

Nantucket's 'Greater Light' house holds clues to island's Quaker past

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NANTUCKET, Massachusetts (RNS) It is an old family story that has become part of the island's lore.

In 1929, two bohemian sisters visiting this island about 30 miles off the coast of Cape Cod were driving up the cobblestones of Main Street when a herd of cows cut them off. On a whim, Hanna and Gertrude Monaghan decided to follow them.

After a couple of turns, the cows headed for an old barn behind a row of mansions built by Victorian-era ship captains. Between the horse trough, the hayloft and piles of cow and pig manure, the two sisters from Pennsylvania had a vision.

Where others saw an eyesore, they saw "Greater Light," their soon-to-be dream home, art studio and expression of their Quaker faith.

"I think of these two indomitable women," Joanne Polster, a Nantucket Historical Association "interpreter" said as she waited for visitors at Greater Light at the beginning of the summer season that's expected to bring 40,000 tourists to this once quiet island. "Everybody in town was against them, but they stuck to their principles. They had faith. Greater Light is a monument, a testament to their faith."

Nantucket has numerous historical sites and houses, including an old wooden windmill, a house built in 1686 and a world-class museum dedicated to the whaling industry that sustained this island for decades. But Greater Light is the only site where religion is a master key to local history.

The fact that Greater Light exists at all is a work of faith. The building reopened to visitors in 2011 after renovations by the NHA. The sisters spent years adapting the gray barn, adding a mishmash of gilt pillars, wrought iron balconies, mahogany doors and carved wood church windows. The horse trough became a bed, the

hayloft became a garden balcony, the pigsty became a patio.

And somehow, Greater Light became a physical manifestation of the sisters' faith in God. They took the house's name from Genesis: "And God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also."

It is also a direct reference to the Quaker idea of the "inner light," the interior personal connection between each individual and God. But like everything else in Greater Light, the sisters had their own version of inner light.

"Gertrude and Hanna Monaghan chose to devote their lives to art, as an expression of their faith," wrote Betsy Tyler, a Nantucket historian, in a companion book to the house. "They were Quakers, but of a decidedly different mold from the earlier Quaker population of Nantucket. Rather than rejecting art, they embraced it."

Hanna Monaghan, writing in her memoir 40 years after the purchase of the barn, put it this way: "Something happened in this Quaker household. A virus struck under the pseudonym of ART. How it entered this sanctuary and hit two who came from a long line of Quaker martyrs cannot be explained. Thereafter these two victims lived for nothing but art."

But they needed a place to put it. In Philadelphia, the sisters were unquenchable collectors. They frequented junk yards, demolished buildings, auction houses, and secondhand stores. Hanna Monaghan, the younger by 10 years, would be frequently overcome with the need to own someone else's junk—old windows, pieces of fabric, abandoned statuary.

In her memoir, she recalls the most audacious of their purchases, made before they ever set eyes on Greater Light—two black wrought iron gates that measured 12 feet by 6 feet. When the gates were eventually sent to Nantucket, they fit the opening from the barn to the garden as if custom-made.

"They didn't believe in accidents," Polster said, standing in front of the massive gates, which frame a sunburst pattern, a symbol that echoes Quakerism's inner light. "They believed in divine accidents. While Hanna was fretting about where they would put things, Gertrude was saying God will provide. And he did."

The locals—who numbered about 3,000 in the 1930s—were less accommodating. Many considered the sisters' house a disgrace to the island, and told them so.

But by the time of their deaths—Gertrude in 1962 and Hanna in 1972—the house and sisters were seen as assets, not the least to the local Quaker community. Once the dominant religion on the island, membership had dropped to only a handful of “Friends,” as the Quakers call themselves, at the time of the sisters' arrival. They helped revive meetings at the old Quaker Meeting House, also on Nantucket's list of historical sites.

“Here, (Quakerism) matters,” Polster said. “The house substantiated their faith because it all worked out in the end.”