

May 2024

Alt Homestead Wins Preservation Leadership Award by Preservation Buffalo Niagara

It is time to announce the winners of the 2024 Preservation Awards!

We have twelve awardees this year that span across preservation advocacy, preservation craft, residential restoration, commercial restoration, emerging preservation leaders, lifetime achievement, and more. We will be highlighting each of the awardees over the next few weeks – to entice you to attend our award ceremony on Thursday, May 30th at the Buffalo History Museum. You can get your tickets [here](#).

Preservation Leadership: Alt Homestead in Grand Island, NY

We are excited to announce our “Preservation Leadership” Award which goes to Alt Homestead, led by Nicole Gerber and Dave Reilly. We also must say a huge thank you to [Windkanter Construction](#) for bringing this project home.

From the nomination: The Alt family is one of Grand Island’s first settler farming families on land that was earlier populated by the Haudenosaunee, the Neutral Nation, and the Wenrohronon people. The Alt Farm and Homestead dates to the mid-1800s when the Alt family migrated from Germany. The farm has been an agricultural location since the 1870s. Its agricultural history includes serving as the site of an apple orchard, a cattle farm, a dairy farm, a haying field, and has been farmed for various crops. Philip Alt purchased the property and created a farm that has been passed down through the family to the present day (six generations of the Alt family). The remaining property includes a historic farmhouse, Grand Island Schoolhouse #8, a historic icehouse, a barn built in the 1870s, sheds that at one time belonged to the Grand Island Highway Department, and an original plank construction garden shed.

The land is now protected as the Alt Nature Preserve through the recent establishment of a conservation easement with the WNY Land Conservancy. The property is approximately thirty-six acres in the center of Grand Island and is one of the few remaining farmsteads in the community. The property includes approximately ten acres of forested land that meets the ecological definition of a unique Wet Oak- Hickory Forest Ecosystem. Approximately twenty-three acres is a meadow and home to several NYS-threatened bird species.

Grand Island Schoolhouse #8 is on the Alt Preserve. It is an original one-room school used by Island children in the late 1800s-early 1900s. It was purchased by George H. Alt, Sr. in 1917 for \$188.90 and relocated to the farm. The building became the original Alt Chevrolet – the first Chevrolet dealership on the Niagara Frontier – and was the service garage for Alt Chevrolet. After its use as a service garage and repair shop, the building was used for storage until its restoration in 2022-2023.

The building itself is a “plank house” construction, meaning there was no wood frame skeleton. The renovations, which included new flooring and restoration of the ceiling and beams, were critical for maintaining the integrity of the building. Markings on the planks in the schoolhouse indicate pitsaws (1600s to 1750s), up-and-down mill cuts (1700s to 1860), and circular blades (after 1840).

The schoolhouse was renovated using architectural designs by Kathleen M. Kinan to serve as the Alt Nature Center under the management of the environmental non-profit Citizen Coalition for Wildlife and Environment. All renovation work was completed by Marty Willett and his team at Windkanter Construction. In the process of the rehabilitation work, the writing on the walls that denotes repair jobs and car owners was saved and protected. Earlier chalk writing from the schoolhouse days is also visible on the walls and protected.

Schoolhouse #8 was renovated to return it to its educational roots as a nature center. It now serves as the Alt Nature Center, a space for historical and environmental education; for teaching and training about ecological gardening, native plants, and habitat protection; and to serve as an information center for free public access to the trails on the Alt Nature Preserve. The Center functions to highlight the preservation of Grand Island's farming history and heritage and to educate on the importance of protecting habitat. To enhance the historical quality of the space, the furniture and decorations in the Nature Center are repurposed from antique and thrift stores with a commitment to sustainable reuse.

During the time of the schoolhouse project, Windkanter Construction was also renovating the historic Alt Barn. The Alt Barn was restored as part of the larger effort to preserve the history of the Alt Farm and Homestead. The Alt Barn was built in the late 1800's and at some later date was lifted onto a concrete foundation. It was one of the first structures built on the farmstead.

The Alt Barn was used for dairy cows and meat cattle on the ground level and for storing hay in the loft. Hay was brought in by large bundles (and later in bales) on a wagon, lifted into the loft with the hay grapple hook which ran on a track at the peak (the track and grapple hook in the Alt barn are still intact!). The grapple hook was attached to a rope that ran to a pulley at the top of the barn and then down to an eye hook in the floor. When placed over hay a rope is pulled and the grapple hooks dig into the hay and allow for hoisting into and out of the barn.

The barn restoration efforts included replacing the external boards and facing on the South, East, and West sides. Corner posts were reinforced, and a foundational corner was poured with concrete, which required lifting the southeast corner of the barn. The original barn boards and beams from the Alt barn were repurposed for the interior of the Alt Nature Center. The west and east original barn boards had Maltese Crosses at the peaks of the barn; these have been built into the wallboards above the entry door and on the bathroom door. The step into the main room is an American Chestnut beam that was also located in the barn.

All these renovations have been funded, to date, by Nicole Alt Gerber, a sixth-generation Alt to live on the homestead. Her commitment, with her husband Dave Reilly, is to preserve the history of the farm while enabling public access and environmental education. The longer-term plan to preserve the history and buildings involves educational signage along nature trails that explains the agricultural history of Grand Island. Alt family photos and farm journals have been saved and are on display in the Alt Nature Center to explain farm life in Western New York in the early 1900s.

With a commitment to education and preservation, in 2023 the Alt Farm was featured in Grand Island's History Day as a tour site. Throughout the planning and renovation phases of the barn and schoolhouse, the Grand Island Historic Preservation Advisory Board has been engaged in the process as well. This includes tours of the site before, during, and after renovations, and a presentation of the history of the Alt Farm to Grand Island Historic Preservation Advisory Board members that explains the intent of supporting the legacy of the Alt family regarding the homestead and farm through the Nature Center and Nature Preserve. The Grand Island Historic Preservation Advisory Board has

included the Alt Farm in its list of historic home designations. Support from the Board has also been expressed through a letter from Chair June Crawford, who states “enthusiastic support for both projects. The CCWE is one of the most exciting and beneficial historic, cultural, and natural developments on our island.”

The Alt Nature Preserve has recently served as a location for Erie Community College students to research types of bluebird boxes and their success rate for attracting bluebirds, tree swallows, and other species of interest. Students presented their work and their recommendations for native plants to support wildlife at the Alt Nature Center. Elementary school classes have visited for experiential learning about plants, animals, and habitats. The WNY Native Plant Collaborative held its monthly meeting in the Alt Nature Center at the end of June 2023. The Alt Farm is an annual site in the Grand Island Garden Walk, at which people from across WNY can walk and see the native plant gardens and historical buildings. The University at Buffalo’s Native American Studies Program has been invited to use the property and Alt Nature Center for their courses and research. And Niagara University’s environmental student organization, NU CARES, has been invited to participate in internships and hold meetings on-site. The center will be open, free of charge, to any environmental organization whose mission is consistent with protecting and preserving ecological integrity and sustainability.

This is all possible because of the combined restoration vision and efforts of Kathleen M. Kinan, architect; Marty Willett and Windkanter Construction, Citizen Coalition for Wildlife and Environment, and Nicole Alt Gerber and family.

In addition to the farmstead and buildings being an important piece of Grand Island’s farming history, the Alt family also contributed to the development and establishment of Island and regional organizations, projects, and businesses.

- George Alt Sr. is listed in the Erie County book, “*Our County and Its People*” (Truman C. White) which notes the family history, starting with the arrival and work of Philip Alt, and lists the accomplishments of George Alt Sr.
- Both George Alt Sr. and George Alt Jr. were active in Grand Island town politics, were members of various boards and local organizations, and were founding members of the Grand Island Farmers Alliance and Grand Island Fire Company
- Along with farming, the Alt family operated a general store and established Alt Chevrolet

The goal is to create, preserve, and share the Alt farm and land with the community so that people can learn about history and nature, view the original farmstead buildings and rehabilitated schoolhouse, and enjoy the outdoors with the gardens and trails. The public has already been able to experience the Alt farm through numerous ways:

- Alt Farm has been in the Grand Island Garden Walk since 2016
- Alt Farmstead is in the Grand Island Historical Society’s “*Historic Grand Island: Self-Guided Tour*”
- Alt Farmstead was featured in the Grand Island Historic Preservation Advisory Board’s Annual History Day in 2023
- Alt Preserve: [The Land Conservancy Places Conservation Easement on Grand Island’s Alt Preserve – Buffalo Rising](#)
- Feature of the Alt Preserve: [Grand Island’s Alt Preserve hosts birds, butterflies, and wildlife | Wild Wny | buffalospree.com](#)
- The Alt Nature Center has hosted several educational events in 2023, including the December Wildlife Winter Wonderland event: [Most Buffalo: ‘Wildlife Winter Wonderland’](#)

