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The Eisenhowers at Twilight: A Visit to the Eisenhower Farm, 1967

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Abstract

Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower relished life in Gettysburg. As he often remarked to friends, in retirement Ike sought to secure a piece of property that he could leave in better shape than he found it. The purchase in November 1950 of the 189-acre Redding Farm on the Millertown Road, only a short distance from Confederate Avenue, was the outcome. Of course the Eisenhowers could have purchased a sizable farm in any number of locations. A Gettysburg address was predicated on their warm memories of a six-month sojourn in the borough in 1918 and recognition that Gettysburg was a convenient location for access to major cities. Lobbying by the Eisenhowers' friends George and Mary Allen, who owned an 88-acre farm four miles south of the square in Gettysburg, along the Emmitsburg Road, also influenced the Eisenhowers' pursuit of a Gettysburg property. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Eisenhower, Dwight D. Eisenhower, President Eisenhower, Eisenhower Farm, Mamie Eisenhower

The Eisenhowers at Twilight: A Visit to the Eisenhower Farm, 1967

Edited by Michael J. Birkner

INTRODUCTION

Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower relished life in Gettysburg. As he often remarked to friends, in retirement Ike sought to secure a piece of property that he could leave in better shape than he found it. The purchase in November 1950 of the 189-acre Redding Farm on the Millertown Road, only a short distance from Confederate Avenue, was the outcome. Of course the Eisenhowers could have purchased a sizable farm in any number of locations. A Gettysburg address was predicated on their warm memories of a six-month sojourn in the borough in 1918 and recognition that Gettysburg was a convenient location for access to major cities. Lobbying by the Eisenhowers' friends George and Mary Allen, who owned an 88-acre farm four miles south of the square in Gettysburg, along the Emmitsburg Road, also influenced the Eisenhowers' pursuit of a Gettysburg property.¹

At the time that the Eisenhowers bought the Redding farm, they had been living in New York City in housing provided by Columbia University—this following two years in Washington where Ike served as Army Chief of Staff. Never completely comfortable as a city-dweller, Ike looked forward to living in a rural setting where his main use of firearms might be to blast away at marauding crows or groundhogs whenever he felt like it. He also had a long-standing desire to retire in a small-college environment. Gettysburg clearly fit the bill on all counts.

The farm and buildings the Eisenhowers purchased needed a substantial overhaul to satisfy the General, then serving as President of Columbia University in New York—and soon to become 34th President of the United States. It took roughly four years to rebuild the farm house to the Eisenhowers' specifications. During the White House years, it would serve primarily as a weekend and holiday retreat from the pressures of Washington. In the Fall of 1955, however, the farm morphed into something larger—an



Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall chats with the Eisenhowers at their farm in November 1967, when the Eisenhowers formally conveyed their property to the federal government as a national historic site.

alternative White House, as Ike's place of convalescence following a serious heart attack he suffered while vacationing in Denver, Colorado. For several months the farm (and to a lesser extent, presidential offices in town and on the Gettysburg College campus) proved the focal point for affairs of state, with frequent visits from administration officials, Congressional leaders, and other Washington political notables. Once Ike was feeling fit again, the Gettysburg farm returned to its role as a family retreat.²

In January 1961, at the close of the Eisenhowers' eight years in the White House, they took up full-time residence in Gettysburg, making it their main retirement home. As a rule they spent roughly eight months each year in Gettysburg, packing up after Christmas and taking the train to Palm Desert, California, where they were based during the cold-weather months.³

In Gettysburg during his retirement years Dwight Eisenhower led a rich and varied life, which has been much commented on but never comprehensively accounted for. It was, at bottom, a working life. Based at what is today the Eisenhower Admissions building on the Gettysburg College campus, Ike produced three volumes of memoirs, two of them about his presidency, the third covering other aspects of his life, including his growing up years in Abilene, Kansas. From his college office, in what had been the home of presidents Walter C. Langsam and Willard S. Paul, respectively, Eisenhower played the role of senior statesman.⁴ He was often consulted about affairs of state by Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, notably about difficult choices to be made in Cuba and Vietnam, respectively. As archival



A view of the west wing of the Eisenhower House.
The site has been open to the public since 1980.
Courtesy of the Eisenhower National Historic Site.

materials and recent biographies make clear, Eisenhower was not reluctant to express his candid views to each of his successors in the White House.⁵

During the Gettysburg years, Ike was active in Republican Party affairs and met frequently with GOP leaders ranging from his former Vice President, Richard M. Nixon and 1964 presidential nominee Barry Goldwater, on down through Adams County political activists. At the farm during his presidency and later, he hosted a number of foreign leaders and former military associates from World War II, including one rather exasperating visit to Gettysburg by British General Bernard Montgomery.⁶ The Eisenhower complex was a beehive of activity, with many family gatherings, and evenings spent with such close friends as the Arthur and Ann Nevins and Henry and Peg Scharf. In such spare time as he had, Ike spent many hours on the minutiae of running a farm, breeding angus cattle that earned numerous honors. He played golf regularly at area courses, delivered many formal and impromptu speeches on public affairs, and participated in the governance of Gettysburg College as a trustee. He also read widely,

often in history, and enjoyed quiet evenings with Mamie playing scrabble and watching favorite programs on television. In his “Florida Room,” a comfortable glassed in porch, Ike spent many hours at the easel producing a remarkable number of original paintings, most of which he gave as gifts to friends and associates. During the retirement years, Ike also launched a major editorial project relating to his public papers. As he noted in a letter to a U.S. Senator whose invitation to speak to a publishers’ convention he declined because of the demands on his time, his retirement was “proving more hectic than ‘active duty.’”⁷

By his mid-seventies, however, Eisenhower was increasingly beset by heart problems. He began quite deliberately to wind down his affairs, including his cattle operation.⁸ He also planned for the future. Cognizant of his historical importance and grateful to his country for the free education at West Point that launched his storied career, Eisenhower decided to will his home and property to the National Park Service. When he spoke of this plan to President Lyndon B. Johnson, all the necessary steps by the federal authorities were taken to make this possible. For his part, Eisenhower worked closely with local Gettysburg attorney Charles Wolf to refine the terms of the deed of gift.⁹

When all this work had been finalized, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall was dispatched to Gettysburg at President Johnson’s behest, to observe the presentation of the deed. The only onlookers besides Mamie Eisenhower and members of the Eisenhower staff were a couple of reporters and Horace Busby, a relatively junior member of the Johnson White House team.¹⁰ Busby’s letter to the president describing what took place is a poignant document, and it is printed in full below. It captures the scene on a wind-blown post-Thanksgiving day, near the close of the president’s active life. Busby not only provides a distinctive window into a significant episode in the Eisenhower story, he demonstrates empathy for Ike and Mamie as they looked beyond their life together to their prospective resting place in Abilene, Kansas—and their place in history.

November 29, 1967

Memorandum for the President ¹¹

[From Horace Busby]

Re: Trip to Gettysburg

I thank you for the mission on Monday to Gettysburg. Unexpectedly, it produced a memory to last a lifetime. You and Mrs. Johnson both will, I am sure, be interested.

Our helicopter landed at the Eisenhower farm in mid-afternoon. While the sun was shining, the wind was biting and the General had been asked to remain inside. The state of his health is all too obvious and the concern of his staff for his well being is not misplaced. He emerged, anyway, to greet Secretary [Stewart] Udall and to inquire if I were the son or grandson of his West Point classmate named “Busby.” We went with him to the Eisenhowers’ lovely glassed porch retreat where the two of them had, as Mrs. Eisenhower explained, been “observing Quiet Hour” – she, playing solitaire and watching television; he, painting with his oils.

Our conversation was cordial and simple, no ceremonies, no signing, no

onlookers. The calm, I soon learned, was deceptive. For both of them, it was an emotional moment, most especially for Mrs. Eisenhower. I felt uneasy, as though Secretary Udall and I were men from the bank foreclosing on the Farm. The General conversed with Udall, talking most of his friend, Alton Jones, who did make a notable contribution to purchasing the lands adjacent to the Farm (from \$688 to \$935 an acre) to prevent promotional development. Jones had willed the land he owned to the Government and, obviously, was responsible for the General wanting to do the same.¹²

Mrs. Eisenhower talked mostly with me and mostly about the meaning of the Farm for her. Repeatedly, her eyes welled with tears as she talked. She had not, as the General said, wanted to sign the deed. Her explanation to me: “After 51 years of doing it, I thought I was through, but now I am back in a Government house again.” Her emotions of the afternoon, however, ran more deeply; it was very clear to me that heavy on her heart and mind was the question whether, after they departed the following day for California, they would ever return together.

Mrs. Eisenhower associates the porch on which we were seated with the General’s recovery from his illnesses while President. After his heart attack, she had called the architect from Denver and arranged to have the porch enclosed so there would be a sunny and cheerful place for recuperation on the first floor. Later, after his second illness, the General had again spent most of his recuperation at the Gettysburg Farm. “My son tells me,” she said, “the Farm and the porch have lengthened Ike’s life twice already”—and, she added very softly, “I don’t suppose you could ask for more.” On the trip westward, by train, she and the General have planned to visit Abilene to see the site where they are to be buried at the chapel which has been built at the Library. She told of this with emotion again and recounted in some detail how, three years ago, she had removed the body of their first son from the original grave for reburial in the plot at Abilene, “so we can all be together again.” She also said that when the General was a first lieutenant, he told her, “Mamie, I don’t know where or when I’ll die, but I want you to promise me that wherever you bury me, it won’t be Arlington Cemetery.”¹³

After awhile, all the things she had to say to someone were said, so she quieted and for awhile longer we listened to the General recount with extraordinary affection various stories about his friend, “Pete” Jones. Then there were photographs, Secretary Udall took the deed, we toured the very handsome rooms of the house and that was all. As we left, the General decided to walk us to the helicopter, even without his coat and hat.

After I sensed the situation and their personal feelings, I told the General and Mrs. Eisenhower of your call and of the personal interest you had expressed in the fine thing they were doing, knowing that someday you and Mrs. Johnson might face the same decision. Your personal thoughtfulness had meaning for them both, and the General commented about how considerate you were of them, observing rather apologetically that, “The President always wants us to use his 707 to make trips like this to Palm Springs, but she”—gesturing towards Mrs. Eisenhower—“says no, we are going to stick to the train.” Mrs. Eisenhower laughed and said, “I have had my time on that; just let me ride the train.”

As I said, it was a quiet but unforgettable moment. I appreciate the opportunity to have gone.

W *M* *J*
HORACE BUSBY

EXECUTIVE

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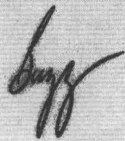
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Endnotes

¹ Helpful background on the purchase of the Redding Farm is supplied in Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co, 1967), pp. 355-358. For the details, however, one needs to consult Edward C. Bearss, "Eisenhower National Historic Site: Historic Resource Study and Historical Base Map, Eisenhower Farm, 1763-1967," bound typescript produced for the National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior, copy in research collections of the Eisenhower National Historical Site, Gettysburg, Pa. The deed was formally transferred to the Eisenhowers in January 1951. Mary Allen's relations with Mamie Eisenhower during World War II led to the friendship that developed between Ike and Mary's husband George (1896-1973), a Washington lawyer and confidant of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman. A natural comic, George Allen made Ike laugh, either with stories he told or his antics, and he gradually became one of the president's more intimate friends, as biographer Stephen E. Ambrose has noted. See *Eisenhower: Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890-1952* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 477. There is no substantial study of Allen, but a good starting point for understanding his character and Washington connections is Ronald W. May, "George Allen: Presidential Crony," *Washington Post*, March 15, 1959, p. 3. Allen's amusing memoir, *Presidents Who Have Known Me* (2nd edition; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), is noticeably reticent about his personal relationship with the 34th president. On Mary Allen's friendship with Mamie, there are brief mentions in Susan Eisenhower, *Mrs. Ike* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), pp. 187, 221, 257, 330; and Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Mamie Doud Eisenhower: The General's First Lady* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), p. 109.

² The best accounts of the farm's operations can be found in oral histories, notably those conducted with General Arthur Nevins, who managed the farm for many years. See, for example, Nevins interviewed by Ed Edwin for the Columbia University Oral History Project, April 23, 1970; and the transcript of his interview by Edward C. Bearss for the National Park Service, May 21, 1973, copy in the archives of the Eisenhower National Historic Site. Nevins's memoir, *Gettysburg's Five-Star Farmer* (New York: Carlton Press, 1977), is valuable for information and anecdotes available nowhere else. The editors of the Eisenhower Papers, Louis Galambos and Daun Van Ee, chose and interpreted numerous documents relating to the farm's operations in volumes 15-21 of their invaluable documentation of the 34th president's activities and correspondence.

³ On the annual train ride to California and life there, see, among other sources, Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower the President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 647; and Robert J. Donovan, *Confidential Secretary: Ann Whitman's 20 Years with Eisenhower and Rockefeller* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), pp. 161-162.

⁴ Gettysburg College President Willard S. Paul served under Eisenhower in Europe and later in the Eisenhower Administration. He owed his new job to President Eisenhower's recommendation in 1956 to the Gettysburg College Board of Trustees. For good accounts of the process that produced the memoirs, see John S.D. Eisenhower interview by Carol Hegeman, January 26, 1984, transcript at the archives, Eisenhower National Historical Site; William B. Ewald, *Eisenhower the President: Crucial Days, 1951-1960* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), pp. 5-7; and Michael J. Birkner interview with Ewald, October 7, 2007, notes in Birkner's possession.

⁵ Eisenhower's complicated relations with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson have been suggestively limned in Ambrose, *Eisenhower the President*, chapters 28 and 29; but the full story remains to be told. For a valuable case study, see Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy About Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History* 79 (September 1992): 568-587.

⁶ Among other sources, *ibid.*; Nevins, *Five-Star Farmer*, pp. 130-150; Nevins oral history, COHP, pp. 31-86; Jerold S. Wikoff, "Eisenhower at Gettysburg," *Gettysburg Alumni Magazine* 78 (January 1988): 198-22; Anna Jane Moyer, "Eisenhower at Gettysburg," in *To Awaken Fond Memory*:

Moments in the History of Gettysburg College (Gettysburg, Pa: Gettysburg College, 2007), pp. 85-90; and Michael J. Birkner, "Eisenhower of Gettysburg," lecture to the Winston Churchill Society, September 24, 1999, copy in author's position. Eisenhower's correspondence with Willard S. Paul may be followed in the post-presidential files of DDE in the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas, and also in the papers of the Eisenhower Society, Musselman Library Archives, Gettysburg College. On the Montgomery visit in 1957 and the waves it caused, see Ambrose, *Eisenhower the President*, p. 392; and Glenn LaFantasie, "Monty and Ike at Gettysburg," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 8 (Autumn 1995): 67-73.

⁷ Ambrose, *Eisenhower the President*, p. 669; Nevins, *Five-Star Farmer*, p. 140. Eisenhower's remark about how busy he was can be found in a letter he sent to U.S. Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, April 20, 1963, in Cooper's unprocessed papers at the University of Kentucky Special Collections. A useful compendium of Adams County citizens' personal testimonies about the Eisenhowers in retirement can be found in T.W. Burger, ed., *A Town and its President* (Gettysburg: Times and News Publishing Co., 1988).

⁸ See Nevins, *Five Star Farmer*, p. 140.

⁹ Charles Wolf shared his Eisenhower stories in many venues, including presentations sponsored by the Dwight D. Eisenhower Society which he headed for many years and to Eisenhower Teacher workshops in Gettysburg in the late 1990s. Wolf's most striking assertion, backed by documentary evidence, has Eisenhower insisting that his deed of gift to the National Park Service must take effect within six months of his death, thereby requiring his widow Mamie to find other accommodations. Mrs. Eisenhower was forced to leave the farm in the latter part of 1969, moving into a Washington, D.C. apartment. She was never happy with that arrangement. Subsequently, the necessary contacts were made to permit her to return to the Gettysburg Farm on a life estate. She remained based there until her death in 1979, whereupon the farm was prepared for its current role as a tourist and education site.

¹⁰ For an account of the deed transfer, see William M. Blair, "Eisenhowers Donate Home to Nation," *New York Times*, November 30, 1967, pp. 1, 36. It is not clear from Blair's article whether he personally witnessed the event. Neither of Mamie Eisenhower's leading biographers—Marilyn Irvin Holt and Susan Eisenhower—mentions her temporary eviction from the farm.

Stewart Udall (b. 1920), an Arizona native, served as U.S. representative from Arizona for three terms (1955-1961), then as Secretary of the Interior under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson from 1961-1969. An ardent environmentalist, he returned to Arizona after his public service concluded and as recently as 2005 was actively practicing law in Phoenix.

Horace Busby (1924-2000), author of the memo published here, was an aide for Senator Lyndon Johnson, and later ran a management consulting firm in Austin, Texas, prior to joining the Johnson Administration as a White House Special Assistant from 1963-1965. He apparently took on the assignment of visiting the Eisenhowers to witness the deed transfer in a private capacity, at the instigation of the president.

¹¹ The original of Busby's memo of November 29, 1967 to President Johnson, can be found in White House Famous Names Series, Box 2, LBJ Library, Austin, Texas. My thanks go to LBJ Library archivist Barbara Cline for re-connecting me with this document.

¹² Alton Jones was a New York City oil executive and one of Ike's most devoted admirers as well as a boon companion at golf and various social outings. (Ambrose, *Eisenhower the President*, pp. 28, 198, 366.) In mid 1954 General Nevins began to purchase in his own name tracts of land surrounding the original Redding Farm property to ensure privacy for the president. These properties were paid for by Jones and later transferred into the latter's name. See, on this, Louis Galambos and Daun Van Ee, eds., *The Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower; The Presidency: The Middle Way* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), vol. 16, p. 561; Arthur Nevins interview by Edwin Bearss, transcript p. 13; and Nevins, *Gettysburg's Five-Star Farmer*, pp. 109-110, 117. Jones joined a partnership with Eisenhower and George Allen that jointly oversaw

farm operations for several years. Jones deeded his own property surrounding the Eisenhower Farm to the U.S. government prior to his death in a plane crash in 1962, with the proviso that the Eisenhower could make use of his land during his own lifetime. *Gettysburg's Five-Star Farmer*, pp. 131, 135-137.

¹³ The Eisenhowers were laid to rest in Abilene in the small chapel on the site of the Eisenhower Presidential complex in Abilene, next to their young son Ikky, and only a few yards from the home where Ike spent his youth.