

July 30th, 2010

Former Fruitlands Museum Executive Sentenced to Prison for Embezzling \$1.3 Million

by Jeanne Schinto

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On June 28, Peggy Kempton, the one-time deputy executive director and chief financial officer of the Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts, was sentenced to state prison and ordered to pay restitution after pleading guilty to stealing \$1.3 million from her former employer. Worcester Superior Court Judge Richard T. Tucker sentenced the 54-year-old Kempton to three to five years in prison, followed by ten years of probation. While on probation, Kempton must stay away from and avoid all contact with her former employer and notify any future employers of her conviction. Judge Tucker also ordered Kempton to make full restitution to the museum at a rate to be determined.

According to press reports, Assistant Attorney General Brendan O'Shea of the Corruption and Fraud Division told the court that Kempton used the money to finance "a lavish lifestyle." Those reports stated that credit card accounts, created by Kempton for herself, her four children, and in the names of three unwitting museum employees, were used to pay for airline tickets (\$52,000), clothing (\$31,000), college and prep school tuitions (\$47,000), antiques (\$88,000), and a summer rental on Nantucket Island. Investigators also discovered that Kempton manipulated the financial records of Fruitlands to make it appear that funds she was using personally were being used for legitimate museum expenditures.

According to the attorney general's office, Kempton worked at the museum from July 1997 through February 2008. The thefts occurred between January 2002 and the end of her employment. Prompted by Fruitlands, the state's Financial Investigations Division and Massachusetts State Police began a probe of Kempton about seven months after her departure. On June 19, 2009, a Worcester County Grand Jury returned indictments against Kempton, and a warrant was issued for her arrest. She pleaded not guilty and was released on \$5000 cash bail. On May 5, 2010, she changed her plea to guilty.

Fruitlands was founded in 1914 by Clara Endicott Sears (1863-1960) of Boston. Initially, Sears bought the property to use as her summer estate, naming it after Bronson Alcott's utopian community of Transcendentalists who lived on the same acreage in 1843-44. About two miles away, a community of Shakers was established in the 1790's. By 1918, however, they were forced to close because of dwindling numbers.

On the Fruitlands property, Sears reassembled a 1794 building that had served as Harvard Shakers' workshop and office. It is now a Shaker museum, established by Sears in 1922.

Across the valley from Fruitlands, there is land in Shirley, Massachusetts, that used to be home to another community of Shakers. After the Shirley Shakers left, their buildings were used as an orphanage, then a home for what we used to call juvenile delinquents. Today it is another type of communal facility—a state prison.

A spokesperson for the attorney general's office said that Kempton has been turned over to the Department of Corrections, and while it's unknown where she will serve her sentence, it's "definitely a possibility" that she may end up at Shirley, a place she must have glimpsed innumerable times. Visible from Fruitlands by day, it is also easily seen at night, because of its blazing security lights.

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