

Conservationist, Feminist, Pagan Priestess

# Deborah Ann Light

1935 - 2015



c.1 Deborah Ann Light, Sag Harbor, NY

Robert Kian

1996

Philanthropist Deborah Ann Light, a key figure in establishing Eastern Long Island's [Peconic Land Trust](#) and pioneering Wiccan priestess, died Tuesday, July 21, 2015 in Gainesville, Florida, at age 80 after a long illness.

Ms. Light, the only child of [Dr. Rudolph Alvin Light](#) and the former Ann Bonner Jones, was born in London in 1935 while her parents were attending Oxford University. She grew up on a large farm in Nashville, where her father, an heir to the [Upjohn](#) pharmaceutical fortune, taught surgery at Vanderbilt University when not fox-hunting with the family throughout middle Tennessee. She attended St. Anne's Preparatory School in Charlottesville, Virginia, debuted at Nashville's Belle Meade Country Club in 1953, lived in Italy in the late 1950's, and received a B.F.A. in textile design from the School for American Craftsmen at the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1961. Her three marriages—to sculptor Tom Muir Wilson in 1958, painter Robert Thomas Taugner in 1962 (with whom she had a son, Michael, in 1963), and Broadway stage manager Peter Jennings Perry in 1966—ended in divorce. Her own parents divorced in 1958.



At the Easter Parade on Fifth Avenue, New York City, early 1960's



Dancing at Guild Hall's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ball, East Hampton, 1981

In the mid-1960's Light lived in bohemian splendor at 1 [Patchin Place](#) in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, where neighbors Marion Morehouse (e.e. cummings' wife), and writer Djuna Barnes would occasionally babysit Michael.

In 1967 Light settled year-round with her young family in the hamlet of Amagansett on the East End of Long Island, New York, purchasing 30 acres known as Quail Hill from Fabergé cosmetics founder [Samuel Rubin](#) and devoting herself to local politics and community service amidst the Hamptons artistic and political ferment of the 1960's and 1970's. There was a fair bit of style, glamour, and fame (author Kurt Vonnegut rented one of Quail Hill's three houses for years) and Light, standing six feet tall and often impeccably dressed in clothes she made with Manhattan couturier [Linda Meisner](#), was known to enjoy making an entrance.

There were grapes, needlepoint, baroque jewelry created with goldsmith [Arthur King](#), [miniature houses](#), and various other divertissements befitting an heiress, along with the countless local board memberships and fundraisers that Light took on with dedicated professionalism. There were also some eccentricities, most famously the 36 cats that Light kept for a short while, fictionalized by New Yorker staff writer and neighbor [Berton Roueché](#) in his 1974 thriller [Feral](#). But all "did have names and proper vet care," she would quip.



With Madam, on the lawn at Quail Hill, 1988





At harvest time with local potato farmer John Damiecki, 1977

More seriously, there was a growing realization in Light's mind that the place of women in Western patriarchal society, religious and otherwise, needed to be changed.

With both abstraction and particularity Light loved land on the East End, and over the next two decades she steadily acquired, parcel by parcel and mostly from her friend [Evan Frankel](#), 190 acres of additional farmland contiguous to Quail Hill, joking that "come the revolution, we'll at least have potatoes to eat."

Dependably Democratic, she ran for a seat on the East Hampton Town Board in 1978 but was "soundly beaten by

her own plumber." Appointed by a Republican in 1981 to the [Suffolk County Farmland Committee](#), she served a decade and in 1983 was asked to become a founding board member of the Peconic Land Trust based in Southampton.

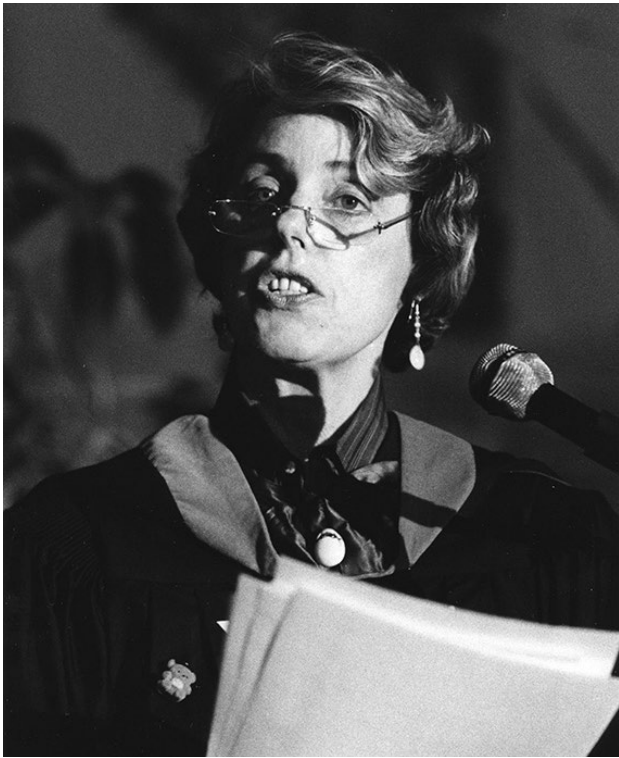
While she did enjoy what she called her "Wyoming view" east of her driveway, Light's intention throughout had been to preserve her land, and in 1990 she started the process with a donation of 20 of Quail Hill's 30 acres to the Peconic Land Trust for the benefit of the entire East End community. Five years later she followed this with a truly spectacular gift, also to the Trust, of 190 acres of adjacent farmland.

Her neighbors to the north, the de Cuevas family, similarly began commitments in 1990 with the Trust that ultimately resulted in the protection of over 400 acres of contiguous woodland -- and thus the bulk of the entire Amagansett watershed was privately protected in one sweep, anonymously noted in August 6, 1990, *New Yorker's* Talk of the Town under the ironic tag "Sharecroppers." The heart of Quail Hill became one of the original [Community Supported Agriculture \(CSA\) farms](#) in the United States and Light moved to a small house in the nearby village of Sag Harbor where she lived until 2009, delighted to have a postage-stamp backyard, a lower local profile, and "walkable proximity to the post office." A short film on Quail Hill Farm can be seen [here](#).

In the early 1980's, liberating herself from her last male lover and returning repeatedly to the question



With John Halsey, President of the Peconic Land Trust, and Lucy Bradley at the dedication of the Deborah Ann Light Preserve, 1995



Giving one of her many presentations on life passages, 1988

of why the three dominant world religions defined divinity as exclusively masculine, Light had a spiritual epiphany on a trip to Ireland and began to study and practice [Wicca](#), a neo-pagan, Earth-revering religion. In 1985 she received an M.A. in Religious Studies from Vermont College, Norwich University, writing her thesis on "Contemporary Goddess Worship: The Old Religion as Currently Practiced in the United States."

That year, Light met Ms. Jeri Baldwin of Ocala, Florida, and they became committed life-partners, maintaining separate residences in the North and South. Living in Quail Hill's historic 1870's windmill, Light quietly took up the moniker "Hedgewitch" and delighted in shocking some of the more staid elements of Hamptons society with her "radical pagan Wiccan feminist lesbianism," but was more often than not travelling elsewhere, giving presentations that celebrated life's rites of passage before women's and pagan groups nationwide. The Crooning of Crones, Medusa Speaks to Men, Of Witches and Wise Ones, and Women's Work in Women's Words were some of her more known pieces. As she began weaving together

poetry and performance in her travels, she became a passionate quilter at home, working for many years with a local South Fork quilting group named, appropriately enough, the Gathering of the Goddesses.

Her mother, Ann Jones Light, a longtime resident of neighboring East Hampton, member of the exclusive Maidstone Club, president of the East Hampton Ladies' Village Improvement Society, and staunch (if progressive) Irish Catholic, did not approve of her daughter's transformation. She died in 1989, and Deborah promptly auctioned her mother's jewelry at Christie's, using the proceeds to start the [Thanks Be To Grandmother Winifred Foundation](#), which gave 321 grants over the next decade to individual women 54 and older for projects designed to enrich the lives of other adult women. The archives of the Foundation are held in the [Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University](#).



At home in Sag Harbor with partner, Jeri Baldwin, celebrating her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, 1995

In 1993 Light proudly attended the [2nd Parliament of the World's Religions](#) in Chicago as a pagan and goddess-worshipping witch, where she represented a group of Wiccan organizations in the Assembly of Religious and Sacred Leaders. In 1999 she was invited to participate in the opening and closing ceremonies of the [3rd Parliament](#) in Cape Town, South Africa, where she was honored to share the stage





Official portrait, 2<sup>nd</sup> Parliament of World's Religions, Chicago, 1993

with Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama. Both events have been characterized as “coming out” moments for neo-paganism amidst the community of world religions. Light was clergy in the three largest U.S. pagan affiliations: [EarthSpirit](#) in Massachusetts, [Circle Sanctuary](#) in Wisconsin, and [Covenant of the Goddess](#) in California.

From 1986 onward, Light and Baldwin assembled 741 contiguous acres in north central Florida's Marion County, creating an educational organic farm, feminist retreat and nature preserve known as [Crones' Cradle Conserve](#). Becoming an integral part of the region, it became a private foundation in 2010. The Conserve provides produce and farm products to the neighboring towns of Ocala and Gainesville.

In 1994 Light was diagnosed with inoperable, terminal lung cancer and given a 95 percent chance of dying within six months. Refusing chemotherapy but undergoing 36 rounds of radiation, she lived another 21 years with verve and characteristic aplomb, finally moving in 2009 from Sag Harbor, New York, to Oak Hammock at the University

of Florida, a retirement community in Gainesville.

In a life of philanthropic generosity, civic service, spiritual practice, and no small amount of questioning and bold living, Deborah Ann Light leaves numerous and diverse communities across America inspired by her example.

She is survived by her beloved partner, Jeri Baldwin and her son, [Michael Light](#), an artist based in San Francisco.



Having a fine time with son, Michael, at a dinner gala, 1991