
THE EDGARTOWN STORY CONTINUES



CHARTING A NEW FUTURE FOR THE COOKE HOUSE AND GARDENS

Cooke House Gardens is the natural outgrowth of the Museum's evolution and need for a new home in Vineyard Haven and strong desire to protect and enhance its current home in Edgartown. The Gardens project responds to our desire to preserve the public use and enjoyment of our centrally located property on School Street, while protecting open space in the heart of historic Edgartown.

Museum planners took a fresh look at the existing Edgartown campus with particular attention to the historic fabric and essence of the town of Edgartown itself. It had been originally assumed that the Museum would retain only the historic Cooke House as a seasonal exhibit and sell the remaining two-thirds of the Edgartown property to support the capital needs of the new facility. However, it became increasingly clear that the Museum could do more to benefit the community by leaving an enduring gift that could forever magnify the character of this historic town and create a lasting community asset.

The alternative concept, Cooke House Gardens, is a bold departure from previous assumptions. The

Museum is optimistic that it is one around which community support will crystallize.

The Plan: Perpetual protection and stewardship of the property in collaboration between the Museum and one or two other well-established Island non-profits. The Museum would oversee and be responsible for the educational, historic and community programming in the Cooke House and Gardens, while engaging other entities to manage the landscape to ensure the establishment of a natural park setting that considers seasonality, ecological and biological value, with native plants, shrubs and trees. A Cooke House Gardens partnership would assure that the gardens are monitored, sensibly designed and responsibly stewarded in concert with programming informed by the community.

BENEFITS TO THE TOWN:

It is no secret that open space in downtown Edgartown is becoming scarcer and scarcer. Little is left of the prim gardens that once provided Edgartown's stately homes room to breathe. The very experience of walking through the heart of Edgartown is changing.

This proposal considers these conditions and offers a counter weight. Instead of increasing the density of people and housing, it actually creates a permanent sense of place. By opening up space and designing an enhanced community asset that will remain perpetually open and accessible to the public, it restores a traditional New England “common green” to this historically-important New England town. Neighbors, too, may appreciate unintended economic benefits. Susan Wachter of the Wharton Business School notes that communal open space has a material and positive impact. “Examples from cities around the nation, including Boston, Chicago, San Diego and Philadelphia, show that the land within close proximity to a park is typically the most valuable downtown land, realizing as much as a 30 percent increase in nearby property values.”

BENEFITS TO THE MUSEUM:

Why would a history museum want to create a community park and garden? What is the rationale? The Martha’s Vineyard Museum’s new mission, to inspire all people to discover, explore, and strengthen their connections to this Island and its diverse heritage, is not about passive collection and curatorship but rather a call for action and involvement. The Urban Parks Institute notes that “Successful parks and gardens are catalysts in transforming and enriching our communities. A park and its surrounding area provide residents with a venue for participation in and attachment to their communities... Not only can they provide a place to understand and relate to nature, but they can also be a place for social and cultural exchange.” Cooke House Gardens takes the Museum’s new mission literally, making the institution an agent of community-building and positive change.

BENEFITS TO THE COOKE HOUSE:

To capture the essence of an historic place and time, there is nothing more vivid in a child’s imagination than giving them the freedom to inhabit authentic spaces while wearing period costume and handling period-appropriate tools and artifacts. The Cooke House will be brought back to life as a multi-use space that preserves the integrity of the historic structure while serving as a venue for exciting programs in Edgartown. Moving beyond the typical historic house museum with velvet ropes and a “do not touch” policy, the Cooke House will invite visitors to engage with the entire span of its history (early 1700s – today) through no-tech hands-on activities, educational programs, and special events.

BENEFITS TO THE GARDENS:

Welcoming open spaces will become less formal the further they are from the house. Stories of the history of the area will be incorporated into the design, so that park users will not need to visit when the house is open in order to appreciate the history of the area.

The Gardens will feature educational program space and half an acre of natural landscaping, complete with water features, period-appropriate plantings, and natural space for a stage-like learning/performing area. Neighbors will appreciate a welcome, relaxing open space.

Community input will be sought and integrated into the project. Neighborhood groups should be welcomed (scouts, church groups, interest-driven groups). Possible programming partners include Polly Hill Arboretum; Edgartown Library; Farm Institute; Island craftspeople; the Martha’s Vineyard Garden Club; Featherstone Center for the Arts; the Yard; local chefs; Martha’s Vineyard Preservation Trust; local farmers; and local musicians.