



# Walnut Acres Foundation News

July/August 2020

## Our Place in History

### *Setting Sights on the National Historic Registry*

**O**ur team has been dedicated to gathering and organizing our history. In our ongoing quest to develop the **Keene Center at Walnut Acres**. We knew that to properly design the core values and purpose of our center, we needed to examine the roots of Walnut Acres. In this process, the stacks of papers, cartons of photographs, and collections of newspaper clippings are becoming less daunting as they evolve to cataloged archives.

Last winter, Nate Anderson, son of project leader Ruth Keene Anderson and grandson of Paul Keene, suggested we get serious about applying to the National Historic Registry to formally establish our place in our nation's history.

Nate reminisced, "Mom loved the idea of the historic registry ever since the neighboring farm made the list. It occurred to me that achieving this status would be an incredible step toward preserving the farm, buildings, property, and legacy of Paul and Betty Keene and Walnut Acres. I knew this might also lead to some terrific preservation funding opportunities."

The *National Register of Historic Places* is just that. The official list of the nation's historic places worthy of preservation. Authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Park Service's registry is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America's historic and archeological resources.

We had immediate support from our senior students at Bucknell University, who were focused on our program for their capstone project in an Environmental Community Projects course taught by

Professor Amanda Wooden. They began researching the 'hows' and identifying the steps required to launch the journey in earnest.

That's when Nate, along with his siblings Chris Anderson and Malina Bowen, forged ahead with drafting the application. The process begins with applying to the State of Pennsylvania, who reviews and provides feedback to help the applicant determine what historic designation best suits. They then help prepare the national application for presentation to their board for review. The final stage takes the application to the National Park Service to determine the listing status. The full process can take up to a year.



*Betty & Paul Keene, circa 1946*

Chris commented, "Working on the application has been really interesting and brought back so many treasured memories.

The process gave me the opportunity to share stories with my daughter Asha who helped organize the many photographs required. Asha had only met Paul when she was an infant, so her involvement made this a really

special four-generation effort. It also gave me a great opportunity to reconnect with my Aunt Jocelyn who contributed greatly to our application's accuracy and details. Memories of playing hide and seek in the Walnut Acres warehouse, sliding down the cold room chutes, waiting to pick the sweet corn until the water was boiling, harvesting acres of tomatoes, and even

*"Paul Keene did not set out or intend to be one of the most successful and renowned organic farming pioneers in the country, but that is our history."*

my first job picking rocks from the fields came flooding back, and were fun to share.”

Chris continued, “I am very excited about the work the Foundation is undertaking to preserve the farm and my grandfather’s legacy. It is amazing to think



that a math professor could become an agricultural pioneer who traveled to India, walked with Gandhi, inspired others with his philosophical writings, built a thriving employee owned business, invested in the Penns Creek community, and celebrated music and

the arts. To me he was Grandpa, singing while he drove his tractor or laughing while we played in his house - but he was so much more!”

Malina added, “Through this process I learned the detailed history that was a natural part of my life, yet

so much of it was lost on me as a child. Walking the farm and buildings today with my children brings great wonder and excitement while they learn about their heritage. The memories and stories are powerful, and I am so happy the joys live on in the next generation.” Malina smiled, “I wish they could grab a warm spoon of fresh peanut butter or find their favorite “yummy” (my code name for our 12-Grain Cereal) in the shop to ship aisle, as I did so many times as a child, to get the full experience of the food that raised us all.”

We are optimistic about our prospects for the National Historic Registry. The process to assemble the required data into our 325-page application has been intense but rewarding, and we are pleased to be sharing some of that with you here. Our ‘period of significance’ for the application spans 1946 to 2000 – the years that Walnut Acres Organic Farm was in operation.

### ***We Hope You Enjoy Our Story!***

**W**alnut Acres Farm is one of America’s original organic farms and is associated with the birth and growth of organic agriculture in the United States. Not only has Walnut Acres been farmed organically and continuously since 1946, but it was among the first sellers of organically produced foods in the nation. In its prime, the business grew to a \$10 million organic foods company, wholesaling products to health food stores nationally and directly to customers worldwide via a mail-order catalog.

First and foremost, Walnut Acres Organic Farm was a home and way of life for the Keene family. Paul Keene did not set out or intend to be one of the most successful and renowned organic farming pioneers in the country, but that is our history.

Born in Lititz, Pennsylvania, Paul Keene earned his undergraduate degree at Lebanon Valley College and went on to earn a Master’s degree in mathematics from Yale University. Paul taught mathematics at Drew University for a few years before taking a teaching position at the Woodstock School in northern India. His time in India, as the country surged toward independence, had a profound impact on Paul’s life. In addition to meeting and marrying his



*Betty & Paul in India*

wife Betty Morgan, Paul met Mahatma Gandhi, who impressed upon him the importance of living simply and in harmony with nature as well as the inherent good within every person. While there, Paul was also introduced to the teachings of Sir Albert Howard, widely credited with creating the first research showing the benefits of sustainable agriculture.

Upon their return to the United States, Paul and Betty attended the Kimberton Farm School located outside Philadelphia where they learned the craft of farming. So began our story. In 1946, with little to his name, Paul established Walnut Acres Farm.



*The old log springhouse, home to the original settlers, served first as the family’s refrigerator, and eventually as Paul’s writing studio*

Paul and Betty were drawn to the property because of the many Black Walnut trees that bordered it – a Pennsylvania Dutch sign of fertile soil. They hoped to build a simple agrarian life for their young family raising varied crops and livestock. Walnut Acres grew organically and through “logical extensions” at every turn, with whatever resource was at hand. In the early days, Paul grew small grains and sold them through the mail. Customers requested that these be ground into flour, so he purchased a hand mill and later stone mills. The waste from the milling operation was used as feed for chickens which produced eggs that were then sold through the mail in returnable metal containers (if you can believe it)! With more chickens came the expansion of the canning operation and the launching of a line of soups and stews, including the customer favorite Chicken Rice Soup. Finally, these chickens and later cattle produced rich fertilizer that went back into the fields where the grains came from in the first place, completing the life cycle.



The original logical extension was to use the Keene’s plentiful apple crop to create apple butter in a large copper kettle (*photo, left*) set over an open fire. They affectionately branded it “Apple Essence” and sold quart jars for \$1. Clementine Paddleford, the food editor for the New York Herald Tribune and

Gourmet magazine came upon a jar and [wrote about it in her column](#). Soon the Keenes were inundated with requests for their first product. Those first orders led to customers requesting all manner of farm-fresh products and the business launched.

Organic agriculture has grown from a small segment of the food production economy into a multi-billion-dollar business in large part because of pioneers like Paul Keene and Walnut Acres Organic Farm.

**The history of Walnut Acres is rich with fond memories, stories from the community about Paul and Betty, and the essence it all left behind. But it is also rich with milestones of growth and noteworthy accomplishments, some of which are shared for you here.**

## Early Days

Paul and Betty Keene purchased Walnut Acres in 1946. From this 100-acre farm with its dilapidated buildings, their secondhand car, and a team of horses they begin their journey and founded America’s Original Organic Farm. Later that year, their first tiny advertisement for organic grains appeared in Organic Gardening magazine.

**1947** – Clementine Paddleford [writes in the New York Herald Tribune and Gourmet magazine](#) singing the praises of their first product Apple Essence. The orders started to flood into the farm.

**1949** – The original brooder house was repurposed into Walnut Acres’ first small milling operation equipped with a hand mill and later served as Paul’s office after 1965.

## 1950’s

Paul became a vocal leader in the natural and organic foods industry and his work inspired many other farmers to convert their operations to organic production.

**1953** – The hog house was converted to a facility for small manufacturing, product packaging, shipping,

and additional business operations, and in 1964 converted to house the ammonia compressor for a freezer built next door.

**1954** – Paul worked to form the Pennsylvania chapter of Natural Food Associates, the first organization that connected organic food producers directly with consumers.

**1958** – The business outgrew the hog house leading Paul to renovate the adjacent forebay barn to house the entire business. The draft horses were replaced by a Ford 9N tractor (though Paul often mused that the horses were much better companions). The barn’s overhang was enclosed to house the first large grain mills. A small reception area for a store was created in the barn’s machinery bay and rows of shelves were installed within the old cow and horse pen area to act as both retail shelving as well as stock for the growing mail-order business while specialized large



refrigerated bins were built on the upper barn floor to store grain – an innovation to keep the harvested grains free of pests without the use of chemicals.

**1959** – Paul and Betty Keene created the Walnut Acres Foundation – active to this day and the roots for our leadership team to continue to develop the Keene Center at Walnut Acres. When first formed, the Foundation’s projects included the creation of the Penns Creek Community Center complete with a gymnasium, roller-skating area, community stage, gymnastics center, classrooms, and outdoor baseball fields and recreation areas. In India, the Foundation helped support *Family Village Farm*, a home for orphan children – providing education and healthcare opportunities for some of India’s most vulnerable children.

## 1960’s

Walnut Acres had 20 full-time employees and seven mills which ground grain and milled flour - clean ingredients which at that time went into bakery products, pancake mixes, and cereals.



From 'field to mill to flour to bakery'.....our Whole Wheat Bread was a customer favorite

**1964** – The hog house was once again converted, this time to house the ammonia compressor for a freezer built next door.

**1965** – Walnut Acres adds a new wing attached to the old barn and installed a new mill, refrigerated storage, a cannery, freezer, office support center, and a newly expanded retail store – all the elements the growing business needed to accommodate the over 10,000 customers who were ordering products through the mail at that time.

## 1970’s

Consumers became increasingly interested in organic foods and the business grew rapidly throughout the decade. Local and national community members became increasingly aware of the impact the Keenes were having in the community and business.

**1971** – Susquehanna University awarded Paul its first *Distinguished Citizen Award* for his work in organic agriculture and the community.

**1972** – Walnut Acres expanded again adding a new warehouse, a larger production kitchen, more refrigerated storage, and a new larger retail store and restaurant. The farm now totals 360 organic acres.

**1975** – Paul battled with the FDA to change the standard of identity ingredient requirements for several products including his roasted peanut butter and 100% organic beef hot dogs. These battles validated that whole foods, without additives like hydrogenated oils and nitrate preservatives, were at least equivalent to (and as Paul believed superior to) their conventionally produced items.

**1976** – Paul is awarded an Honorary Doctor of Science degree from Lebanon Valley College.

## 1980’s

Organic foods began to move into the consumer mainstream and demand for Walnut Acres products surpasses \$4 million annually. The vast majority of orders are sent directly to consumer’s homes and delivery routes are established for the company’s first wholesale and health food store sales.

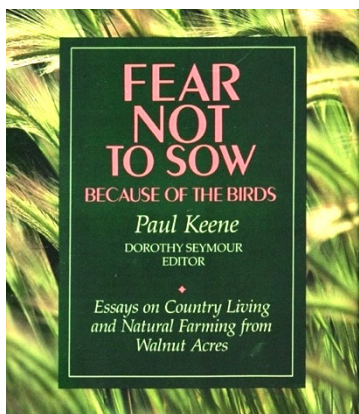
**1982** - Walnut Acres’ final expansion occurred when a large warehouse and loading dock facility was added to the complex. Over 200,000 black and white catalogs are mailed each year.

**1986** – Annual Harvest Festivals began with a celebration of Walnut Acres 40th season. These events grew in size and attendance each year exposing visitors to organic agriculture and the beauty of nature and place.

**1988** – The farmland expanded to organically cultivate over 500 acres growing as many grains and vegetables as possible to meet customer demands. Products from the farm were harvested and processed at the peak of ripeness and shipped around the globe.



**1988** – Paul published *Fear Not to Sow Because of the Birds; Essays on Country Living and Natural Farming from Walnut Acres*. These naturalist essays, extremely popular with readers, were originally published in the catalog.



## 1990's

Demand for organic foods explodes in the United States and sales are climbing across the industry by 20% annually. Walnut Acres sales surpass \$10 million and the products are increasingly available in large stores including Whole Foods Market, Weis Market, Giant, and Wegmans.

**1995** – Walnut Acres mails over 2 million catalogs directly to customers. Also that year, [the article "Pure and Unadulterated" appeared in US News & World Report](#), stating that the company was selling over 700 products – in effect serving as a natural foods store to customers worldwide.

**1998** – Paul was awarded the distinguished *Organic Leadership Award* by the Organic Trade Association, as he "furthered the goals of the organic movement, and demonstrated skill, innovation, personal commitment, leadership and vision to achieve identifiable and lasting changes to protect and promote organic agriculture and trade."

## 2000's

Paul was always passionate about educating consumers and Senators alike about the virtues of healthy living and organic foods. Throughout the development of the National Organic Standards in the nineties, Paul and the Walnut Acres team worked tirelessly with Pennsylvania and US government authorities to create the standards that govern organic food production to this day. This work culminated with the implementation of the National Organic Standards in 2002.

Paul and Betty's legacy and vision live on in the family today. After spending thirty years in the family business overseeing all aspects of the mail order catalog division, their daughter, Ruth Keene Anderson, (pictured right, on the catalog cover with Paul, 1997) currently serves as President of the Walnut Acres Foundation. The Foundation has recently reacquired the buildings and several of the processing machines to assure preservation of this significant property and a pioneering vision for organic farming. The original structures present wonderful opportunities for future exhibits, and educational and cultural events.

By preserving this incredibly beautiful, significant, and accessible farm, we can bring the community together and educate them about organic agriculture and the incredible legacy of Paul Keene and the Walnut Acres Organic Farm. Planning for the **Keene Center at Walnut Acres** is underway! ■

*Here in the quiet countryside, we do wondrous things  
in cooperation with Nature.*

*– Paul Keene*

