



Greater Light

JEFFREY ALLEN, 2012

Greater Light

The house now known as Greater Light dates to the late eighteenth century, when it was built as a livestock barn for Zaccheus Macy (1713–97) or his son, Richard (1742–1814).

Two artistic Quaker sisters from Philadelphia, Gertrude and Hanna Monaghan, discovered it in the summer of 1929, when they followed a herd of cows up Main Street and out of curiosity continued their pursuit down what was then called Bull Lane, but is now a part of Howard Street. The cows disappeared into a massive barn, the sisters followed, and their moment of inspiration occurred: they had found the perfect project. Situated just a block away from the formal houses that lined Main and Gardner streets, but ancient and rural in character, the barn would be transformed into a summer home and art studio unlike anything else on the island.

Collectors of cast-off architectural elements — including iron gates, gilded columns, odd windows, and bits and pieces of trim and embellishment — the Monaghan sisters were scavengers with

ADDRESS

8 Howard Street

CONSTRUCTED

circa 1790

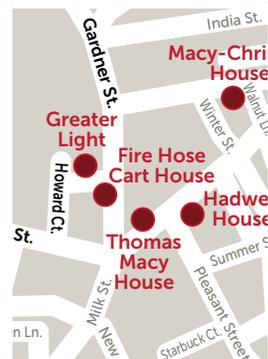
REMODELED

1930

DISTANCE FROM

WHALING MUSEUM

.5 miles



pocketbooks, partially funded by their indulgent parents, James and Anna Monaghan, who were joint owners of the barn property with their daughters. Gertrude, the elder sister, forty-two years old in 1929, was an artist who had studied in Philadelphia and abroad. She was well established as a muralist in Philadelphia where she had applied her talents to the walls of several large department stores and private homes. Her artistic sister Hanna, two years younger, was an amateur actress and author as well. The family was well-to-do, talented, well educated, and somewhat nontraditional for its time and place. Gertrude and Hanna Monaghan chose to devote their lives to art, as an expression of their faith. They were Quakers, but of a decidedly different mold from the earlier Quaker population of Nantucket. Rather than rejecting art, they embraced it. Gertrude attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and won several awards, including a European Travel Fellowship. At home, she and Hanna created a studio that was their first building



The barn on Howard Street before 1929

F2509



Hanna Monaghan

PH37-N60



Gertrude Monaghan

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P21297

project: they first made a drawing of a room above their kitchen, then created a scale model, hired a carpenter, and supervised the project. The result was a cross between a workshop and a chapel, and set the stage for their Nantucket barn project.

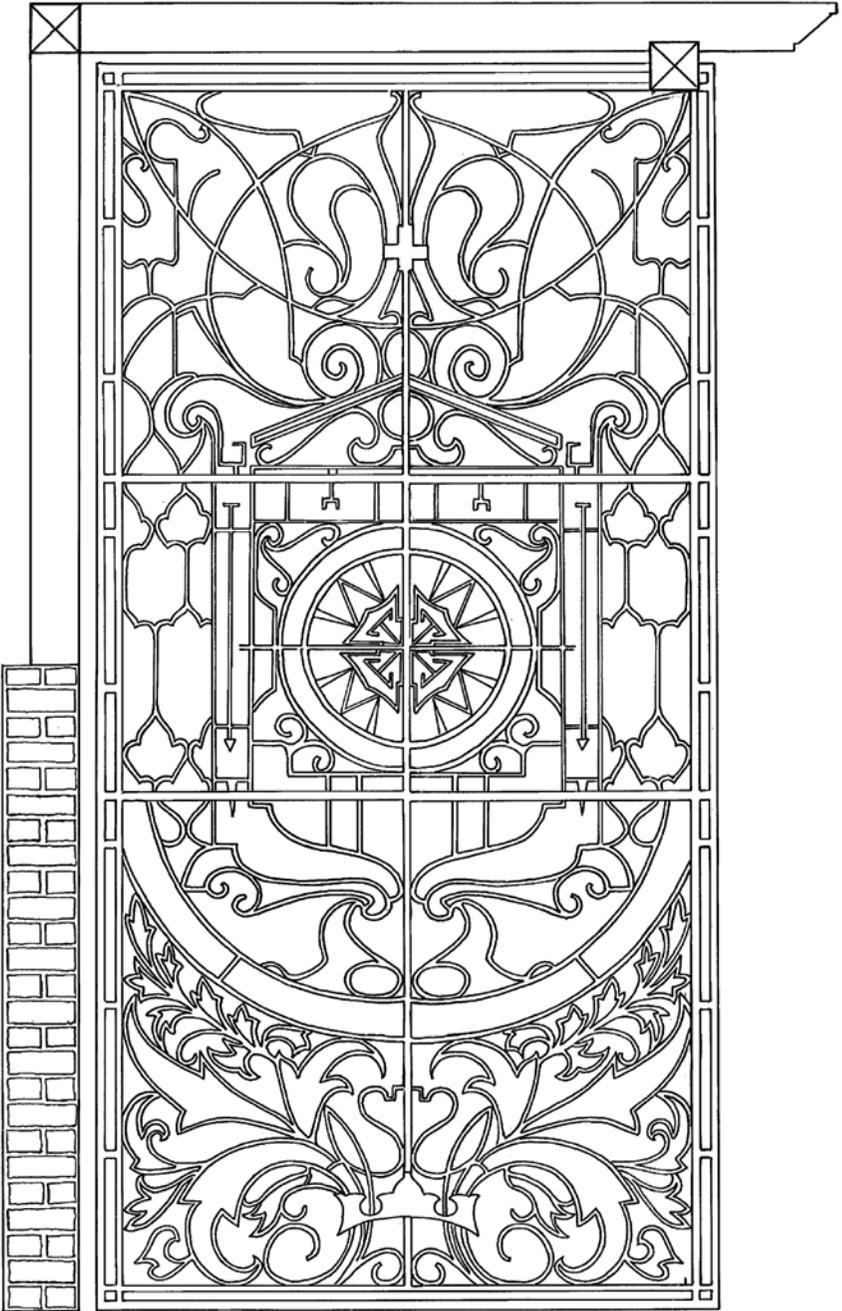
And what a project it was! Back in Philadelphia, over the winter of 1929–30, the sisters constructed a carefully planned, detailed cardboard model of their vision for the barn. It included the perfect location for a pair of twelve-foot-high wrought-iron gates that Hanna had purchased the previous spring, on a whim, from a junkyard near the city. When Hanna left a deposit for them, her plan for their use was another unknown, but they were a work of art, and she recognized their intrinsic value. Serendipitously, the height from the edge of the barn roof to the garden on the east side was just over twelve feet, the sort of fortuitous circumstance that seemed to flow naturally during the course of the renovation. Pieces fit. Stained-glass windows were wished for; they were found. Wrought-iron balconies were desirable; the sisters drove by a building in Philadelphia that was being demolished and spied just the ones they envisioned, ripe for the picking.



Anna and James Monaghan with family greyhound, Angel Gabriel, in Greater Light PH37-N1

Each of these elements was replicated in tiny pieces of cardboard and added to the model, which began to take final shape.

One of the most remarkable features of the house, the fireplace in the great room, was designed by the sisters to have a semi-circular raised hearth with an opening seven feet high. Its stuccoed chimney-piece, rising from a mantel supported by gold columns, is the antithesis of the traditional Nantucket fireplace. The door to the balcony over the patio – where there had formerly been a pigpen – was made of



Historic American Buildings Survey drawing of patio gate

CAROL MCCHESENEY, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION,

HABS MA-1306, SHEET 8



Fireplace in the great room, 1930s

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four church windows fitted together in red-painted frames, and the north wall was almost entirely taken up by a gigantic nine-paned studio window, also fashioned from individual church windows. All of these features, as well as an interior balcony to allow access from a third-floor bedroom to the original hayloft door, were thoughtfully considered, drawn to scale, and cut and pasted onto the model, which Hanna put in a hatbox and transported to Nantucket. The reaction of Magloire (Mack) Paradis, their island carpenter, to this whimsical,



View of the great room from the second-floor interior balcony of Greater Light, 1930s GIFT OF DR. AND MRS. JAMES BULLOCK P20201

dainty rendition of their future summer home was recorded by Hanna in her memoir: "Well," he said dryly, "I would suggest that you tear the barn down and I can build you something new and much nicer. "And," he added, "it will be cheaper, too."

True to their inner vision and trusting in their plan, the sisters persevered. Every element of every room in the house was designed by them, with carefully selected handcrafted pieces — from door latches to windows and iron balconies — fitted in. It was a labor of love, soon to be furnished and decorated with the same astute aesthetic. What the sisters created was an intensely personal environment made up of widely disparate parts that came together with harmony in the three-dimensional collage that was their home.

As the renovation of the barn neared completion, the sisters turned their attention to the garden, which required imagination and faith, qualities they had in abundance. Hanna recounts their contemplation of the old farmyard:



Greater Light garden, 1930s

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Greater Light garden, 2011

As we sat in our patio and surveyed its surroundings, I said, "A patio must have a garden, a green grassy room under the sky." The grilles seemed rather ludicrous as we looked beyond them into the pile of ashes. A more hopeless sight could not be imagined. "We know nothing about planning or planting a garden," I said to Gertrude as we surveyed the dump around us.

Although it is now hard to imagine Greater Light without the garden that is an integral part of the patio room, it was another huge project for the sisters, and one they approached with their usual faith in serendipity. They had heard of a gardener who lived on Main Street, someone locally renowned for her talent in garden design and her knowledge of flowers. Without their asking, the woman appeared on their doorstep and offered to advise them, first suggesting that they use the large stones from the cellar, now in the rubble pile around the ash pit, to build a garden wall, and then to plant irises and other blooms in the chinks of the rocks. Although the town was still full of gossip and some displeasure about what was considered by some a bizarre alteration of the barn, their landscape consultant, excited by the project, continued to help:

Our "garden old lady" on Main Street was true blue through it all. She would come hurrying down the street, knowing of the eyes watching behind closed blinds in the houses as she passed. On she came, her basket over her arm with peony roots and iris tubers to plant. She would scuttle by the curtained windows as though snipers were after her, and arrive quite out of breath.

The sisters added a tall board fence along Howard Street to keep the "peepers" at bay, but that only made their activities more interesting to the curious, who acted as though aliens had landed in the town's backyard. Undeterred, they added trees, a millstone topped with an alabaster column surrounded by baby boxwoods, and a tiny pool and fountain.

Art, needlework, research, conversation, and relaxation on the patio



Hanna Monaghan, by
Helen Cordelia Gilbert, 1960

1998.1013.1



were the order of a summer day on Nantucket for Gertrude, Hanna, and their family and friends at Greater Light, while their greyhound Angel Gabriel, and later his successor, Star of Bethlehem, snoozed in the garden. The sisters' vision of a summer home and studio was inspired. From a simple but solidly built eighteenth-century barn of beautiful proportions, they created a magical space. Their personal aesthetic blended imagination and whimsy with a passionate appreciation of unique hand-crafted works of utilitarian art — woven, carved, forged, or painted — that coalesced in an environment that is a monument to their spirit.

Hanna Monaghan, the surviving sister, bequeathed Greater Light and its contents to the NHA in 1972. The hidden gem of a property was



Restored great room

JEFFREY ALLEN, 2012

open to the public for a number of years, but when the aging building became structurally unsound, the doors were closed. In 2009, a new vision for the house as a center for small gatherings and lifelong learning in the arts spurred a complete restoration of house and garden. Reopened in 2011, Greater Light embodies the creativity and spirit of the summer art colony that thrived on Nantucket in the 1920s.