



## *Environmental Education on the Potomac*

### **Alice Ferguson the Artist**

In the early 1920s, Alice L.L. Ferguson (1880- 1951) --wife of Henry Gardiner Ferguson-- a dynamic, creative artist trained as a painter at the Corcoran School of Art began to look for a country property close to Washington, D.C. They lived there in a house she is claimed to have designed on California Street (now demolished) and it is there she began her career as a painter while Henry- affectionately known as Fergie – was a geologist with the United States Geological Survey. His work took him -- and occasionally Alice -- to many points in the American Southwest during the early 20th century. It was in 1922, during one of Fergie's trips, that Alice bought Hard Bargain Farm. He good-humoredly accepted the purchase but made it clear that she would be the manager and in charge of everything.

Hard Bargain Farm, initially a 138.39-acre plot of land along the banks of the Potomac River across from historic Mount Vernon, included an old farm house, farm structures, rolling hills, fields, woods and streams, all in fairly untouched, undeveloped condition of early 20th century rural America. It was to be for Alice and Fergie the place that would change the course of their lives, a place that she would transform into a unique, remarkable environment that is still alive with the force of her creative touch.

Alice was an active member of the Washington arts community and belonged to and exhibited with most of the local arts organizations including the Society of Washington Artists and The Arts Club. Her paintings were shown locally as well as sent to exhibitions in cities along the East coast. During the years before acquiring Hard Bargain Farm she kept a studio in their home at California Street and later at Hard Bargain she utilized the log cabin for the same purpose. Many of the scenes and activities she saw at Hard Bargain became the subjects of her paintings. Her art was initially hung in the California Street house along with the paintings she collected or received from fellow artists. Many years later after her death, those works and the rest of her art collection were brought to the farm where they remain today.

Alice extended her creative interests beyond the mediums she had utilized as a studio painter. She was an amateur architect, landscape planner and garden creator, writer and archeologist. Soon after acquiring the farm it was determined that the existing farm house was unsafe and would have to be replaced. She designed and had built the existing main house and its ancillary buildings. The interiors were furnished in the manner of a country home with an eye both to comfort and to the engaging qualities of interior design derived from English Country homes, a stylization common among culturally informed designers of the period when Edith Wharton was active. The rooms on the first floor of the farm house retain many of the interesting and unique articles Alice selected including art deco lamps, other pieces of iron work, a Tiffany lamp shade, Quimper pottery, and antique furniture, clocks and decorative items. These rooms are oriented with a relationship to the surrounding terraces, porches, and garden areas.

Almost every window or open door afforded an opportunity to not only see outside activities but also to look beyond to the magnificent scenes of the river and distant landscape. These rooms and the surrounding grounds were used by the Fergusons to bring into their lives people from the many

circles of which they were a part -from the men of the Geological Society to the people of the local community. If the time had been a century earlier one might have called the regular weekend and summer gatherings at Hard Bargain a "salon" but the informality and the free-form manner of activities made it something more and in many ways very different. The image of Hard Bargain and the Fergusons and their friends who gathered here was probably best captured in Alice's paintings.