

# Sarah Farmer:

## Raising the Flag of Peace

*or Vigorous Champion of Universal Peace*

*or Social Reformer and Champion of Universal Peace*

*Anne Gordon Perry*

“Years ago intellectual Boston would have gone out to Concord for spiritual regeneration at the feet of the good, sweet poets and philosophers who lived there. Today the inner circle of intellectual Boston goes to Green Acre to sit at the feet of the gentle and wonderful prophetess-priestess, Sarah J. Farmer.”

*Boston Sunday Journal, 1903*

A passionate peace activist raised in a progressive family of transcendentalists associated with the abolitionist and other movements, Sarah Jane Farmer (1844–1916) was the daughter of inventor Moses Gerrish Farmer and philanthropist Hannah Shapleigh Farmer. Their home was a way station on the Underground Railroad. Sarah grew up knowing Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Tubman, Julia Ward Howe, John Greenleaf Whittier, and other influential people—associations that contributed to her understanding of social problems and the importance of peace, freedom, and equality.

Sarah Farmer was said to have genius with regard to human relationships. From 1886 to 1910, she undertook a series of educational projects in the town of Eliot, Maine, founding the Eliot Public Library, the Green Acre Conferences (a summer forum for cultural and intercultural exchange that was universal in scope and open to all races and creeds, held on the grounds of a resort hotel Farmer owned with four businessmen), and the Monsalvat School for the Comparative Study of Religions. The Green Acre conferences drew large audiences and attracted the support of social scientists, reformers, theologians, philosophers, educators, and artists, including Edward Everett Hale, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Annie Besant, Julia Ward Howe, Jane Addams, Ralph Waldo Trine, and Phoebe Hearst. The Monsalvat School, begun to perpetuate the work of the 1893 Parliament of Religions, contributed to the adult education movement, which narrowed the gap between the intellectual and the common person in the United States. It also, in Farmer’s words, “brought the Orient and Occident into close sympathetic touch.”

Between 1880 and 1910 a transformation in the basic character of American society occurred, and Sarah Farmer was one of a small group of people who devoted themselves to involving others in the process of social change. There was little of progressive thought that she did not attempt to incorporate into her work in adult education. She was fully committed to such ideas as the equality of women, universal education, international arbitration, opportunity for the economically depressed, and abandonment of religious and racial prejudice. Her forums on evolution and other controversial subjects sparked much debate, but she insisted that all listen with an unbiased mind to any ideas expressed.

Peace emerged as the single most important concept Farmer embraced. In 1894 at the dedication of the Green Acre Conferences, she raised the first known peace flag in the world, which, significantly, was visible in 1905 from the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, where the Japanese and Russian delegates negotiated the Portsmouth Peace Treaty. After hearing that the signing of the Peace Treaty was to take place, Sarah invited the peace delegates to Green Acre to celebrate the victory. Russian Ambassador Witte declined, but the Japanese envoys came on August 31, 1905 for a rousing program on peace. On September 5, 1905 Sarah Farmer was the only woman present at the signing of the Portsmouth Peace Treaty. Hidden from view, she observed a dramatic moment in the history of negotiations.

In 1900 Farmer embraced a new religion, the Bahá'í Faith, which fulfilled her hopes for religious unity and social reform. But her new allegiance sorely tested liberal notions of freedom and open-mindedness and was seen by some as a betrayal of her previous eclecticism. Her detractors wondered how an independent, reform-minded woman could resign her own will in service to a specific religion. Farmer, however, was confirmed in her faith and saw it as a natural extension of the intellectual life of Green Acre, which had always had a religious and moral emphasis. Her vision for Green Acre was also confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, who predicted that Green Acre would become a great center for the unity of East and West and that Farmer herself would one day be recognized by people worldwide.

Writer Horace Holley remarked: "Miss Farmer arose as a consecrated pioneer to make a definite and practical application of ideals hitherto existing only in the minds of philosophers and the lives of saints. . . . The significance of Miss Farmer in the history of American progress is that she stands as the actual fulfiller of Emerson in terms of applied influence. Miss Farmer can be considered as the feminine counterpart of Emerson, for she possessed his idealism to the full,

but her nature was executive, practical and intensely human, desiring tangible results above abstract formulas and definitions. Green Acre consequently arose as the effort to live out and apply the great American vision of truth, justice and righteousness, and has never lost sight of that essential purpose. . . .”

Green Acre Bahá’í School, as it is now known, is part of Farmer’s legacy as a spiritual center dedicated to the oneness of humanity, world peace, race unity and the equality of women and men. It considers itself an international center of learning, one of Farmer’s goals.

Farmer’s life is becoming of greater interest to the public as her connection to the Portsmouth Peace Treaty and her activism in the peace, interfaith dialogue, and summer school movements are revealed. She will be remembered, above all, for her passion for peace.

*899 words right now*

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Atkinson, Anne Gordon [now Perry], et al. *Green Acre on the Piscataqua*. Eliot, ME: Green Acre Bahá’í School Council, 1991.

Martin, James Douglas. *The Life and Work of Sarah Jane Farmer, 1847-1916*. Master’s Thesis, The University of Waterloo, 1977.

Schmidt, Leigh. *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2005.

Stockman, Robert H. *The Bahá’í Faith in America: Origins, 1892-1900*. Volume One. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1985.

Portsmouth Peace Treaty web site: [www.portsmouthpeacetreaty.com](http://www.portsmouthpeacetreaty.com)

Green Acre web site: [www.greenacre.org](http://www.greenacre.org)

Dr. James Sacco, Administrator, Green Acre Bahá'í School, [Jsacco@usbnc.org](mailto:Jsacco@usbnc.org)

## TIME LINE:

- 1847 Sarah Farmer is born in Dover, NH, into a progressive family.
- 1859 Moses Farmer illumines their Salem, MA home with a row of electrical lights when Thomas Edison is Sarah's age—twelve.
- 1881 Moses, Hannah, and Sarah Farmer move to Eliot, ME from Newport, RI
- 1890 Sarah joins four businessmen to open a resort hotel in Eliot, Maine. John Greenleaf Whittier came that first summer and gave Green Acre its name.
- 1892 Sarah has a vision that the hotel should offer a series of conferences on progressive subjects
- 1893 Sarah visits the Chicago World's Fair and the end of the Parliament of Religions and invites some of the participants to Green Acre
- 1894 Sarah establishes the Green Acre Conferences and raises the first known peace flag in the world
- 1900 Sarah embraces the Bahá'í Faith and begins to include some Bahá'í content in her programs
- 1904 Sarah holds a rousing program at Green Acre to pray and sing for the cessation of the Russo-Japanese War
- 1905 Sarah invites the peace delegates negotiating the Portsmouth Peace Treaty to Green Acre. Russian Ambassador Witte declines, but the Japanese envoys come on August 31. Five days later Sarah becomes the only woman present at the signing of the treaty.

- 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá visits Green Acre and again confirms Sarah's vision of it as place of learning and peace.
- 1916 Sarah Farmer dies and is buried in Eliot, ME