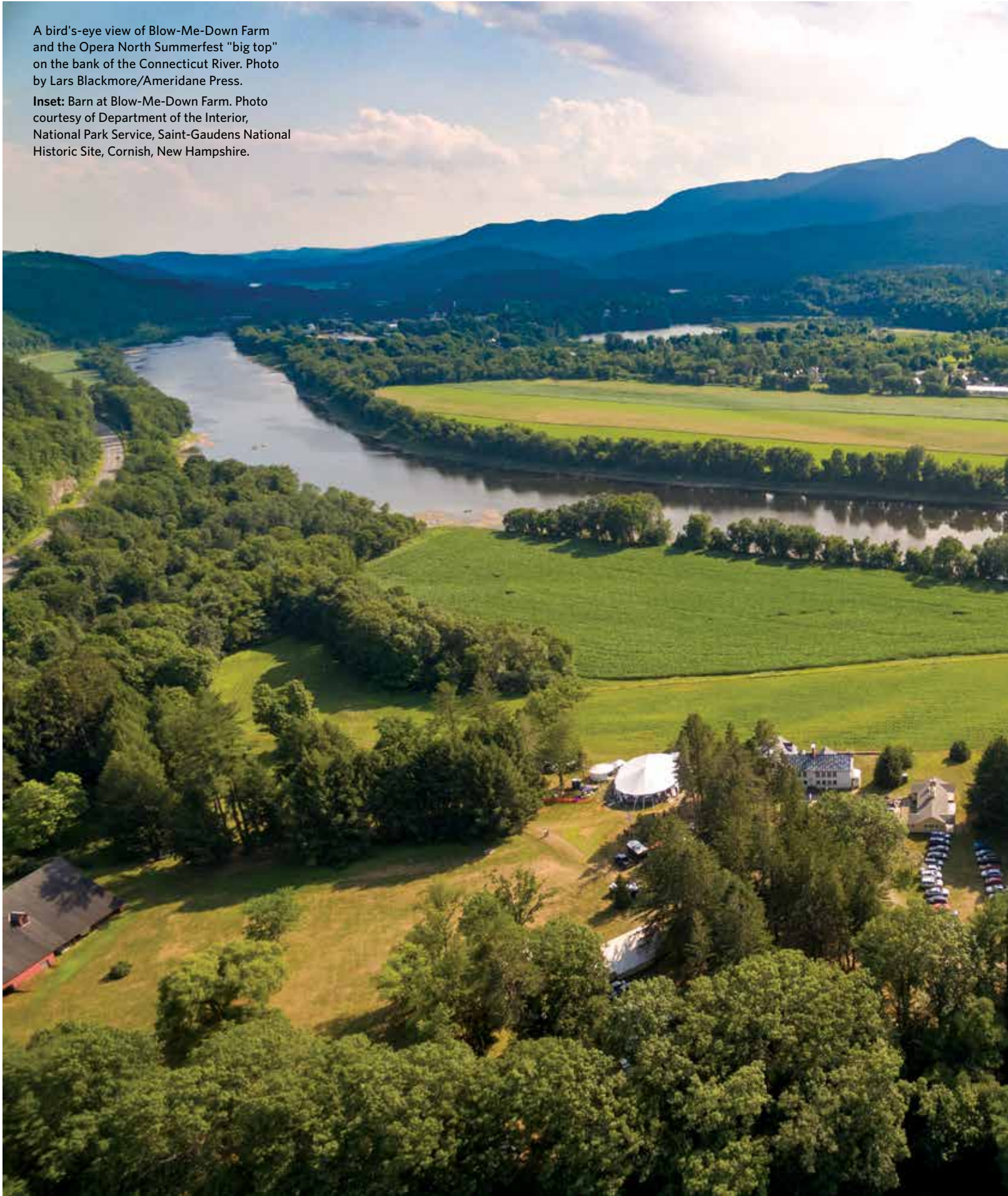


A bird's-eye view of Blow-Me-Down Farm and the Opera North Summerfest "big top" on the bank of the Connecticut River. Photo by Lars Blackmore/Ameridane Press.

Inset: Barn at Blow-Me-Down Farm. Photo courtesy of Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire.



DOWN ON THE FARM

OPERA NORTH TAKES A JOURNEY OF REBIRTH



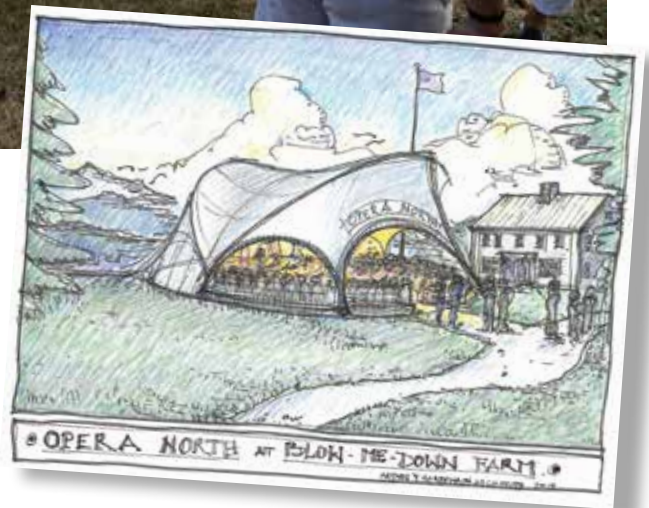
What happens when professional opera singers and circus performers share an outdoor stage on a riverside farm in Cornish, New Hampshire? According to Opera North, a new, creative experience for the audience seated under the big top. It may be unorthodox, but Opera North General Director Evans Haile believes there are dots between the two that are easy to connect. Tensions run high in both kinds of performance. “At the circus, the audience wonders, ‘Are they going to make that leap?’ and at the opera, they think, ‘Are they going to hit that high note?’”

THE ARTS





Circus performers and opera stars under the direction of Opera North Artistic Director and founder Louis Burkot (lower left) dazzled the audience. Photos by Lars Blackmore/Ameridane Press, courtesy of Opera North.



Opera North, a professional opera company that begins its 37th season in the Upper Valley, has cast itself into a journey of rebirth. For decades of summers, it has brought professional-quality traditional opera to the Lebanon Opera House in Lebanon, New Hampshire. In the past three years, Evans and Artistic Director Louis Burkot have sought to sync the image and content of Opera North’s offerings with the changing tastes and expectations of modern audiences.

Enter another unusual pairing—that of the opera company with the Blow-Me-Down Farm in Cornish, New Hampshire. The 42.6-acre parcel hugging the banks of the Connecticut River with a killer view of Mount Ascutney lies across Route 12A from Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, the only national park in the state of New Hampshire. The farm was acquired by the Saint-Gaudens site in 2010; they launched a plan to create “A Park for the Arts,” and sent out a call for community involvement. Opera North responded.

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THE ARTS

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In considering the Blow-Me-Down, Evans, Louis, and Maria Laskaris, now the company's Director of Development, had a few things in mind. One was the possibility of a home for Opera North. While it has been headquartered at the Lebanon Opera House and has played in other Upper Valley venues, the company has never had an actual physical location of its own.

In addition, audiences for traditional opera everywhere have become smaller and skew grayer. Opera North did not want to continue with only the tried-and-true of presenting full-scale productions in typical venues. They wanted to create new opportunities for existing audiences, even as they enticed people for whom opera was less familiar. Finally, they envisioned Opera North not going it alone, but as an umbrella

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The historic 46-acre Charles Beaman Farm is set to become a national "park for the arts" thanks to a unique partnership between the National Park Service and Opera North. Photo courtesy of Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire.

under which other performing artists might gather and strut their stuff.

According to Maria, when she and Evans and Louis walked the land together for the first time, they felt the potential of linking the beautiful, historic spot with a "destination" performing arts center, not unlike the Berkshires' Tanglewood or Jacob's Pillow. It wouldn't be the first time that the farm inspired art-centered dreams.

Blow-Me-Down Farm is part of the rich history of the Cornish Art Colony of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Charles Beaman, a New York City lawyer, purchased the property in 1882, erecting a home, barn, and several other buildings. He also bought the property that is currently the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site and leased it to the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

Charles Beaman is credited with enticing Saint-Gaudens to move to Cornish, telling him that New Hampshire had plenty of men with

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THE ARTS

physiques akin to that of Abraham Lincoln who could serve as models for Saint-Gaudens' work-in-progress—a sculpture that would become the *Standing Lincoln*, which incidentally is now installed at the Saint-Gaudens site. Charles brought other artists to Cornish as well and entertained them at his home at Blow-Me-Down Farm. In 1926, a fire destroyed the Beaman home, forcing the conversion of the “casino,” a building designed for guests to play games, into a new family residence.

Today, several of the original buildings on the Beaman farm remain, including an iconic New England barn, a caretaker's cottage, a dance hall, and the post-fire Beaman home. Opera North has received grants from the Northern Border Regional Commission, the Jack and Dorothy Byrne Foundation, the Timken Foundation, and the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation that have enabled it to enlist architect R. Andrew Garthwaite to preserve and rehabilitate the main house.

Construction is scheduled to start in the spring of 2019. Opera North will use the renovated space as a general headquarters for its summer program at the farm. Plans for other structures are subject to additional funding. Possible ideas include installing an artist-in-residence in the caretaker's cottage and using the existing dance hall as Park Service exhibition space. As for the barn, it wouldn't be the first time that someone stepped through an old New England barn door, eyeballed the vast emptiness, and thought “theater.”

A FRESH TAKE ON TRADITION

What's in store for Opera North patrons for this season? More time down on the farm, beginning with *Hoedown at the Blow-Me-Down*, featuring the music of American composers Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, and Rodgers and Hammerstein. Similar to last year's *Singers and Swingers*, Mark Lonergan, director of the Big Apple Circus, and

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professional circus artists will join Opera North's live orchestra and resident artists (young opera singers from around the globe) for multiple performances on July 12 through 14. After four sold-out performances last year, Opera North has contracted for a larger tent.

New this year at Blow-Me-Down is the first outdoor performance of a full operetta, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* on July 26 through 28. Amid various concerts at other Upper Valley venues, Opera North will wrap up the summer back at the Lebanon Opera House with a full-scale production of Verdi's *Macbeth*, August 4 through 10.

Extending the season is another example of pushing Opera North in new directions. Formerly a strictly summertime phenomenon, last year saw an autumn performance of the thoroughly modern, sung-in-English, *Scalia/Ginsburg*. This October will bring the New England premiere of *Glory Denied*, an opera by Tom Cipullo (based on a book by Tom Philpott) about Colonel Jim Thompson, America's longest-held prisoner of war in Vietnam.

Change in a tradition-bound world like opera always takes place in uncharted waters. "Continuing to be creative," says Louis, "is the beauty and curse of longevity." Louis's and Evans's respect for the form is steadfast, even as they grow animated when talking about how to present opera in other spaces, to new audiences, in collaboration with other artists. "The Blow-Me-Down is our sandbox," says Evans, "a relaxed, family-friendly space where we can turn old into new." ❶

Blow-Me-Down Farm

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