

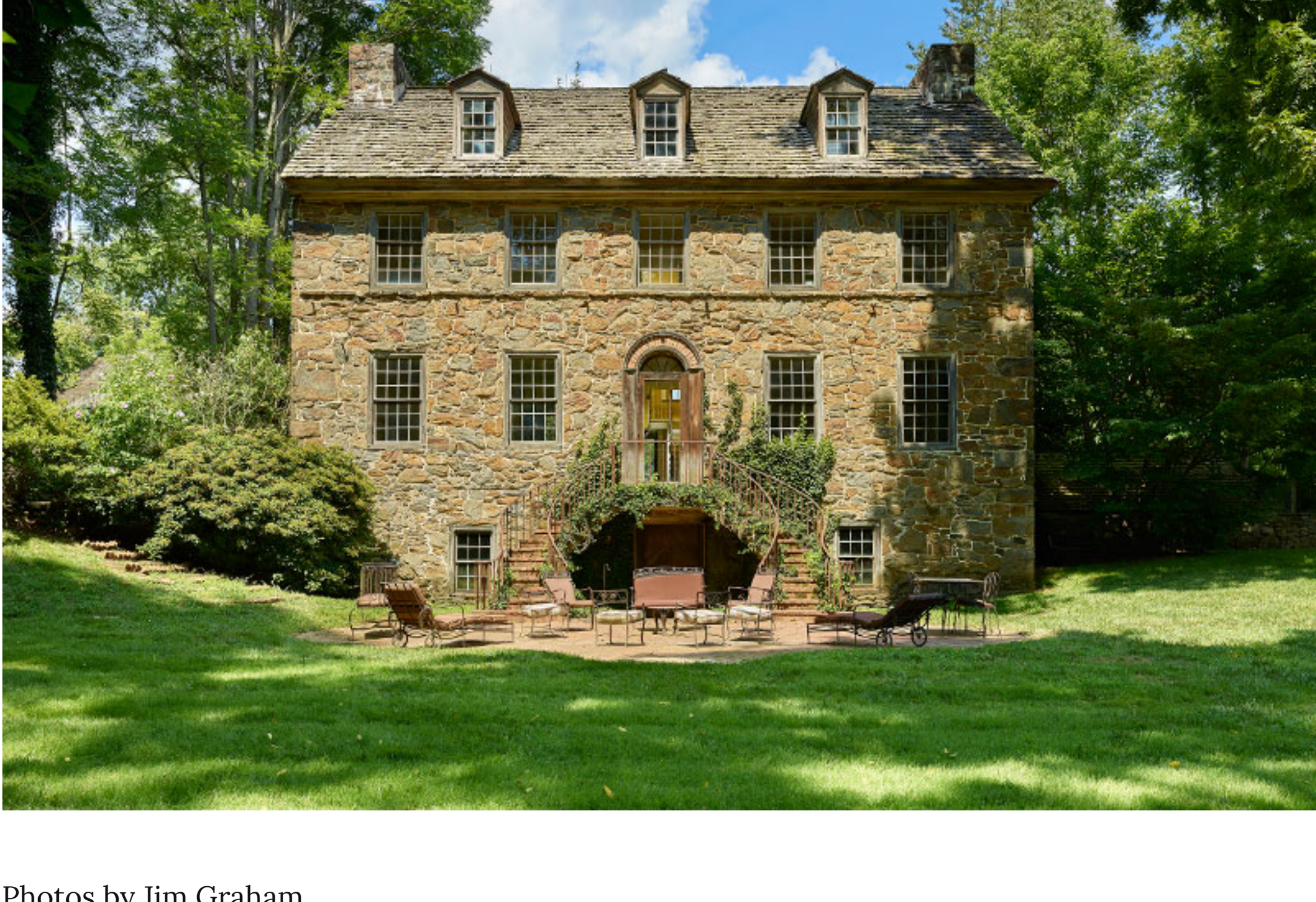


Home & Property

# Reviving Frolic Weymouth’s Big Bend Farm

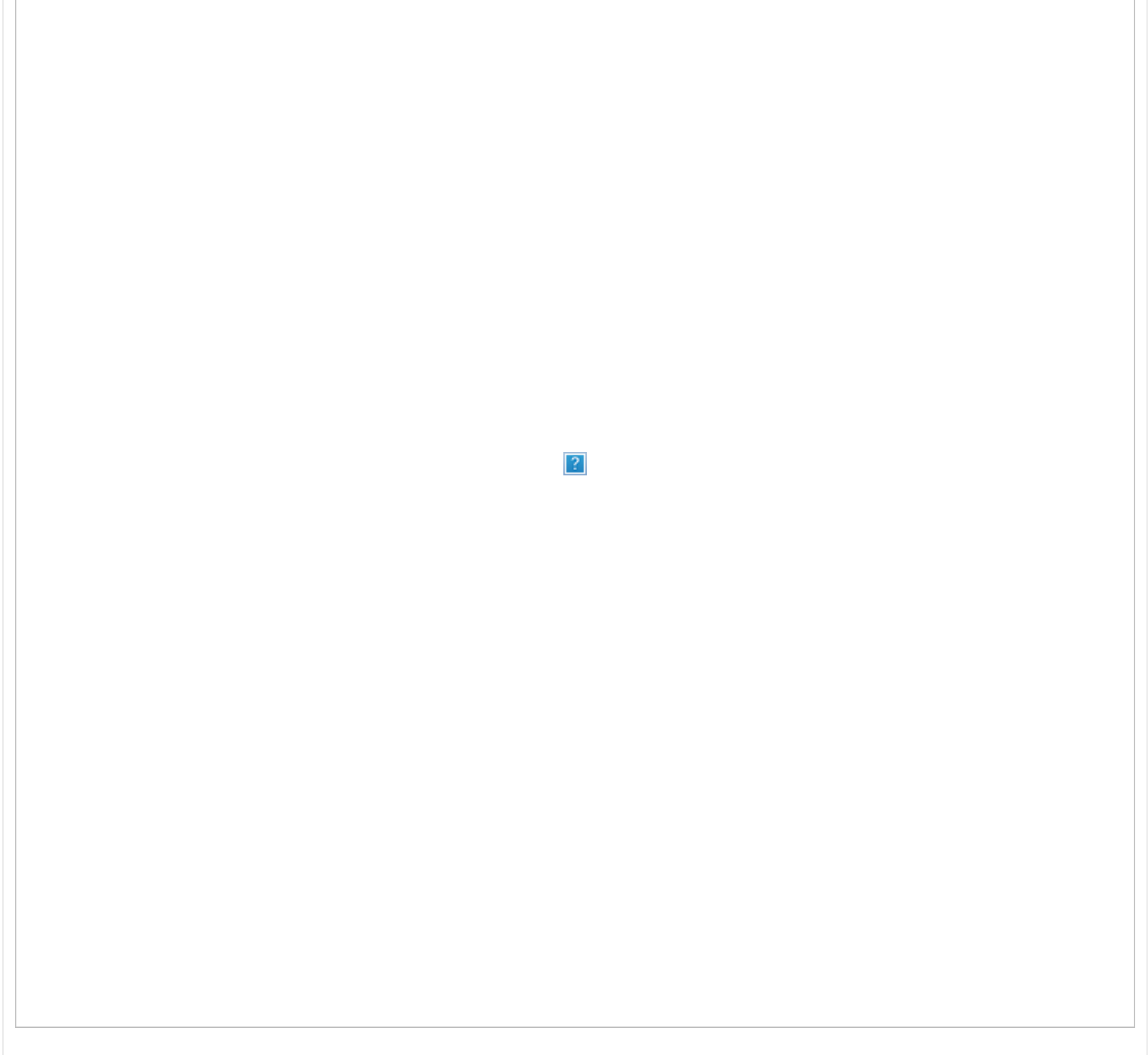
The late artist’s only son is in the midst of renovating the centuries-old Chadds Ford estate.

DECEMBER 20, 2018 | BY STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM GRAHAM



Photos by Jim Graham

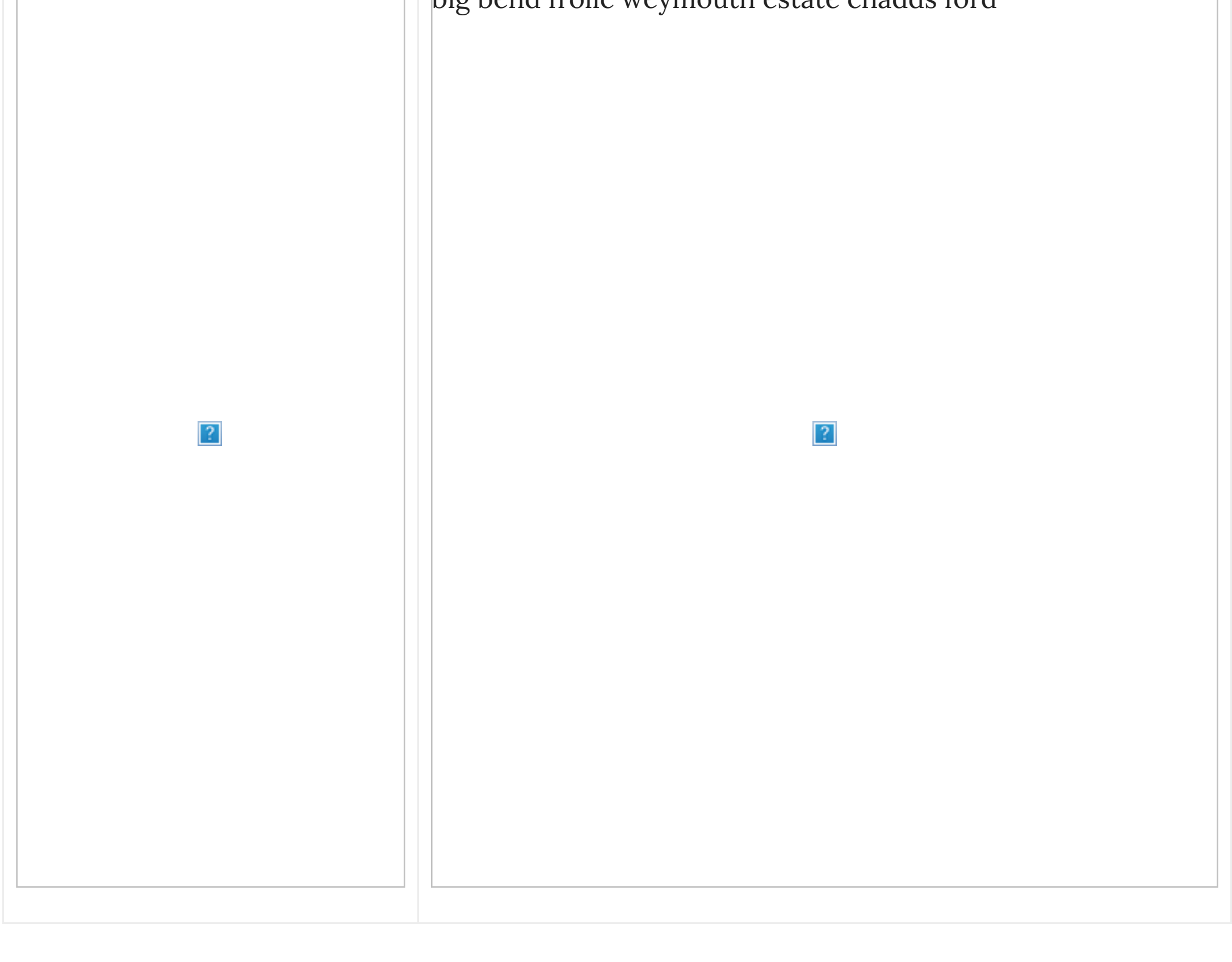
Big Bend Frolic Weymouth estate



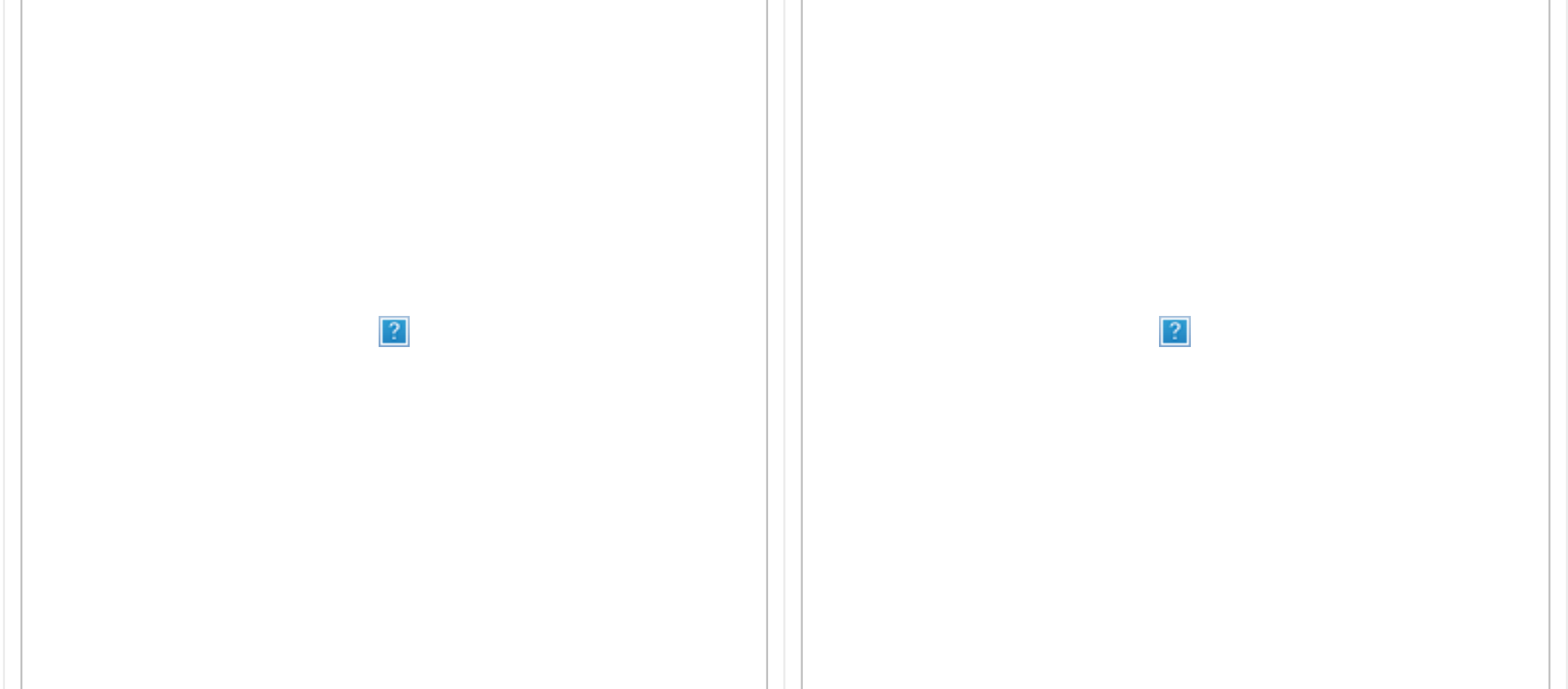
The headwaters of Brandywine Creek are located near Honey Brook. From there, the water meanders through the Pennsylvania landscape, dipping into Delaware before crossing back into Chester County. On the Great Bend of Brandywine Creek in Chadds Ford, there was an early European outpost dating from the mid 1600s. The Swedes and the Lenni Lenape Indians used the log cabin there as a trading post.

No one is quite sure who later rebuilt the original structure to create a house. There's some research indicating that it could've been Harry Gordon, a Scots officer in the Royal Engineers, who was said to have bought a farm along the Brandywine Creek as a summer residence. Historical records do show that he owned what we now think of as the Big Bend Farm from 1763 to 1775. But his personal papers have no mention of him building a home there.

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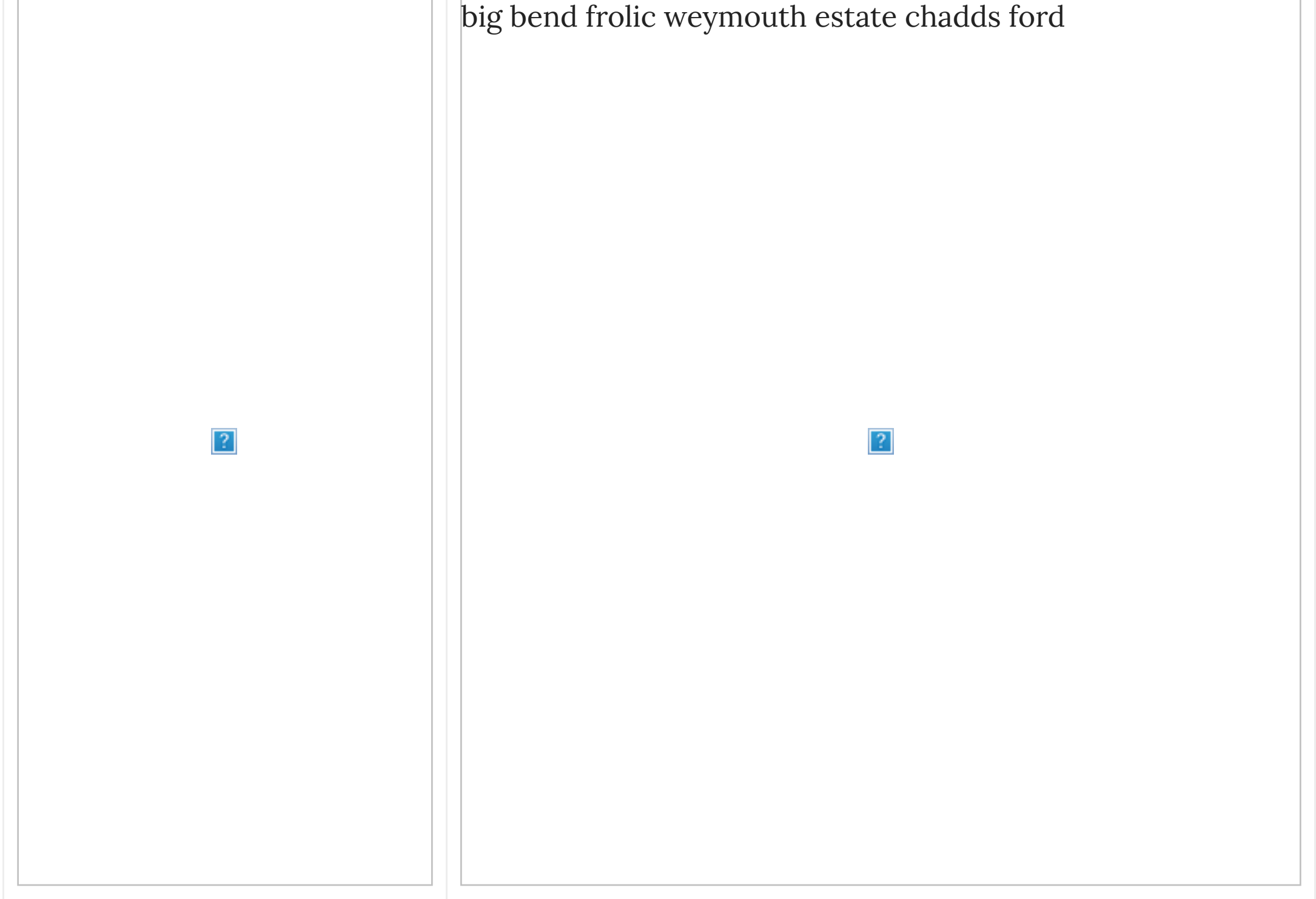


Two years before swords were drawn and muskets fired in the Battle of the Brandywine, William Twaddell bought the property, operating several mills there. It appears that he also built a home on the Bend—one unlike anything else in the area. Almost two centuries later, renowned Brandywine artist, whip and conservationist George A. “Frolic” Weymouth found its ruins while hunting near the creek. The house had been abandoned since 1925. It had no water or heat, and crows rummaged through the first floor of the shell.

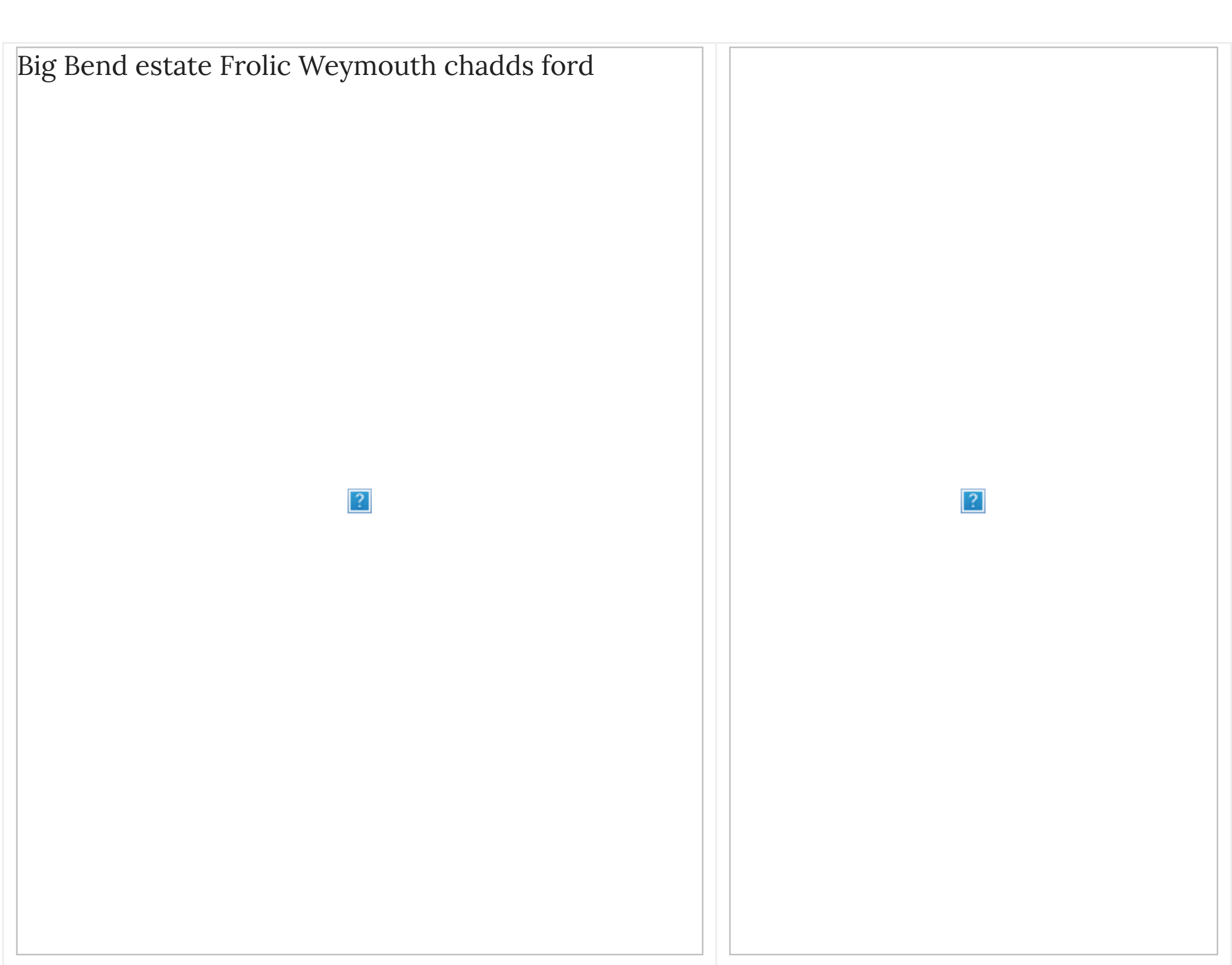


By 1961, Weymouth owned the ramshackle home and its 225 acres. He acted as his own architect, restoring the dwelling. In the process, he found the body of a Revolutionary War soldier in the dining room, under the hearth. He simply covered it back up again. “We figured he’d been there longer than we have—and ought—to stay,” recalled Weymouth, who passed away in 2016.

It took Weymouth and then-wife Ann three years to restore the home. “We did as little as possible,” he said.



All the windowpanes were gone, and vandals stole the stairway banisters. Weymouth replaced each pane with period glass retrieved from another house. Among the debris scattered around the property, he found one rotted newel post and one rung, reproducing the original stairway from those. He went to great pains to add 20th-century conveniences while maintaining the 18th-century character of the house. One modern-day luxury of note: an indoor lap pool.



Weymouth's son, Mac, wants to ensure that the Big Bend lives on for centuries to come. He's charged Archer & Buchanan's Richard Buchanan with restoring the home. “The overlay of so much history—both in the distant and recent past—gives the home and the property a richness of meaning and context,” says Buchanan. “As architects, we struggle not to be overwhelmed. The layers of history are so many and so varied. We have to be very attentive that we’re respecting all of it and not losing anything in translation.”

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To preserve the exterior character, Weymouth placed a façade easement on the house. “That narrows our opportunities for alterations to meet the evolving needs of the residents as their needs and lifestyle evolve over time,” says Buchanan. “We’ve planned substantial changes to the interior, but none is permitted for the exterior. As a result, a tremendous amount of careful planning is required to integrate the services and technology of a really well-ordered home into the lean shell of an 18th-century home, without the slightest evidence to be seen from outside.”



Much of the apparently antique fabric of the home was actually done in the 1960s. “Frolic and Ann did a masterful job of renovating the old house in ways that accurately mirrored history and invited the fantasy of the 18th-century ideal to appear authentic,” Buchanan says. “On one hand, it could be seen as a theatrical reinterpretation within the old walls. On the other, it's no less authentic than very old details that would've likely been there regardless.”

There's no set completion date for renovations at the Big Bend. But when finished, the house will have a fresh nose on life. The crumbling mortar and plaster will be renewed, the hearths reset and the walls repainted to match what was once there. There will also be 21st-century technological additions to improve the odds that the home will last another 300 years.

Indeed, the Big Bend's lifespan is one few homes in the area can boast.