

## A Passion for

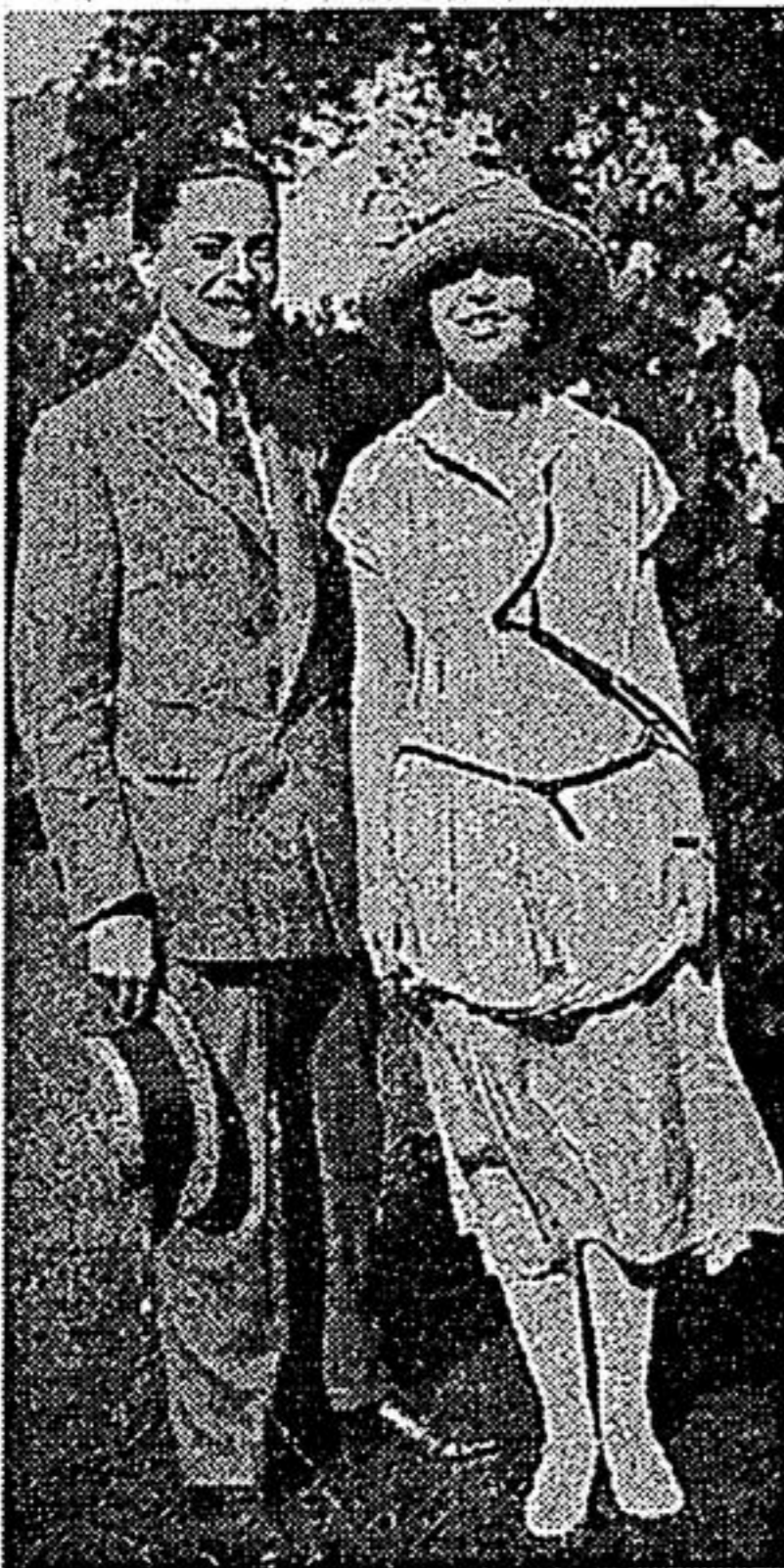
KATHLEEN GORMLEY MCKAY:

Patron of the Arts

1899~1996

To say that The Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery of Markham is the result of one person's efforts alone would dismiss the many who have worked so hard to see it come to fruition. Without Kathleen Gormley McKay, however, the gallery would certainly not exist, and quite likely, nor would many of the masterpieces it holds.

Kathleen Gormley McKay was born in Unionville in 1899. Her father, a landowner, and her mother, a gifted amateur singer, sent her to the Royal Conservatory of Music to study voice. She met her husband Donald while singing in a church choir and married him in 1927 in St. Phillips Church (located next to the gallery). Donald's job as a food chemist with a large American pharmaceutical company took the couple to Baltimore. In the late 1930s, Donald developed multiple sclerosis, forcing the couple to return to Toronto, where they purchased a rooming house.

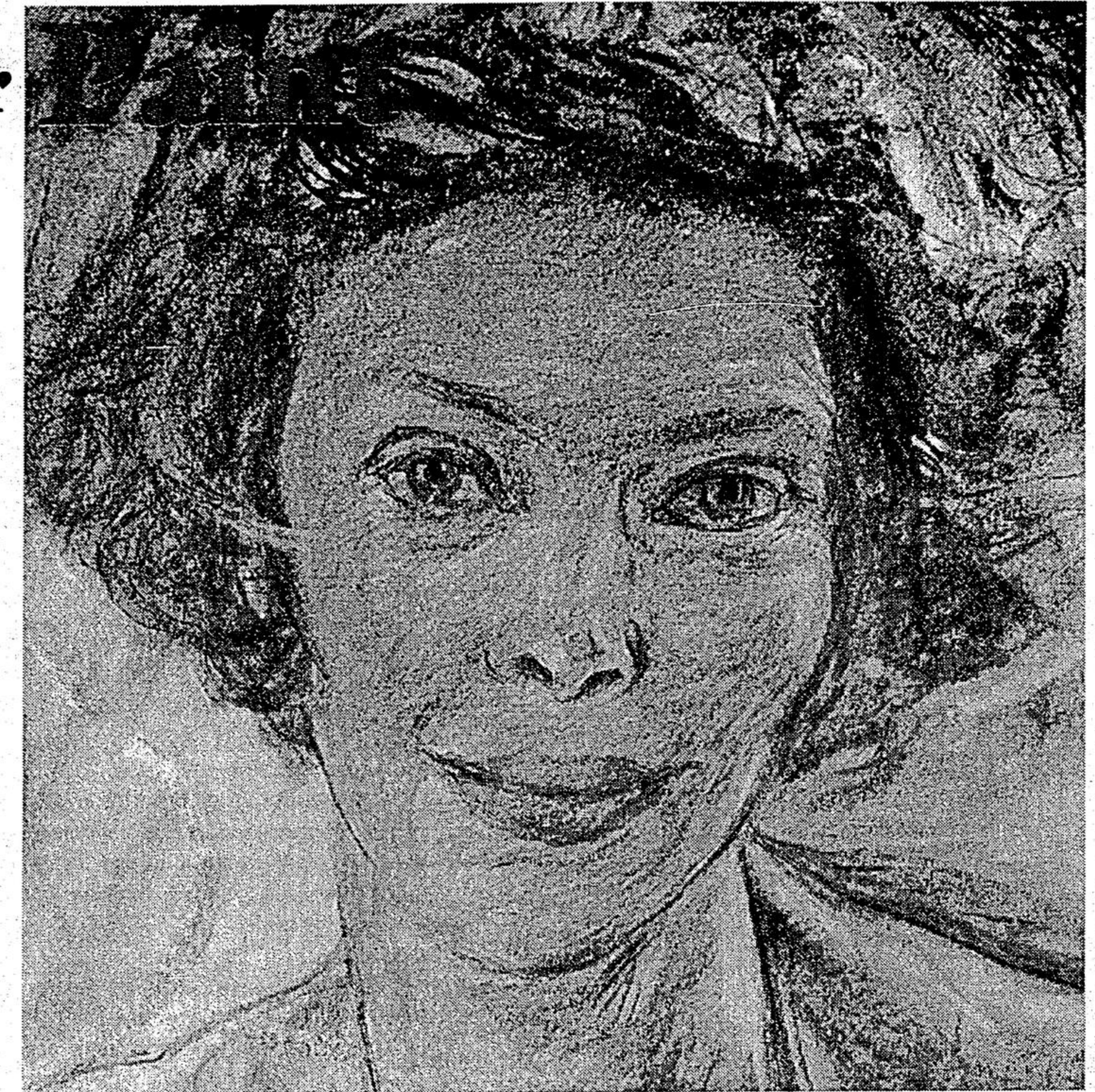


Donald and Kathleen  
c.1922

In 1952, Kathleen visited the studio of Frederick Varley to inquire about commissioning a portrait of her husband. For the next 17 years, a close friendship developed between the McKays and the aging artist, who shortly after their meeting, accepted an invitation to live with Kathleen and Donald. In 1957, the trio moved to Kathleen's ancestral home in Unionville, a Gothic Revival style cottage they dubbed

'Burdennet,' built originally by her great-grandfather, Salem Eckhardt in the 1840s.

Varley encouraged Kathleen's artistic efforts. The two often embarked on sketching trips together, Kathleen's art displaying a marked influence by her



Kathleen Gormley McKay was a frequent subject of Frederick Varley. This is a charcoal and pencil sketch, *Kathy* c.1953.

teacher. In turn, she nurtured Varley's artistic passion by setting up a studio for him in the basement of their Unionville home and flaunting his talents at every opportunity as a famed member of the Group of Seven.

Kathleen was a significant source of artistic inspiration for Varley in the last years of his life, often posing as his model. The insightful artist captured Kathleen's many moods, from his reverent depictions of her beauty and warmth to snapshots of her captivating smile and studies of his subject in tranquil repose. After her husband died in 1968, followed by Varley in 1969, Kathleen returned to Toronto with the considerable collection of works by Varley and his contemporaries she had

amassed over the years. Kathleen then sold her historic Unionville house to the Town of Markham in 1978. Ten years later, despite being courted by other art institutions, she signed an agreement with the town whereby she promised to donate her entire collection of more than 80 oil paintings, watercolours and drawings to be housed in a gallery suitable to their display and preservation. Soon after the town purchased a Unionville property at the northwest corner of Main Street and Carlton Road as the gallery site. Just a few short steps from that site, the cottage that had been home to Varley and the McKays

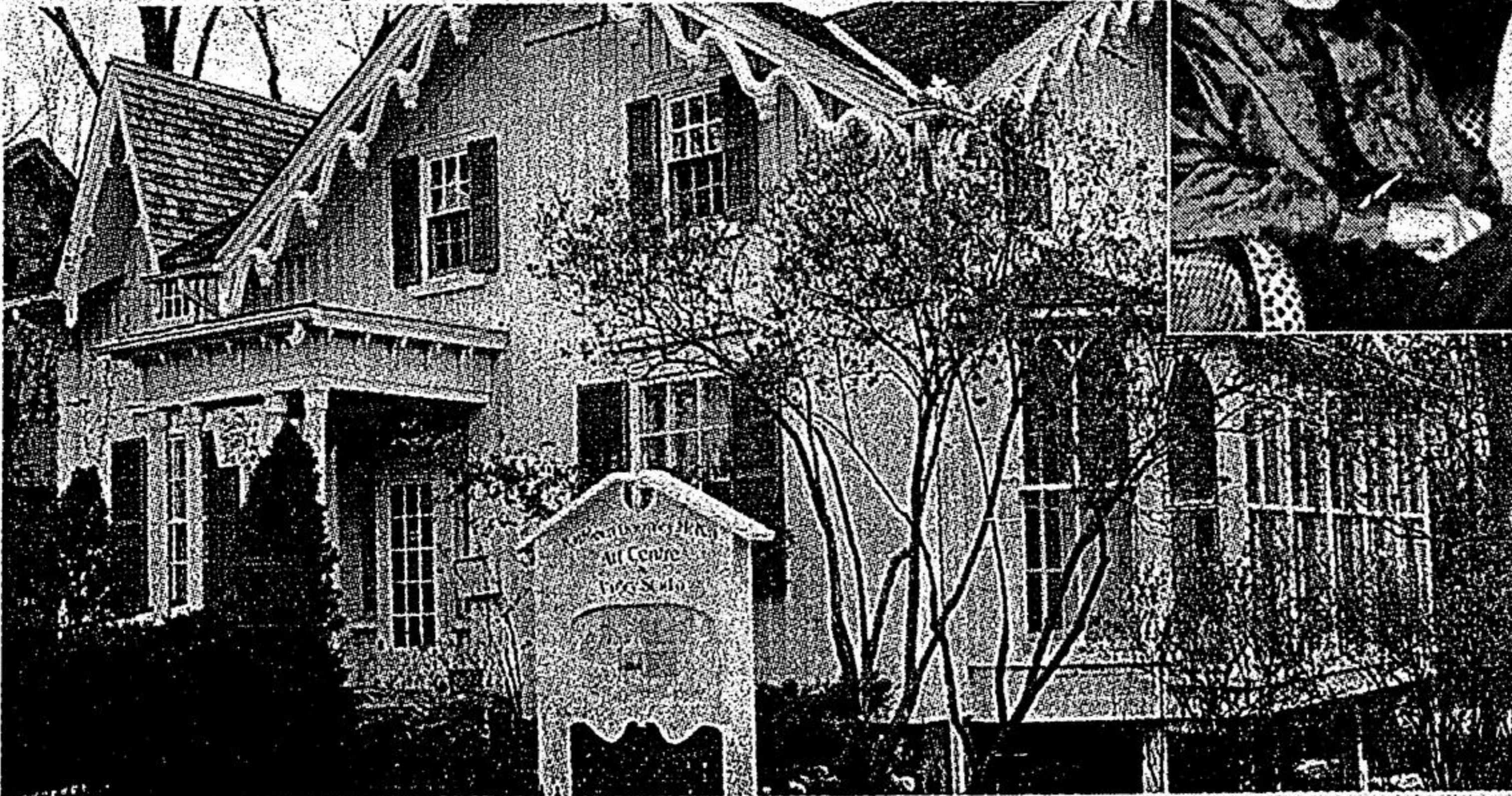
was converted into The Kathleen Gormley McKay Art Centre, a venue for exhibitions by local artists and art classes. Kathleen's longtime dream to establish The Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery of Markham began to materialize in the fall of 1994, with Kathleen the guest star at the groundbreaking ceremony. As

fate would have it, just months before the gallery was due to open, Kathleen McKay passed away in Toronto at the age of 97.

The guiding light behind The Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery of Markham will always be Kathleen Gormley McKay.

She is remembered affectionately by those who knew her as a woman of "indomitable spirit" possessing a "wry sense of humour" and displaying "great generosity."

Kathleen's gift is now a part of Markham's treasured legacy.



The former 'Burdennet' cottage on Unionville Main St., is now the Kathleen Gormley McKay Art Centre. Above, Varley and Gormley McKay at home, c.1957.

