

# Annual Meeting Program: The Keith Family Preserve, George Keith, and 20th-Century Warren



50 Cemetery Road  
Warren, CT 06754

Email: [info@warrenlandtrust.org](mailto:info@warrenlandtrust.org)  
[www.warrenlandtrust.org](http://www.warrenlandtrust.org)

The Keith Family Preserve, a generous bequest from Joyce Keith of over 60 acres off of Cornwall Road, was a focus of the 2021 annual meeting. Historical context for this gift, and the important role that the Keith family played in Warren's 20th-century history, was provided by Warren Historical Society Curator Heather Forstmann. Mrs. Forstmann drew on resources in the Historical Society's collections, as well as a treasure trove of information in the form of an oral history provided by Elaine Layman. These fascinating oral histories, collected and compiled by Warren Historical Society volunteers Marylyn Hendricks and Jon Garvey can be accessed on the Warren Historical Society website: [www.warrenhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.warrenhistoricalsociety.org). Click on the "Archives" tab, and then on "Oral Histories." Below is a condensed version of Mrs. Forstmann's presentation, focusing on George Gilman Keith II (1907-1961), the first member of the Keith family to settle in Warren.



George Gilman Keith II was a true advocate for Warren. From 1930 when, at the age of 23, he answered a help wanted ad to become a herdsman for Ludlow Melius, until his untimely death in 1961 from leukemia, he was always helping someone.



After 9 years on Melius' Reverie Farm, Keith moved his wife and three young children to what would become Keith Road. Warren was truly a small town at that time: the population in the 1930s was approximately 300 people, rising slightly to 328 in the 1940s.

With the advent of World War II, fear was in the air in Warren. There was talk of building a watchtower to spot enemy aircraft, but townspeople thought the expense too great. So Keith paid out of his own pocket to build a wooden tower behind the Academy – a 10x10 room with a telephone and wood stove, and glass windows providing 360 degree views of town - manning it with his wife and children ages 12, 9, and 6. Soon curiosity got the better of the townspeople and the number of watchers, two at a time, grew to 200. Planes spotted would be called in to Mitchell Field with information on their direction and bearing.



WARREN OBSERVATION POST

Similarly, when Connecticut winters proved too much for existing local plowing efforts, George Keith took the initiative to go to Vermont...and returned with "the Monster" – a massive snowplow attached to a front-end loader, to which he added auxiliary fuel tanks so as not to have to refuel while clearing roads in Warren and surrounding towns. The plow – which garnered a fair share of publicity – was housed at one of the commercial garages on Keith's property.



Like others in Warren, Keith was concerned about the town's future. He helped bring many new families to town (among them the Allmands, Youngs, and Scofields), selling smaller lots on Keith Road, White Oak Lane, and Laurel Mountain Road – a part of town that became known as Keithville. Keith also worked to enhance the community in Warren, helping to establish the Volunteer Fire Department, turning what was effectively a bucket brigade into an organized, modernized fire service. Keith and Sons also helped in the construction of the 1949 Town Hall (the current Community Center) and the Warren School.

George Keith and his family were also involved in some of the area's more unusual occurrences. When a Navy plane crashed in town in 1960, it was temporarily stored in the Keith Garage...

as was sensitive equipment prior to its installation at the Cold War radar station on Above All Road. And when the West Cornwall covered bridge was threatened by ice jams and state officials didn't respond to the town's appeals for help, Keith & Sons dynamited the jams without injury to person or property, saving an iconic landmark.

But for all its involvement in key moments in Warren's history, the Keith Family will also be remembered for their strong support for family – their own, and those of others – and their ties to the woodlands where they built forts, climbed trees, and caught frogs. And now that land – which Joyce Keith inherited from her husband Eddie, George Keith's youngest son – will be shared with the community, who will explore it and make their own memories there.

