

Sarah Gibbs and Oakland Farm: Hospitality and Heartache



"The farm at Portsmouth," as it appeared in William Ellery Channing's time, was both a place of relaxation and a working farm. This image is from a print once owned by Channing's daughter, Mary Channing East's. Reproduced in William Ellery Channing: A Confessional Memory, AMU #0502

Oakland Farm at Sarah Gibbs time.

Today "Oakland Farm" is best known as a condominium community or it is remembered as the country estate of a branch of the Vanderbilt family. Before the land was sold to the Vanderbilts, Oakland Farm was the summer home of Sarah Gibbs and her sister Ruth Gibbs Channing. Ruth was the wife of William Ellery Channing, a famous Unitarian minister, and Oakland Farm was Channing's treasured summer retreat.

Sarah Gibbs is known for her founding of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in

Portsmouth. Known as "Aunt Sarah" by her family and friends, she was famous for her hospitality. Sarah never married, but at Oakland Farm she was surrounded by loved ones. Sarah was an integral part of the Channing family and wrote about the Channing girls as "my children."

The reminiscences of family friend Miss Mary Powel, give us a glimpse of Sarah's Oakland Farm.

"Here she kept not only a good farm but a charming and really beautiful old house...not far from the highroad. The garden, carefully planted and containing several curious foreign trees (one brought back from England in a flower pot by Miss Gibbs herself), was separated from the road and from the farm driveway by old stone walls and well-kept arbor vitae hedges.....The house, a good specimen of colonial architecture, was filled with fine old furniture and many curios. Owing to the large hospitality of its owner, there were many rambling additions built from time to time and the exterior of the house was adorned here

and there by little balconies of open rails....” (From the Gibbs Family of Rhode Island and some related families. By George Gibbs privately printed in New York in 1933).

Miss Powel goes on to describe an apple orchard and tree sheltered grass road to the woods where Channing loved to stroll. To the west of the house were fields of Indian corn and pumpkins with pastures close by. The farm had the usual outbuildings, barns, corn cribs, stables and sheds. There was even an outdoor shower! Approaching Oakland’s door, guests would be surrounded by chickens and turkeys. Guests would be ushered into a broad beamed drawing room with a fire place. Sarah would greet her guests there. Miss Powel describes her as a “little lady” dressed in fabrics from India and China and draped in white cashmere or camel hair shawls.

“Her features were strong and pronounced, her eyes extremely blue, her complexion rather bright, but much wrinkled and her voice and manner were most kind and gracious...I think that all children thought she was a sort of venerable fairy godmother” – (Gibbs Family, pg 101).

Sarah always sent her guests off with handfuls of ginger cookies. Miss Powel remembers her as *“the genial dignity and gracious cheerfulness of the lady of the manor, with her many rural dependents, her liberal charities, her fond but humble love of the Church; the evening prayer, the kindly chat, the fond welcome and the sweetness and serenity of the scene and the visit.”* (The Gibbs Family, pg 106.)



While the descriptions of Miss Gibbs’ life at Oakland Farm seem idyllic, there were family tensions that disturbed the peace of both Sarah and her sister Ruth Channing. The eighty acre Oakland Farm was purchased from John Faxon in 1796 by the merchant firm of Gibbs and Channing. In 1807 the firm ended and George Gibbs had the property. When George Gibbs died in 1813, his wife, Mary Gibbs, was granted the farm for her lifetime use. Mary was concerned about what would happen to the family estates at her death, so she established a trust for the benefit of her children. It was her intention that Ruth and Sarah would have use of the property for their lifetimes, but after their mother’s death

the brothers (George and William) tried to challenge that. They refused to sign the “life tenancy” agreement for their sisters and explored ways of breaking the trust.

The strain in the relationship between the Gibbs sisters and their brothers weighed heavily on Sarah. Sarah wrote to her Uncle Walter in 1825: “The stillness of Oakland is increased in the solitariness of my feelings, – it is a desolation I can never lose – but in the quiet here I strive to interest myself in the garden, to forget that I have a Brother so near to me who has never called or sent to us to offer to give us any assistance.”

A month later she wrote again to her uncle:

“I have not heard from W(William) or what (he) has been doing – this silence forebodes a storm I very much fear – In the sense of the correctness of our feeling and actions- I hope we shall meet all the difficulties with composure and firmness – to me it has been a hard struggle to be cast off where I ought to expect so much tenderness & kindness.”

The rift with her brothers was particularly painful because Sarah was known as a congenial and non-judgmental person. She was an intimate part of William Ellery Channing’s family. Although she disagreed with Channing on theology, it appears there were no conflicts over this. Although Channing frequently preached at the Union Church just down the road, Sarah never attended a Channing service. Sarah was devout in her Episcopal faith, both on Sundays and in her home life. A bell in the Oakland house called the family to daily morning and evening prayer. She gathered an orthodox Episcopal community around her and erected St. Mary’s Church at her own expense. In the end there was a compromise between the siblings. William and George did sign the life tenancy of Oakland Farm to their sisters and the sisters agreed to sacrifice some of their shares in other portions of the estate. Sarah lived on there until her death in 1866. Ruth Gibbs Channing lived until 1870.

This article re-searched and written by Gloria Schmidt. It was first published in her blog portsmouthhistorynotes.wordpress.com in 2018.

Sources:

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