

Love of the Land

BY GREGORY LEFEVER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY J. DAVID BOHL



LOOKING OUT OVER THE FARM HER FAMILY WORKED FOR NINE GENERATIONS, CHARLOTTE GEER KNEW HER HOUSE MUST HONOR HER RARE HERITAGE. SHE MET THAT CHALLENGE BEYOND ALL EXPECTATIONS.



Family bloodlines run deep into the Connecticut soil where Charlotte Geer built her home. The farm where she lives has been in her family since the 1680s—one of New England's longest tenures of one family owning a tract—and represents an extraordinary account of dedication, hard work, and love.

The dramatic tale begins with two young brothers in 17th-Century England, orphaned, robbed of their fortune by a deceitful uncle, and shipped off to America with literally only the shirts on their backs. A later chapter recounts how another orphaned boy in the 1930s learned to chop wood to save the homestead that had been in his family for eight generations before him.

The most recent chapter tells of young Charlotte, who sold off her belongings in the 1970s to buy the remnants of a dilapidated 18th-Century saltbox-style house to erect on a parcel of land near the family homestead. She spent years reconstructing and furnishing it until she had achieved a remarkable home with the ability to transport a visitor three hundred years back in time.

"I don't know what it is about the Geers," Charlotte mused recently. "We have this drive, this determination. When we put our mind to something, we tend to get it done, no matter what."

That is an understatement.

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

Charlotte Geer's lineage traces back to 1450 to Heavtree, in Devon, England, but the pertinent part of the story picks up in the late 16th Century with Jonathan Geere, of whom little is known other than he was born circa 1580 and was deemed a gentleman and man of property. He

A period William and Mary chest-on-frame stands gracefully in the living room alongside a reproduction wing chair and couch, both upholstered with the Historic Deerfield flame pattern. The Douglas fir tree came from the Geer Tree Farm. A mix of early and reproduction toys surrounds its base.

died in about 1630, shortly after the death of his wife, and left their two young sons—George, born in 1621, and Thomas, born two years later—as orphans.

The young boys, heirs to their father's considerable wealth, were placed under the guardianship of an uncle. According to a Geer family account compiled five generations ago, the uncle deprived the boys of even a rudimentary education—all of their lives George and Thomas would sign legal documents with simple marks instead of signatures—and schemed to acquire their property. In about 1635, he made his move.

The uncle allegedly wrote a letter and instructed the boys to carry it to a ship's captain and to wait on board the ship until they received a response. They gave the letter to the captain, and, while they waited, the ship set sail. Victims of their unscrupulous uncle, the boys—barely in their teens—found themselves bound for America as virtual captives with no luggage or money.

Arriving in Boston in 1635, the brothers disappeared from the annals of history for several years. "The first reliable record we find of them is years later in Connecticut, where George was an early settler of Ledyard about 1651, and Thomas of Enfield in 1682," Charlotte said. "I'm a direct descendant of George."

George Geer eventually had eleven children and acquired substantial land holdings. In 1687 he deeded to his son Joseph four hundred acres of beautiful, rolling countryside in the town of Preston. There, Joseph built the original Geer homestead and created one of the landmark dairy farms in southeastern Connecticut.

In 1815, the portion of Preston where the farm lies became the town of Griswold, the name it still bears. Sometime in the 1830s, the old homestead met an unknown fate and a descendant built a new house on the first structure's 150-year-old foundation.

George Geer—despite his uncle's deviousness, the unimaginable hardship of his youth, and the pres-



Charlotte Geer's house has the traditional lines of an 18th-Century New England saltbox. The 1779 building, originally located about 25 miles from the Geer farm, served first as a house and then a tavern before falling victim to neglect. As workmen dismantled the structure, they uncovered its classic architectural features. It took years to finish the reconstruction. The entire post-and-beam frame, chimney and several fireplaces, and wood floors are all original. The only departure is the rear wing, constructed in period style by Rex Fackler of Hopkinton Post & Beam, which houses the kitchen and great room.

Since the 1680s, the rolling acres of the Geer property have been used as a dairy farm, fields rented to neighboring farmers for growing crops, and a tree farm. One of New England's oldest tracts held by members of a single family, the land retains much of its 17th-Century appearance, with forests, ponds, and numerous stone walls.





The keeping room's large, wide-plank harvest table is not an early piece, although it harmonizes with the period furnishings. It holds a holiday feast of roast goose, a ham shank, cornbread, plum pudding, and chestnuts in a 1700s wooden trencher. The floor is covered with a c. 1900 Heriz rug. The 18th-Century spoon rack holds Charlotte's collection of 1700s pewter spoons. The ball-foot blanket chest is a vintage William and Mary piece, and the unusual Santa standing atop it has a coat made of tree bark.

tures of his large family and many properties—lived to be 105. Blind in his old age, he moved from Ledyard to the Griswold farm, where his daughter Margaret cared for him the last five years of his life. He was buried in 1726 in an old Indian burial ground in Griswold.

SAVING THE FARM

Generations of Geers operated the dairy farm for two more centuries before Charlotte's grandparents

took it over. The first century saw more acres cleared and countless stones hoisted from the fields to form picturesque stone walls. Geer descendants built, repaired, and replaced barns to house their herds of dairy cattle. In the second century they faced tougher times. The original 400 acres were whittled down to 160, the herds sold, and the fields rented out to neighboring farmers for growing crops.

In the 1930s, after nine genera-

tions of Geers had maintained the farm, the family nearly lost it.

Charlotte's father, H. David Geer, was only nine when his father died, throwing the farm's future into doubt. David's mother sold the remaining dairy cattle and moved with her son and four younger daughters to nearby Sterling to live with her mother. That left only David's paternal grandmother, Margaret Geer, and her daughter Bertha at the family farm in Griswold.



The great room, in the rear wing built by Rex Fackler of Hopkinton Post & Beam, contains some of Charlotte's rarest pieces. On the rear wall is an English oak chest from the 1600s. Atop it are a 1600s Friesian-footed document box and early-1700s pewter charger. The 1700s gate-leg table is American and flanked by three 18th-Century New Hampshire banister-back chairs. The armoire is also from the Pilgrim Century, built of English oak with arched carvings indicative of the 1650s.

On top of the armoire, inset, redware jugs and a pewter charger from the 1700s nestle amidst a natural holiday arrangement of pinecones, fruit, and turkey and pheasant feathers. Interior decorators Dennis Beauregard and David Thomas of Norwich, Connecticut, created this arrangement and others for tabletops and trees throughout the house.



Shortly afterward, David's mother died as well, leaving David and his four sisters as orphans. The situation went from bad to worse when their grandmother Margaret fell ill at the farm and slipped into a coma.

As the family story goes, young

David was at his grandmother's deathbed when Aunt Bertha told him, "Mother will be dead by morning and I'm going to sell the farm, so you'll have to find someplace else to live." With those words, Margaret suddenly awoke from her coma and

told her grandson to fetch a lawyer. With the help of the lawyer, Margaret signed her part of the farm over to her grandson and, just before dying, told him, “Whatever you do, keep this farm in the Geer name.”

Faced with this formidable challenge, especially during the Great Depression in a rural area, David sacrificed his schooling to support what remained of his family. His main income came from chopping wood for the local schoolhouse’s wood stove and selling surplus cords to neighbors. He learned quickly that the more cords he chopped, the more money he made.

Never large in stature—he grew to be five-foot-seven—David became so proficient he could hack down a tree with just a few strong strokes of his ax. People remarked about his ability and in 1948 invited him to compete in the Preston County Fair. He won his first wood-chopping contest with its prize of five dollars—more money than his mother had been able to make in a week as a schoolteacher—and a new ax. He went on in 1956 to become World Champion Lumberjack, a title he won forty-five times in contests in the United States, Canada, and Australia. He earned a place in the *Guinness Book of Records* and appeared on popular television programs including “The Johnny Carson Show,” “What’s My Line?,” and “I’ve Got a Secret,” and was the subject of a feature film called *Timber*.

“At eighty-three, he still cuts wood and he still competes,” Charlotte said. “He’s amazing.”

Along the way, David Geer, who lives in the early Geer farmhouse, made enough money to buy a bulldozer for clearing town roads of snow and building new ones. He founded Geer Construction Company, which today is Geer Sand & Gravel. He also bought out his aunt’s half and took sole possession of the farm.

“So my father, even as a young boy, managed to save the farm and keep it in the family through his pure love of the homestead and through his incredible drive and determination,” Charlotte said.

END OF A SEARCH

In 1975, when Charlotte’s father gave her a piece of the family farm, he envisioned his daughter building a simple house and quickly settling in. Charlotte saw it differently.

“I looked at the site of where my home would be,” she recalled. “I looked into the distance and could see the fields and the stone walls and the ponds. It was the same view my ancestors had, and the Indians before them, and it was still intact. I knew then that I wanted to build an early farmhouse—something appropriate, either a reproduction or an antique—that would suit the location.”

But first she had to determine what would be appropriate. “I did considerable research on early New England architecture and furnishings. I had to become knowledgeable of what I’d be buying,” she said. “I just kept researching and looking and looking for about a year and a half. I wanted to make sure I made the right decision.”

Eventually, she heard of a project that held promise. A company called Hopkinton Post & Beam of Ashaway, Rhode Island, was disas-

sembling a Revolutionary-era structure in the town of Bradford, Rhode Island, about twenty-five miles southeast of the Geer farm.

“They were in the process of dismantling what would eventually become my home,” Charlotte said. “They were confident it was an early building, but everything was covered over by modern building materials. Its antique floorboards were hidden beneath layer upon layer of linoleum, the post-and-beam construction was concealed under hanging ceilings, and of course the original windows were long gone. But still you could see the center chimney and the basic design of a classic New England saltbox.”

Historical records disclosed the building originally was a farmhouse, later converted to a tavern called the Bradford Social Club.

Charlotte said she sensed that this dilapidated structure suitable for the wrecking ball could become her dream home. She bargained with Rex Fackler, owner of Hopkinton Post & Beam, and then sold the small house where she had been living not far from the Geer farm. Not

The fireplace in the living room is original, as are all the home’s fireplaces. The c. 1700 English recessed-panel blanket chest appeared in the movie *The Crucible* and served briefly as a seat for actor Daniel Day-Lewis. The pipe box hanging above it is an early piece with original paint. Charlotte purchased the room’s 18th-Century yellow pine feather-board paneling from Brooklyn Restoration Supply.





blessed with wealth, Charlotte worked out a pay-as-you-go plan with Fackler, enabling her dream to become reality.

“I came to appreciate the beauty of New England architecture. It was brought over from England and I have such a deep love for it,” she said. “It’s so amazing how craftsmen in the 18th Century with their simple tools could create things like the beautiful raised paneling with all of its details. It’s all so special, and I look at this property today and feel so fortunate to have been in a position to save it.”

A CEDAR ON THE ROOF

It took Fackler’s team two months to dismantle the old tavern. “Rex still recalls that when they opened the building’s original roof, bats swarmed out and flew into the neighborhood,” Charlotte said. “I have an article from the newspaper there, where people are complaining about a new problem with so many bats. They didn’t realize those were the bats from the Bradford Social Club.”

The process of dismantling the structure gradually unveiled its vintage lines. “As we started to peel off layer after layer of unsightly material, it gradually became this beautiful early New England saltbox, which was very exciting,” Charlotte recalled. “You could tell by the post-and-beam construction, the floorboards, and the fireplaces that we were working with a classic 18th-Century structure. Then when we took the stucco off the center chimney, we found the date stone marked 1779.”

Charlotte purchased a 45-foot single-axle trailer for storing the pieces of the saltbox on the farm until reconstruction could begin. Meanwhile, Fackler’s men dug a

OPPOSITE The massive firebox in the keeping room has a primitive oven. The original firebox had a wooden lintel that Charlotte had to replace to meet fire codes. Wrought-iron cookware hangs on an 18th-Century crane and trammels. The Queen Anne tavern table still has its original top. Pulled up to it is a c. 1700 Spanish-footed, Prince of Wales-crested banister-back chair. The sleigh bells hanging next to the fireplace are c. 1900.



The hand-carved wooden drinking vessel is from the early 1700s and has the initials “BD” carved into it. It rests next to a period gin case bottle and two etched flip glasses, also from the 1700s, each holding a chestnut muddler. The mustard-painted pine box is a reproduction.

basement on the farm to match the one that had been beneath the Bradford Social Club and put a temporary roof over it. Charlotte lived here, with heat supplied by a little wood stove, until she could move into her saltbox.

“I lived in the basement all the while the house was being reconstructed over my head. It was roughing it, that’s for sure,” she said. “I remember one Christmas when it was snowing inside my basement home because the men were rebuilding the chimney and they had to open my temporary roof to the elements. Sometimes you just do what you have to do.”

Fackler, an expert on vintage New England buildings, either performed or personally supervised every phase of the prolonged reconstruction. He would rebuild part of the house and Charlotte would save up for the next phase. “It’s hard to pinpoint exactly how long it took to reassemble because we did it in stages, almost room by room,” she explained. “One thing about doing it slowly, it gave me time to do more of my research so I could avoid making a mistake.”

Hopkinton Post & Beam rebuilt

the structure’s foundation with its original Rhode Island yellow-gray stones. Workmen rebuilt the original oak post-and-beam frame with the original timbers. They rebuilt the chimney from its original masonry, rebuilt all of the original fireplaces, and re-laid the original floorboards of oak, chestnut, and pine. Charlotte had stockpiled antique glass, which Fackler used to build windows to match period originals.

Workmen covered walls and ceilings throughout the house with blueboard, a material similar to sheetrock but intended as a base for veneer plaster. Most doors are suitably old, as is much of the hardware, although they aren’t original to the house. The building’s raised paneling had seriously deteriorated over the centuries, but Fackler salvaged enough to replicate it. The one major departure from the structure as it stood in Bradford was adding a large wing in back for a great room.

Today the home’s interior is traditional colonial, with lighting and color schemes displaying an array of prized antique furnishings to their fullest advantage. White plaster covers the walls and ceilings, complemented by woodwork mainly in



Rex Fackler reproduced the built-in corner cupboard in the dining room based on a period design. It holds part of Charlotte's collection of Flow Blue and Imari china. The c. 1830 portrait at left is of ancestor Jacob Avery Geer, and the framed document below it bears the 1836 signature of Nathaniel B. Geer and others, certifying that Jacob was deemed qualified to teach school in Ledyard, Connecticut.

The fireboard covering the dining room fireplace displays the Geer family crest, painted by Charlotte's artist daughter, Amy Morey. The Queen Anne-style chairs are Centennial pieces. A c. 1720 brass candlestick illuminates 19th-Century Flow Blue plates in the "Manila" pattern. Lemon and orange slices serve as decorations for the Fraser fir from the Geer Tree Farm.





Reproduction 18th-Century heart-and-crown banister-back chairs and tavern table, all from the Seraph in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, grace the saltbox's kitchen. Charlotte keeps the shelving open as it would have been in an early tavern. Her collections of redware and treen are a mix of original and reproduction pieces. The bottles, however, all date to the 18th Century, including the case gin bottle on the left side of the top shelf. The c. 1880 chestnut bottle on the lowest shelf, right, bears its original label, "Laudanum, William S. Tyler, Druggist and Apothecary, 22 Water Street, Norwich, Connecticut."

muted tones of gray and taupe. Early red is the boldest hue. Floors are either dark natural tones or painted in shades of gray or sand.

"Rex has done the major percentage of all the work at the house," Charlotte said. "He's incredibly talented. He's a perfectionist, for sure. But it was wonderful to work with him, and we're still good friends."

During the reconstruction, one day in particular stands out for Charlotte.

"I remember I'd be at work and couldn't wait to come home and see the progress," she said. "One day I came home and I saw something up on the roof. The Hopkinton people

had just completed work on the frame and roof of the house and I could see that they'd nailed a little cedar tree to the peak. It turns out this was an early New England tradition to bless the house and bring it good luck. It was wonderful that they'd kept up that tradition of the little tree and its blessing with this house."

FURNISHING FOR THE PERIOD

Not only did Charlotte sell her former house, she also sold all her furniture to pay for rebuilding her new home. "I sold it all—everything—so I had only this house," she said.

"And that's when it got fun, starting one piece at a time to furnish my

new home. In the process, I absolutely fell in love with antiques."

She became so enthralled she launched a business called Geer Early American Antiques, which she operated for several years. It enabled her to upgrade the quality of her furnishings. "I slowly began to buy antiques and I found myself turning pieces over, getting earlier and earlier pieces to the point where the house is almost entirely 18th-Century antiques," she said. "There are some reproductions, which you need if you want to have a sturdy chair or a comfortable bed for guests."

Walking from room to room, you are struck not only by the age of

the furnishings but also by their pristine condition, the sign of a knowledgeable collector with a good eye. Some of the earliest pieces include a Pilgrim-era English armoire and chest, both in oak, as well as a circa 1700 English recessed-panel blanket chest on which actor Daniel Day-Lewis sat in a scene from the movie *The Crucible*, set in early New England.

Other outstanding 18th-Century furnishings include a gate-leg table, Connecticut single-drawer blanket chest, tavern tables, and several banister-back chairs. Among the smaller items from the period are document boxes and collections of pewter, redware, treen, and rare bottles.

Charlotte treasures heirlooms associated with Geer ancestors. She has two fan-back Windsor chairs made by John Wheeler Geer (1753-1828), a cabinetmaker and wood-

turner who worked in Preston and Griswold. Several ancestors held civic positions in the area, so Charlotte has early-19th-Century documents bearing the signatures of John Gere, Nathan Geer, John Geere, John G. Geer, Nathaniel B. Geer, plus a circa 1830 portrait of schoolteacher Jacob Avery Geer. The variations in spelling likely resulted because orphans George and Thomas never learned to sign their names, so those who wrote their names for them spelled Geer to suit themselves.

Ultimately, Charlotte's years of effort speak for themselves. She explained, "I have friends who have some very early homes and when they come here, they say, 'Charlotte, when we're in your home we really feel like we're in the 18th Century.' The house definitely has that feeling. There's just something about it."

'A REALLY GOOD JOB'

During the tough period after Charlotte purchased the old building but before it had been reconstructed, her father openly questioned her judgment. "He thought it was going to be an overwhelming task for me," she recalled. "He wasn't pleased. Then, around the time we got the frame up, he and a friend came by and his friend was highly complimentary of the project and said I was doing a good thing by saving the old building. That was the turning point. When it was finished, my father said to me, 'Charlotte, you did a really good job with this house.' And that has meant so much to me."

From her home, Charlotte looks out over fields dotted with row after row of evergreen trees in varying stages of growth. The land became Geer's Tree Farm when her father and other family members planted the first trees thirty-five years ago, and for the past twenty years it has been a thriving business venture, especially during the holidays.

"The Christmas tree farm is so much fun," Charlotte said. "There's such a tradition surrounding getting a tree, and we see certain families year after year. It's very busy here that time of year. It just gives you a great feeling to be around it."

One of her brothers, Thomas, operates Geer Sand & Gravel close to the farm. Brother Richard runs the tree farm with his son, Bowman, who has his own one-year-old son, Cole. The family hopes Cole will be the twelfth generation in line for the farm. Both brothers and Charlotte's sister Holly also live on parcels of the farm.

"It's wonderful to look out in the distance and see this 18th-Century family farm and to be part of it," Charlotte said. "It's one of the few farms in Connecticut still remaining in the founder's name after such a significant number of years. It seems nothing short of a miracle." *

Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

A c. 1850 pine blanket chest stands beside the home's hind-leg staircase. The samplers hanging above the chest are from the early 1800s.





In the eaves of the saltbox, this upstairs bedroom holds family heirlooms. The two fan-back Windsor chairs next to the c. 1810 cherry swing-leg table are attributed to John Wheeler Geer (1753-1828), a cabinetmaker and wood turner who worked in Preston and Griswold, Connecticut. One of the documents hanging above the pine chest designates a local minister's salary and bears the 1809 signatures of John Gere and Nathan Geer, while the other is an 1839 Griswold school district document signed by John Geere and John G. Geer. An unknown artist painted the c. 1880 portrait hanging above a c. 1850 rope bed in its original red paint.



Leaning against the fireplace on the opposite end of the room is an 18th-Century brass bed warmer with chestnut handle. The pine single-drawer blanket chest and dome-top leather document box were made in the 1700s in Connecticut. Charlotte's great-great-grandfather owned the framed lithograph titled "Geer Homestead," which shows the family farm during the mid-1800s.