

Connecticut, American Impressionism, and Weir Farm National Historic Site

By Nicky M. | Arcadia Staff

Nestled in the farmland of Connecticut, the Weir Farm National Historic Site has welcomed visitors since 1990. Home to 60 acres of farmland, the site also celebrates the life of American impressionist painter J. Alden Weir. In his upcoming book, *Weir Farm National Historic Site*, artist Xiomáro details the life of Weir, and the history of the park which bears his name. Read on for a special sneak peek at *Weir Farm National Historic Site*, out now!

Weir Farm National Historic Site has its roots in the conservation and environmental movements of the 1960s. This was the era when the National Park Service was expanding from traditional parks, such as Yellowstone, to include other natural and cultural resources needing protection from rapid commercial development. In the 1970s, subdivisions were threatening the existence of the farm, which had already been reduced to about one-quarter of the original 238 acres that straddled the Connecticut communities of Wilton and Ridgefield. Over time, grassroots efforts resulted in the acquisition of parcels that were set aside for protection. In 1990, Congress established the farm as a national historic site.

Weir Farm thus became Connecticut's first national park, and paved the way for the creation of other units in the state such as the New England National Scenic Trail and Coltsville National Historical Park. The communities in Connecticut have also benefited economically. Federal reports show that visitor spending has made steadily rising contributions to an increase in jobs, labor income, and overall economic output.

So what is the historical significance of Weir Farm? Those roots go back even further in time. In 1877, paintings were realistic, detailed, and highly varnished, with few if any visible brushstrokes. That year, a group of young French painters—mockingly called “impressionists” by a critic—revolted against this academic tradition with visible dabs of bright colors to capture the effects of light and time. Julian Alden Weir (1852–1919) saw these painters’ 1877 exhibit in Paris while he was studying abroad.



The Burlingham house. Reprinted from [Weir Farm National Historic Site](#) by Xiomáro (pg. 12, Arcadia Publishing, 2019).

In 1880, while in Europe, Weir served as a curator and agent to purchase artwork for the collection of Erwin Davis, a wealthy mine owner. That same year, Davis acquired a Connecticut farm, which was conveniently located near the Branchville station with trains going to New York City's Grand Central Terminal. Two years later, Weir bought a painting for himself for \$560. Davis saw the painting, wanted it, and offered to give Weir the 153-acre farm in exchange for the painting plus \$10. This once-in-a-lifetime real estate flip gave rise to the cradle of American Impressionism.

The farm became a summer/autumn retreat from the New York City life of Weir and Anna Dwight Baker, who married in 1883, as did the home in Windham,

Connecticut, owned by Weir's in-laws. During this era in the country's history, Americans were looking to reconnect with nature. The dual national traumas of 1865—the Civil War and the assassination of Pres. Abraham Lincoln—were still fresh in the nation's psyche. Moreover, industrialization and immigration ushered in rapid social, cultural, and political changes. The farm's proximity to the Branchville railroad station gave the young couple commutable access to the countryside without sacrificing Weir's need to be close to New York City to maintain his professional connections, especially with galleries for the sale of his work.

They had three daughters—Caroline ("Caro"), Dorothy, and Cora—all of whom possessed artistic talents. Caro was a book-binder and painter, Dorothy was a painter as well as a writer, and Cora was an avid garden designer. Their mother, Anna, died in 1882 from childbirth-related complications. Anna's sister Ella cared for the children while Weir mourned. In 1883, Weir married Ella. In 1885, Weir had a studio constructed at the farm. By the 1890s, his landscapes reflected the Impressionist style; as a prominent leader in the movement, he co-founded the Ten American Painters in 1898 to advance Impressionism in the United States. By 1915, Weir was on the board of directors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

When Weir died in 1919 at age 67, his wife and three daughters inherited his estate. In 1922, Caro and Cora transferred their rights to the farm to Ella and Dorothy; Dorothy (1890–1947) lived at the farm during the summers to care for her stepmother, Ella. When Ella died in 1930, Dorothy inherited the property, and Cora (1892–1986) gave birth to Charles Burlingham Jr. The following year Cora took possession of the Webb farm portion, and Dorothy married Mahonri Mackintosh Young (1877–1957), a renowned sculptor and a grandson of Brigham Young. A studio for Young was constructed next to Weir’s in 1932 where the Salt Lake City monument *This is the Place* was created. As Burlingham later recounted, Dorothy continued Weir’s legacy as “she was an extraordinary person by any standard and a substantial talent in her own right. She had studied art at her father’s elbow and later attended the National Academy of Design. She painted in oils and watercolors and was a superb print maker.”



Part of the Weir Farm grounds. Reprinted from [Weir Farm National Historic Site](#) by Xiomáro (pg. 25, Arcadia Publishing, 2015).

When the historic structures were finally opened to the public in 2014, the park became whole; visitors who could previously only access the grounds could now enter the house and studios. The big story of this small park contributes to the American experience of transformation and will be commemorated by the striking of a special Weir Farm quarter in 2020 as part of the US Mint’s America the Beautiful series.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then perhaps these approbations from those who have keenly studied Weir suggest that the story of this painter, his art, his farm, and the generations of artists who followed will be communicated to new audiences in a way that far exceeds the words in this book. Thousands of pages of research materials were read, and thousands of photographs were studied—all of which went through a painstaking process of distillation. There is much more to learn about Weir and his farm than can possibly be covered here. Rather, this book is an introduction and a springboard to mining the historical and artistic depths of the subject.

The best experience is to visit Weir Farm National Historic Site to see the home and studio of America’s most beloved Impressionist, Julian Alden Weir, and walk in the footsteps of generations of world-class artists.