



## PRESERVATIONISTS RALLY TO SAVE THE DANIEL WEBSTER FARM | By Beau Trudel '05

For much of his life, Exeter alumnus and renowned U.S. Senator Daniel Webster (1782–1852) fought for the idea of a perpetual, insoluble Union of states, unbroken by sectionalism or civil war. This fiery passion for unity defined Webster the man. Therefore, it was somehow painfully ironic when, in early 2005, his 140-acre New Hampshire family farm was sold to a developer who planned to subdivide it into lots for 130 new homes.

Located in Franklin, the farm was where Webster spent much of his childhood before he left to attend Exeter in 1796. Owned by Webster until his death, the farm later became a home and school for children orphaned by the Civil War. With its long and varied history, the property stands as one of the state's most valuable historic sites—and, as one of the largest contiguous tracts of fertile farmland in New Hampshire, an agricultural landmark as well.

The proposed development of the farm quickly caught the attention of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which in June 2005 placed the property on a list of the 11 most-endangered historic sites in the United States. Though the sale to the developer had slipped under the radar of state preservationists, the National Trust warning spurred many local and national groups into action. After months of political and public pressure, the developer agreed to sell the entire property to the Webster Farm Preservation Association, a local group founded in mid-2005.

Funding the preservation of the farm has been the association's biggest challenge. Grants from the Trust for Public Land and the state's Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) allowed a purchase and sales agreement to be negotiated with the developer, but more than \$1 million still must be raised to permanently protect the farm and begin the process of restoration.

Daniel Webster attended Exeter for nine months under the tutelage of Dr. Benjamin Abbot, after which he enrolled at Dartmouth College. His time at Exeter was marked by impressive academic success in all areas except for the required public speaking class, declamation. Webster later said of his time at the Academy, "I believe I made tolerable progress in most branches which I attended to while in this school, but there was one thing I could not do—I could not make a declamation; I could not speak before the school." Webster clearly overcame his terror of public speaking, however. He went on to become one of America's most influential politicians and orators, serving as a U.S. senator for 19 years and later as secretary of state under two presidents.

Webster's connection to New Hampshire, Exeter and the U.S. Senate endures to this day. The desk at which Webster sat in the Senate chambers, engraved with his name and those of all 18 of his successors, is today inhabited by a fellow Exeter alumnus, New Hampshire Senator Judd Gregg '65. In a fitting tribute, Senator Gregg has been a vocal supporter of the preservation of the Webster Farm. "Given the central role Daniel Webster played in the development of the United States," says Gregg, "it is critical we take every step necessary to preserve his legacy and his memory."

*The family farm of Exeter alumnus and U.S. Senator Daniel Webster was slated for development until a coalition of preservationists intervened.*