Plantation. However, Mary succeeded at getting the plantation back in her name in 1859. There is no known explanation for Mary's desire to do this other than her unusual tendencies to be independent. Mary and John Preston had one child, a son, who was born in 1856 and died when he was just four years old. Shortly after the death of her only child, Mary converted to Catholicism, a bold maneuver since her entire family



One room school near Mary Preston's Home Place. After Civil War, all the plantation children educated here.

was against her conversion. She was baptized a Roman Catholic by Bishop Martin John Spalding of Louisville at the Cathedral of the Assumption on November 6, 1862. This information is taken from the cathedral's Baptismal Register Book 4, 1859-1875, p. 145. Mary buried her son in the St. Louis

Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky. When her husband, John, passed away in 1882, she buried him in Cave Hill

Cemetery in Louisville. However, shortly after he was buried in Cave Hill, Mary had his body and those of his parents moved to the St. Louis Cemetery. Mary Preston is also buried in the St. Louis Cemetery.

Soon after Mary converted to Catholicism and before the end of the Civil War, she opened and ran a school in Trimble County called The Norfolk School. The Norfolk School was the only school in the area to teach African American and Caucasian children in the same room.

In January 1891, Mary Preston created a will in which she left all of her property in Trimble County to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Louisville. This land was to be used as a school or college for boys. However, about one year later, a codicil stated that Mary had in fact already donated Preston Plantation to the Abbot of St. Meinrad Abbey, in Spencer County, Indiana. Not too long after Mary Preston died in 1892, Mary's family, both the Wickliffes and the Prestons, fought to have her will overturned. They argued successfully that Mary had been mentally unstable and under the influence of the

Roman Catholic Church. Once the will was overturned, the families argued over property rights, resulting in the break up and sale of the land in 1902.

After the sale of the land, existing structures were left standing. However, many of those structures succumbed to fire and the passage of time. Currently, Mark Timmons owns the land that contains Mary Preston's "Home Place." Several families have lived in the "Home Place" in the meantime, and currently a tenant rents the house.

In 1973, Virginia Venard of Cincinnati purchased two of the lots from the Preston Plantation land division of 1902. The Venard family then moved "Freedom's Home", a house built in 1861, to their property. Freedom's Home was built in 1861 by Francis Marion Lee. The home sat on 657 acres of land in Trimble County where the LG&E power plant is now located. Freedom's Home is significant to Preston Plantation because it was thought that Frank Lee was involved with the Underground Railroad. Lee was the first farmer to use windmills and

pressed hay barns, making him one of the most progressive farmers in the area. He was a die-hard unionist and Abraham Lincoln Republican at a time when Trimble County was overwhelmingly pro-slavery, pro-confederate, and anti-Lincoln.

When Virginia Venard died in 1987 her son, Paul, tried to buy the property from her estate. Paul's sisters owned 2/3 of the total property – 107.9 acres. In spite of a signed contract, Paul's sisters attempted to sell Virginia's property to a land developer that had purchased some additional land near the Venard property. However, four years later, Paul managed to buy the farm from his sisters. Over many years this land developer continued his attempts to acquire the farm, suing the Venards for breach of contract. Since the developer could not purchase the Venard farm, he had no access to the land he had purchased and planned to develop into 45 lots. The developer attempted to declare a limited access road on the Venard property a full access county road, to give him a thruway to his property, however, the Venards fought his attempts in court. The situation finally came to a bitter end in 2003 after the Venards took the case all the way through the Kentucky courts.



Figure 5 Freedom's Home

After successfully defeating the lawsuit, Paul Venard sold the development easement, 160 of 167.9 acres to P.A.C.E., a state program, to preserve the farmland. However, he held out several acres around freedom's home, Watson Landing, and their family home. As a result of the sale to P.A.C.E., the farm that was purchased by the developer prior to the lawsuits, cannot be developed for commercial or residential purposes. Through Preston Plantation, Inc., a nonprofit, the Venard Farm holds educational and historical programs at least twice a year and promotes the area's history through reenactments and celebrations.

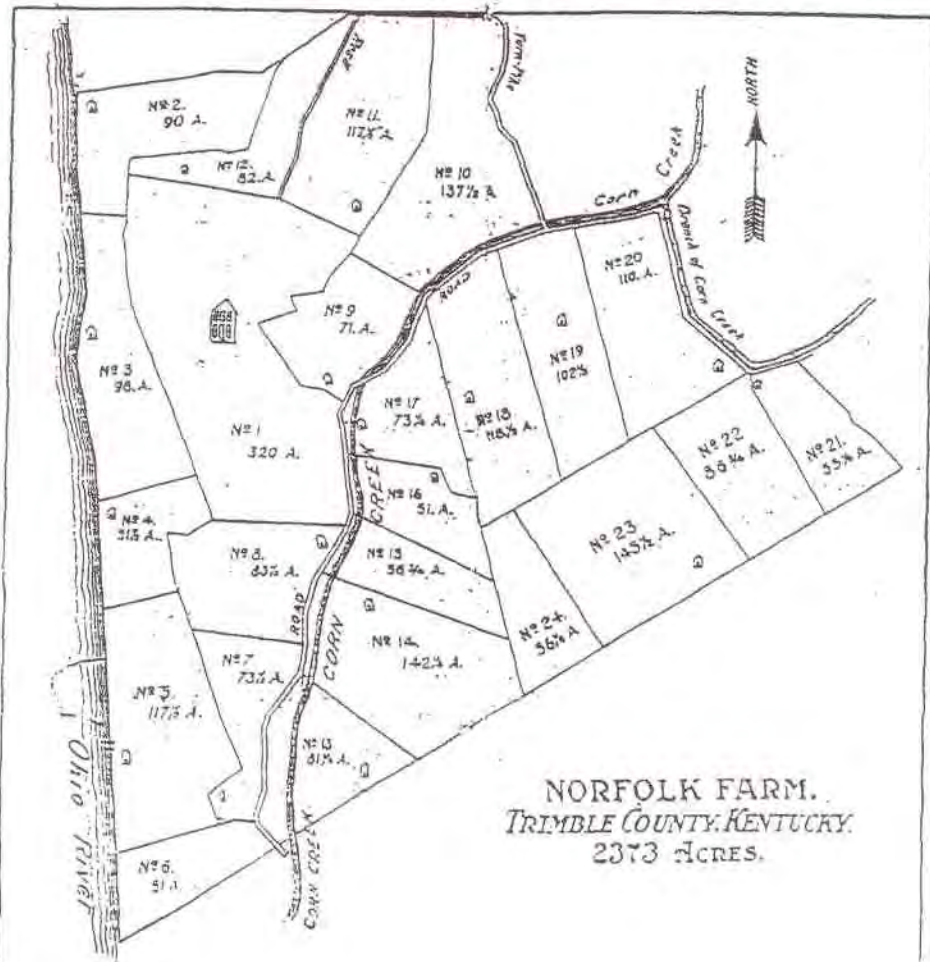
24 FARMS FOR SALE

AT

PUBLIC AUCTION

AT BEDFORD, KY.

Monday, November 24, 1902



NORFOLK FARM.
TRIMBLE COUNTY, KENTUCKY.
2373 ACRES.