

A Memory in Miniature: Freedom as Refuge

Janet French Thomson's Doll House



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Janet French came to Freedom as a teenager, in the 1930s. Her father died when she was young, and she and her mother lived in straightened circumstances in a boarding house in Glendale, Ohio. Their landlady took summer vacations in Freedom, and brought Janet and her mother Willetta a couple of times. They stayed with Maude Lincoln (aka “Auntie Maude”), in what is now Carolyn Clancy’s house.

After WW II, Janet and her husband moved to Houston, where Chilton began teaching. Summers were brutal, so they wanted a cooler, northern retreat when school was out. Janet suggested Freedom. In 1951 they bought the 1851 cape on the corner of Loon Lake and Village Roads from Mary Blinn. The deal was struck over the phone--Chilton had never seen Freedom at the time.

Summers in Freedom offered the Thomsons more than a congenial climate. In the 1950s Freedom was still a real village, a functioning economic center, albeit one struggling to adapt to a changing world.



Thomson House in the 1950s

Rich and poor, natives and flatlanders, young and old, workers and retirees, lived side-by-side. Summer kids from white bread suburbs played with children living in houses clad in tarpaper.

Small businesses and residences commingled easily. “Zoning” was simply an understanding that one should be a good neighbor. For women, status had little to do with where a husband worked, or whether you belonged to the Junior League. There was social stratification, but far less than that of the bedroom communities in which the Thomsons and other summer folk lived most of the year. Janet felt herself “belonging” in Freedom, free of the feelings of alienation and imagined snubs which weighed on her in the upscale suburb of Shaker Hts., Ohio, to which the Thomsons had moved from Houston.

The Thomsons engaged George Nichols to refurbish the house. This soon included erecting a barn to replace the missing original, reduced by fire to nothing more than a cellar hole. George was central casting’s idea of the craggy, taciturn Yankee craftsman. Single-handed, he did framing, finish carpentry, electrical, plumbing, and painting.

After George retired, an equally gifted builder, Spike Mayhew, whom the Thomsons liked and respected, did additional work on the house, including a modern kitchen and an enclosed porch.

The Thomsons also began putting money into other buildings around Freedom. Not with any thought of profit--there would be none--but out of love for the town. Spike, who did much of the restoration work, wrote a touching tribute to their efforts

(copy attached). He erred only in ascribing the initiative to Chilton. In fact, it was Janet who drove the process. She had a gift for spending money on sentimental gestures, as the doll house confirms.

Ironically, it was their success in prettifying the village that ended Janet and Chilton's sojourn in Freedom. As Janet's social anxiety disorder worsened, in her mind the increasingly gentrified Freedom she'd done so much to foster became less and less the refuge from suburban pecking orders and the status-jockeying she found so painful.

Janet and Chilton departed Freedom in the late '70s, never to return. They retreated to a fortress-like house on the edge of Cleveland, where Janet became increasingly reclusive. For the last decades of her life, she rarely went outside.

The doll house was born a few years after Janet left Freedom. She flew an architect to the village to make scale drawings of the house, then hired craftsmen to build the model and reproduce the furnishings, down to miniature copies of the actual furnishings and paintings. Glad Works, whose husband Skrow started the Historical Society's museum, wove tiny rugs, matching those in the original house.

The doll house sat in Janet's "Freedom Room" in Cleveland for several years before being donated to the New Hampshire

Historical Society, from which the family eventually recovered it. Today, through the efforts of Laura Thomson, Janet's daughter-in-law, and Ken Brogren, a master of miniature building, the doll house is fully refurbished and on display at the Freedom Historical Society museum.

Tellingly, Janet's doll house captures the actual house as it was in the early 1950s, and not as it had evolved by the time the model was built. Freedom had changed, but what it had meant to Janet never did: a world where, all too briefly, her demons were at bay, and she was at home.

Though "her" Freedom is long gone, it would please Janet to know her symbolic memorialization of it has come to rest with the Freedom Historical Society. Perhaps it will inspire others to think about what Freedom means to them, since no two people will experience it in exactly the same way, and what it was yesterday will never be what it is today, or what it will become tomorrow.