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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Community will add a local voice to a larger civic
2 conversation

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####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Retreat Farm, Vermont Public, and Vermont Community
4 Foundation host 'America at 250' series this summer and fall

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 Lawyer, history scholar, and *New Yorker* staff writer Jill
7 Lepore will host a series of local community conversations
8 beginning this month at the Retreat Farm.

9 The agricultural nonprofit and event venue has joined
10 with Vermont Public and Vermont Community Foundation to
11 offer "America at 250: A Four-Part Community Conversation

12 about Our Country, Its Founding, Active Citizenship, and
13 Community.”

14 Each event in the series is to be hosted by Jill Lepore,
15 acclaimed author of *These Truths: A History of the United States*
16 (2018) and *We the People: A History of the U.S. Constitution* ,
17 (2025), and 13 other titles.

18 A staff writer at *The New Yorker*, Lepore is professor of
19 American History at Harvard University and a professor of law at
20 Harvard Law School, where she holds classes in evidence,
21 historical methods, and humanistic inquiry.

22 Retreat Farm founder Buzz Schmidt, of Guilford, who has
23 an extensive background in not-for-profit advocacy and
24 administration, first reached out to Lepore late in 2019 to invite
25 her and her husband, Tim Leek, to the Retreat Farm.

26 “We sat in the conference room in the yellow farmhouse
27 just talking and I told her about our dreams for the North Barn,”
28 the circa 1837 structure on the 500-acre farm campus that was
29 soon to undergo renovations to become a capacious public
30 venue.

31 At that point, Lepore, a part-time resident in southern
32 Vermont, had an idea. “What you need to do,” Schmidt recalls
33 her saying, “is host a civil discourse series there.” Lepore is, he
34 adds, “a small-d democrat and a communitarian.”

35 When North Barn renovations were complete, “I started
36 bugging her. Are we ready for a civil discourse series? You want to
37 host this? But she was tied up then, and I then left the scene for a
38 while.”

39 Soon after Schmidt’s return last fall to a more active
40 management role at the Retreat Farm, Lepore called him to
41 propose what ended up being a successful December 2025
42 event.

43 “That got the two of us thinking about what we could do
44 during [America’s] 250th anniversary year,” Schmidt says.

45 Thus, the America at 250 series was created, and the first
46 installment — “Being American,” a live storytelling event

47 featuring local residents telling their stories about what it means
48 to be American — takes place Wednesday, March 11, at the
49 North Barn.

50

51 “Being American” will be produced and presented by the
52 Transom Story Lab, founders of the popular Moth Radio Hour
53 public radio show and podcast featuring the influential
54 storytelling series.

55 Schmidt notes that the value of the first event is “getting
56 people to express their own feelings, their own hopes, their own
57 affinity for their own concerns for their American citizenship.” As
58 Lepore hosts, author, radio personality, and local community
59 facilitator Tom Bodett will emcee.

60 “It’s going to be exciting. It’ll be fun. And hopefully a
61 great kickoff,” Schmidt says, also acknowledging the role of
62 Transom’s executive director, Sophie Crane, in the development
63 and facilitation of the event.

64 Lepore has had a relationship for several years with
65 Crane who, prior to taking the lead at Transom, was recruited by
66 Pushkin Industries, the podcast company founded by author
67 Malcolm Gladwell. Prior to that, Crane worked as a producer for
68 PBS’s *Frontline*.

69 Pushkin hired Crane with intent of having her work on a
70 podcast with Lepore.

71 “As a history person, the opportunity to work with Jill
72 was just such a gift,” Crane recalls. “She’s incredible. So brilliant
73 and so fun to work with.”

74 Called *The Last Archive*, that podcast was about the
75 “history of truth,” Crane explains: “What truth meant, and why it
76 felt like we were in a moment in time when no one could agree
77 on what was true anymore.”

78 Crane, who lives in Norwich, graduated in 2016 from
79 Brown University with a concentration in the history of science.

80 “It turns out that if you study history in college, it’s
81 mostly just lovely people telling you stories in seminars,” she
82 says.

83 With an enduring passion for storytelling, she made radio
84 and podcasts throughout college and started an audio magazine
85 with a friend “to basically have an excuse to teach ourselves and
86 our classmates how to make narrative, long-form radio.”

87 Crane explains that the 25-year-old award-winning
88 Transom Lab — the brainchild of her father, environmentalist Bill
89 McKibben — was “well before podcasts, the internet hub for
90 narrative radio: people who were doing really interesting
91 experimental things, mostly on public radio.” She called it “a tiny,
92 scrappy nonprofit that punches so far above its weight.”

93 Transom has evolved to be the primary training ground
94 for people who want to make narrative radio through vehicles
95 like *This American Life*, *The Moth Radio Hour*, and *Radiolab*.

96 “A whole bunch of people have gone through our
97 workshops and trainings,” Crane adds.

98 Despite dramatic funding cuts, Crane explains, “things
99 have been going really well. Our workshops have never seen
100 more demand, and we’re doing more of them than ever. People
101 really need this sort of joyful, soulful gathering place that is
102 entirely outside of commercialism and entirely about craft.”

103 Since she took the helm at Transom, she adds, the
104 organization has been engaged in much more live storytelling
105 work and training, such as the March 11 program.

106 Participants in this event were selected through an
107 application process from a broad spectrum of Brattleboro-area
108 residents who will have engaged in a weekend-long workshop
109 with lead teacher Meg Bowles, a senior director of The Moth and
110 co-host of *The Moth Radio Hour*.

111 “Meg has years and years of experience as a story
112 coach,” Crane explains. “That’s how we started doing three-day
113 intensive workshops to teach people who have never told a story

114 before how to tell a personal story live on stage. That's what we're
115 doing in Brattleboro."

116 Viki Merrick, an independent radio producer and voice
117 coach, will assist Bowles in helping participants shape their
118 stories.

119 "We're trying to make sure that the crew selected
120 represents all different sorts of Brattleborians," Crane says.

121 The idea for this event is "to make sure that those voices are included in this larger conversation and that the
122 people and their personal histories are taken as expert testimony."

123 "We've been working with the library, in particular, and
124 [its outgoing director], Starr LaTronica. She's done a huge amount
125 of the outreach," she adds.

126 The intent, says Crane, "is just about being in
127 community, being in person, putting down the phone or the
128 computer."

129 "A huge part of this workshop wherever we do it is
130 honestly just about learning how to be vulnerable with strangers,"
131 she continues, calling that vulnerability "a skill that atrophied for
132 people during the pandemic and in the age of social media."

133 "And it hasn't come back," Clark says.

134 "It's so easy to have your most vulnerable moments now
135 be with an AI chat bot anonymously or on social media
136 anonymously and the idea of sitting down with strangers and
137 being vulnerable is something that is really, really hard for a lot of
138 people," she adds. "Understandably so."

139 **The rest of the series**

140 The second event in the America at 250 series will be
141 Thursday, May 7: "The Meaning of the Declaration of
142 Independence."

143 According to press materials, leading historians will
144 discuss the origins, meaning, and legacy of America's founding
145 document. Comprising the panel, moderated by Lepore, will be
146 Christopher Brown (Columbia University historian), Ken Burns
147 (documentary filmmaker), Maya Jasanoff (Harvard University

148 historian), and Jane Kamensky (retired Harvard University
149 historian and CEO of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation and of
150 Jefferson's home, Monticello).

151 Following that, Schmidt explains, he and Lepore are
152 “really looking for the strength of the community.” Thus, the third
153 program on Thursday, Sept. 17 will be “Strengthening
154 Community, Citizenship, and Civil Society in a Time of Change
155 and Conflict,” where local, state, and national leaders will weigh
156 in “on our roles, responsibilities, and opportunities as citizens,
157 community members, and civic leaders at this critical moment.”

158 Vermont Public’s Jane Lindholm will moderate a panel
159 featuring Michael Wood-Lewis, Front Porch Forum founder and
160 CEO; Dan Smith, Vermont Community Foundation president;
161 Vijay Singh, Vermont Public CEO; and Django Grace, local
162 activist and Columbia University sophomore.

163 The last program in the series, slated for Thursday, Nov.
164 19, will be “The 2026 Election and the Health of Our
165 Democracy.”

166 There, “elected leaders and analysts chime in on the
167 implications of the election for our country as it begins its 251st
168 year” with a panel, moderated by Lepore, that will include U.S.
169 Rep. Becca Balint and others to be determined.

170 If the series succeeds, Schmidt says, he’d like to see it
171 become an annual event with a different focus each year as part
172 of Retreat Farm’s regular programming.

173 He wants to see the Retreat Farm “enabling civil society,
174 civil discourse, and community gatherings.”

175 “We’re very self-conscious about our opportunity to be a
176 coalescing, coordinating venue for all the organizations in the
177 community to utilize both the interior and outdoor spaces,”
178 Schmidt says. “Gathering places, spaces for retreats and that sort
179 of thing are so critical to the health of a community, so that’s the
180 genesis of this.”

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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181 For March 11 tickets, or more information on the
182 America at 250 Series and to learn about the Retreat Farm, visit
183 retreatfarm.org.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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