

Minutes
Meeting of Great Barrington Historical Commission
April 6, 2015
Meeting Room
Great Barrington Fire Station
Great Barrington, MA 01230

ATTENDING:

- *Members:* Paul Ivory, Gary Leveille, Bill Nappo, David Rutstein

MINUTES OF FEBRUARY 9, 2015

- On a motion by Gary and second by David, the February 9, 2015 minutes were approved unanimously.

HOUSATONIC SCHOOL FORM B PROJECT

- Background: The Housatonic Grammar School admitted its first classes in 1909 and served the community until 2004 when the Berkshire Hills Regional School District constructed new elementary and middle schools. Since its closing, the school has served as offices for the school district and BRIDGE, a non-profit promoting cultural understanding. The building, mothballed since 2010, is presently vacant. The town's annual maintenance costs for the building are \$50,000.

Two RFPs for the school have been issued by the town without any serious results. In 2005, the school district estimated a cost of \$901,000 to bring the building to code compliance. The town is preparing to issue a third RFP. To make this edition as attractive as possible to potential developers the town needs to verify that the building is eligible for historic tax credits. A privately owned building is eligible for historic tax credits if it is listed on the National Register or is judged by the Massachusetts Historical Commission to be *eligible for listing*. The school is neither on the National Register nor, inexplicably, the town architectural survey, c. 1980. The Massachusetts Historical Commission requires a completed Form B inventory form to determine eligibility for NR listing.

- Architectural Historian: Because of the lengthy, arduous and exacting nature of the Commission's project to research the site to complete Form B, Paul recommended to the Town Manager that the town hire a consultant architectural historian to complete the work. The Commission prepared a RFP and sent it to a list of four potential architectural historians to complete the work. One was out of the area and declined; one didn't respond; one expressed interest but didn't submit a proposal. Norene Roberts, Goshen, MA, who had completed the successful National Register nomination form for the Ramsdell Library, submitted an excellent proposal. She is an experienced and highly qualified candidate. The Town completed a contract for her to do the work, to be completed by the end of May. Paul and Gary will be the liaison with Norene. A key potential resource of information is through oral history. Blanche Koprek, a life-long resident of Housatonic and part of the Polish immigrant community, has already agreed to be interviewed.
- Sharon Gregory, a member of the Finance Committee, questioned the slow pace of the RFP process. David responded that the dearth of readily available information on the school was the biggest impediment. If the Town's application to the Massachusetts Historical Commission is successful, the historic tax credit component of the project will mean a significant dollar value to a developer. Sharon responded that the Iredale project to adapt the Bryant School as office space rejected the tax credit program because it was too restrictive and bureaucratic. Paul replied that when the money is available through this program, the paperwork is worth the trouble.
- Sharon asked about leeway in changing the interior of the Housatonic School. Paul responded that there should be no restrictions in modifying the interior. The exterior period appearance of the building is what is important. The project should follow the guidelines in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings, the field standard for projects on historic buildings.
- Sharon suggested the building could be used for technology enterprises, affordable housing or programs created by affiliation or with academic institutions. A grand vision is needed. Paul stated that the Historical Commission's priority is to apply for eligibility for listing on the National Register.

Selectman Ed Abrahams suggested putting out the widest net possible and screening ideas as they are submitted.

- Paul stated that it would be a colossal waste of a resource if the building were to be razed (the estimated cost for which is \$400,000).
- Sharon suggested application for a CPA grant. Bill responded that if the town retains ownership it could apply, but there has to be a solid project goal first. Gary stated that the Housatonic School Alumni Assoc. sponsors a scholarship program administered by the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation.

COLLECTIONS

Paul and Gary met with Archivist Margaret Cherin to discuss collection care issues and her work priorities.

- Collection Care Recommendations:
 - Install UV light filter film on windows
 - Write a housekeeping plan and use as basis for both in-house and town employee work program
 - Purchase hygromograph and regularly take and record readings. This will serve as a baseline record for a museum environmental consultant to recommend the most effective measures to stabilize temperature and relative humidity.
 - Prepare a plan to secure the collection from intrusion by unauthorized personnel.
- Archivist Work Program
 - Continue cataloging collection located at Ramsdell, Mason (paintings), and Wheeler Farmstead.
 - Monitor climate conditions at Ramsdell with new equipment.
 - Review Taylor collection computer entries for accuracy and fix errors made by volunteers.
 - Clean and protect ledgers, books and ephemera on shelving

JOINT MEETING WITH HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

- In absence of Don, Chair of the GBHDC, discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

PRESENTATION AT CPA PUBLIC MEETING APRIL 23

- The CPC has tentatively scheduled a public informational meeting for all CPA grant applicants on April 23 at St. James Place. Paul will represent the Newsboy project with illustrations and a briefing.
- Bill reported that Karen Smith will make a presentation for all projects at the town meeting.

CERTIFIED LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- In Don's absence, discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

FIRST RESISTANCE OBELISK

- In Don's absence, discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

METHODIST CHURCH PARSONAGE

- Paul documented the building with photographs.
- Ed Abrahams stated that the Selectboard will conduct a site visit for a special permit on Monday.

MAIN STREET RECONSTRUCTION PROJECT

- Paul will attend the site meeting to renew the salvage archaeology component of the project.
- St James Steps: The steps leading from the sidewalk to Main St. at the corner of Taconic and Main and in front of St. James Place are to be removed. Paul will approach the contractor to recommend the steps be moved further back. A second option is to contact Fred and Sally Harris at St James Place about their interest in incorporating the steps into their project plan (and thus preserving a small but important 19th century pedestrian amenity). Bill will contact them.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY HOUSE TOUR

- The Great Barrington Historical Society will present a tour of five local homes on May 2 from 1:00 to 5:00. Bill's house will be open as part of the program. Volunteers are still needed to sell tickets, serve as tour guides and to help with parking.

1995 TORNADO and WWII PLANE CRASH

- Gary reminded that Memorial Day Weekend will mark the 20th anniversary of the 1995 tornado that struck Great Barrington.
- This year is also the 70th anniversary of the crash of a WWII training plane into 106 Cottage St.

GARY LECTURE AT BCC

- Gary will present a local history lecture at Berkshire Community College on April 7

NEXT MEETING

- Monday June 1 at 7:00 pm.

ADJOURN

- Motion made, seconded and passed unanimously.