

**Historic District Commission  
Town Hall, Room 204  
Final Meeting Minutes, May 13, 2014**

**Meeting called to order at 8:00 PM. Attending Kathy Acerbo-Bachmann (KAB), David Honn (DH), Pamela Lynn (PL), Ron Regan (RR), and Anita Rogers (AR). Michael Gowing as BofS rep.**

**David Shoemaker absent.**

**8:00 PM      Application 1406: Public Hearing - Request to remove the so-called "Asa Parlin House" located at 17 Woodbury Lane and to convert the site to another use.**

**Kathy Acerbo-Bachman read the public hearing notice**

**KAB outlined the order of the public hearing including a presentation by Director of Municipal Properties Dean Charter, questions and comments from the public and discussion by the HDC members. She clarified that there would not be a vote at the end of the evening.**

**As authorized by the Board of Selectman, Dean Charter explained that the selectmen had voted the Asa Parlin House on September 23<sup>rd</sup> as surplus to the needs of the town and to begin a RFP for the removal of the house from the site.**

**DC further explained that the house was purchased in 1996 to provide space for parking and a septic system for the newly renovated Acton Memorial Library. There were no specific plans for the house made at the time of purchase. The library project could not have been completed without land from the Vaillancourt parcel. The town created a hardship upon itself by buying the land to complete the library, thus creating a non-conforming lot. The Board of Appeals would likely not look favorably upon a request for a non-conforming lot as the town's purchase had created its own hardship.**

**An initial study generated a cost of 350k for full rehabilitation. The building was used for a short time as offices although it was not in the**

**best shape when purchased. In 2011 the Historic Commission (HC) submitted a request for a study to stabilize the building. This study, completed ten years after the initial one, was required by CPC in order to consider supporting a project.**

**The study indicated that the building had grown organically over 150 years, probably used as an agricultural building initially. The second study indicated the presence of various materials containing asbestos. The abatement costs had increased, suggesting a cost of three hundred thousand dollars for only use of the ground floor of the building. In 2012, HC made a second request for further study. The building was declared surplus in September, 2013.**

**Two members of the HC, Bill Klauer and Bill Dickinson, were involved in the most recent study. The building continues to deteriorate. The Selectman would like to propose an RFP in the hopes that someone would purchase and take all or pieces of it away. The Town Manager would evaluate these proposals which would then go back to the Selectman for a final decision. The cost of a complete demolition is estimated to be 80k.**

**Other questions that have come up include what to do with the site if the building is removed. DC believes that the consensus of the selectman at the time did not favor the addition of more parking. There is a great deal of interest among the neighbors to create and to maintain a buffer. DC would favor a green space with a kiosk indicating that the building had been located there. He does not think the pending traffic study would impact these plans. Although two of the selectman who voted for this plan have subsequently left the board, the remaining three still support the previous decision.**

**KAB clarified that the Board of Selectmen has declared the building surplus. HDC has the option to deny the application. HDC also has the option to accept the sale and removal of the building without demolition. The town can take no action without HDC approval. HDC will not be allowed to consider use for the building in reaching its decision. HDC will be voting on the contribution of the building to the surrounding area. Typically the HDC has not accepted demolitions**

**without knowing what will replace the existing structure. Up until now, HDC has required specific plans.**

**DH asked about a September, 2012 discussion, documented in the Menders, Torrey, Spencer report concerning abatement and demolition. "Can you demolish the newer part of the building without abating it?" DC indicated that the greatest abatement issue is located in the newest part. The architects' opinion was that the sections of the building could not be demolished without prior abatement. DH reiterated that his concern reflects the significant cost of the abatement. DC noted that it would be difficult and probably not legal for a contractor to demolish the building without prior abatement. He cited the abatement and subsequent demolition of the police station to construct the Public Safety Building as an example.**

**DH: "Was the surplus vote (by the BofS) synonymous with a vote for demolition?"**

**DC responded, "No."**

**PL asked about the Selectmen's view on parking. In spite of periodic conversations about parking pressures, he does not remember a majority of any BofS advocating increased parking. DC thinks people are willing to accept the inconvenience to keep green space.**

**RR "Is the primary reason for taking the building is to save money or don't know what to do with it? Space studies indicate the need for more office space but from a management point of view no one was able to identify a good use for the interior space and the cost is half a million dollars.**

**KAB clarified that just as HDC has no purview over use, it also does not have purview over money issues. As Acton has no demolition by neglect bylaw, the HDC cannot compel any citizen or entity to preserve and repair.**

**Terra F of Wright Terrace in West Acton emphasized that all Acton 2020 people talk about character, heritage and preservation. A Massachusetts**

**architects association has cited the Asa Parlin House on its quarterly tours as an indication of the structure's historical significance. Only four houses in Massachusetts are selected quarterly for this citation.**

**TF asked MG how much the town has spent on historic preservation throughout the town to which he responded "millions." TF emphasized that the money spent on historic preservation is small, perhaps one percent or less. People have told her that the character of the area should be saved.**

**Virginie Landre of 14 Newtown Rd. described walking Woodbury Lane recently and noting not just the impact of the house but the garden, too, on the streetscape. Nice houses on one side of the street and then parking lots on the other side. Preserving the house preserves the character of the area.**

**VL asked whether the structure could stay without any abatement? DC indicates that any adaptive use of the building would involve some drastic changes to the building and so an asbestos abatement issue. To abate the building, it is necessary to take the sheet rock off from the inside.**

**VL asked about the age of the additions to the original house. The oldest part is likely an agricultural outbuilding with beams dating to the late 1700's. Then the building was converted to a small cottage about 1870s. The newest portion was likely built in the 1970s.**

**VL asked about the viability of renting out the building. DC indicates that it would need to be brought up to current code if converted to a commercial use. VL asked whether it could be a setting to sell something cooked somewhere else. VL asked whether the original section could be stabilized and be used as an artifact. DC used the "set props" at MM National Park as an example of previous discussion points by the selectman. This approach was a favorite idea of the architects.**

**DH cited the specific costs from the most recent study in response to this question. (Menders, Torrey & Spencer, Inc., Conditions Assessment & Schematic Design Report, October, 2012, p. 45.)**

**DC indicated that the building is at a tipping point. The roof is at the end of its life. The wall next to the chimney is not stable. VL asked about the cost of just “mothballing” the building with a new roof and repairs, maintaining the 1970s portion without abatement.**

**DC’s memory of the architects’ view was that the Greek Revival section was the most important portion. Similarly the neighbors seemed most interested in maintaining the façade. The Board of Selectmen would be unlikely to have cost figures by the next HDC meeting. The report, cited earlier, estimated the cost of “mothballing” the original portion of the house, not the entire building.**

**John Quimby of 12 Woodbury Lane indicated the building recognizes a conundrum. The building holds the character of the street but any adaptive reuse might threaten the character of the street due to potentially excessive parking demand. He has thought about proposing keeping it, as its most historic rendition, as a place holder. Not doing anything for another ten years is also problematic. Identifying how stay to within the HDC’s stated goal while not increasing the existing parking is going to be difficult. He realizes HDC cannot compel the town to repair or restore but this evening he has recognized a new conundrum in that the town does not have a future plan for the area. Preserving the artifact, useless as that use may be, may be what we may end up concluding should be done.**

**JQ asked if there is any use that the town has thought about that would not increase parking. DC indicated discussion of stabilizing the 1860s section and using it for storage such as for equipment. Taking into consideration current code much more than that would likely cut into the existing parking.**

**MG, speaking as a citizen, asked JQ if the structure was demolished, what would JQ prefer to see if the parcel were not going to be just a green space? JQ responded that as a structure it blocs Woodbury Lane**

**from the parking lot. A green space would not have to be flat. He liked the articulation of the street scape concept as mentioned by VL earlier.**

**KAB is going to pause but not close the public comment section of the public hearing.**

**AR is filled with hesitation to take away the building and have Woodbury Lane become a one sided street. She sees all the problem but favors preserving something.**

**DH asked whether there had been additional comments (letters, emails, etc. to the HDC).**

**KAB read Anne Forbes comment sent to HDC by email focusing on the nature of the Asa Parlin House as a “small house” and as an indication of how Acton Center incrementally grew.**

**DH noted that one of the issues that drives this discussion is that the building is town owned and so construction contracts for abatement, demolition, stabilization and/or rehabilitation would have to be let according to prevailing wages which is what the current cost estimates are based upon. A private citizen would likely not need to pay so much. DH asked MG whether it could be sold or given away to a non-profit entity such as “Friends of the Asa Parlin House” who could then apply for CPC and other funds for construction services unencumbered by prevailing wage restrictions. MG indicated it could be.**

**KAB asked DH whether he wishes to express an opinion concerning the property.**

**DH noted that if the HDC agrees to preserve the Greek Revival section of the property, HDC is agreeing to a two-thirds demolition. He also stated that landscaping does not substitute for a building as an effective screen. He focused on the nature of an historic district and the inappropriateness of extracting one element from it. He would have trouble spending the requisite funds to make it a useable building. The artifact approach seems most logical.**

**KAB summarized that the decision must be view as a whole, the district.**

**PL spoke to the wisdom of the comments shared by AR and DH before her. The streetscape is important as is the structure itself in lieu of simply the creation of additional green space.**

**RR approaches the issue from thinking about the importance of the Asa Parlin House itself. A green space does not fit the need of defining what the historic district is. Taking the building down to put up another building seems incongruous. Preserving something historic is more important than creating something that looks historic.**

**KAB HDC's role is not just preserving structures but focusing on a district as a whole. As the district is on the National Register, the district as a whole matters. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. The town has invested in its historic features and is to be commended. The support for the Asa Parlin House, however, has not been commendable. KAB would have trouble supporting an approach of rewarding demolition by neglect and of establishing a precedent of accepting demolition without future plans.**

**KAB would be supportive of the National Parks approach of "mothballing" in the hopes that future groups would have a viable solution.**

**JQ asked for clarification of "giving it away." MG meant the building, whereas DH meant both the building and the land. JQ asked for further clarification about the "privatization" of the building. MG emphasized that it would be a non-conforming lot and so would pose additional challenges. DH noted that if there is no "use involving occupancy," then the non-conformance issue might be mitigated.**

**TF finds intriguing the idea of an entity taking it such as Ironwork Farm. She appreciates Anne Forbes comments and those of KAB that the whole is more than the sum of the parts.**

**VL asked about the cost. DH indicated that the report states approximately \$60k to abate the entire property and \$80k to demolish the most recent additions.**

**KAB concluded the public section of the public hearing. KAB cautioned the HDC members to think carefully.**

**DH emphasized that the Asa Parlin House is a vernacular building and that is the point made by Anne Forbes. The building is humble but it is relevant. Historic preservation is not always about saving the big, important building(s). The original house embodies an additive record of domestic construction in Acton and this is what's important in this instance.**

**Unanimously voted to accept adjournment of the public hearing to be continued on Tuesday, May 27<sup>th</sup>.**

**Respectfully submitted,**

**Pamela Lynn  
Secretary**