



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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MINUTES
RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION
April 13, 2022

Location:

R.I. Department of Business Regulation
560 Jefferson Boulevard, Warwick, R.I.
DBR Board Room, First Floor

I. MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr. Michael Abbott, AIA
Mr. Warren Ducharme, representing James Cambio, State Building Code Commissioner
Mr. Jeffrey Emidy, Interim State Historic Preservation Officer
Dr. Morgan Grefe
Ms. Roberta Groch, representing Meredith Brady, Associate Director, Division of
Statewide Planning
Ms. Kaity Ryan
Mr. Clark Schoettle
Ms. Ruth Taylor, Chair

MEMBERS ABSENT

Ms. Hilary Fagan, President, Rhode Island Commerce Corporation
Mr. Paul Jordan, representing Terrence Gray, Acting Director, Rhode Island Department
of Environmental Management
[Vacant]
[Vacant]
[Vacant]
[Vacant]
[Vacant]

STAFF PRESENT

Joanna Doherty, Principal Architectural Historian
Sarah Zurier, Principal Special Projects Coordinator

II. AGENDA

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:33 A.M., Ms. Taylor, Chair, presiding.

2. For approval: Minutes of March 9, 2022, Commission meeting

On a motion by Ms. Ryan, seconded by Mr. Abbott, the commissioners voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the March 9, 2022, Commission meeting as they appear in the draft.

3. Interim Executive Director's Report

Jeffrey Emidy reported that:

- a. The proposed window replacement at Riverside Middle School, in East Providence, has not progressed. At the last meeting, he told the commissioners about the project to replace the windows at the school, and that we were at an impasse with the East Providence Superintendent of Schools. There was nothing for the Commission to do last month because he was awaiting official notice that the school department was terminating consultation. He received a letter March 29th, informing him that the School Department does not believe that the Commission has proper jurisdiction over the project, but not explaining that opinion. The letter also says that they are going to go ahead with the plan they previously submitted and requested a "denial letter" from RIHPHC . He responded the next day with a letter stating that, since they are questioning RIHPHC jurisdiction, he needs to know what the federal and or state funding and permitting sources are for the project in order to respond. On April 4, he received an email from Superintendent Crowley stating that they forwarded our request to their lawyer and the Department of Education's lawyer and again requesting an RIHPHC denial letter. He replied that he needs the answers to his questions in order to know what regulations he is responding under. Superintendent Crowley replied that they are already months late due to this situation and to forward all information to the School Department attorneys and RIDE. He has heard nothing since.
- b. The State Historic Tax Credit program is about to sunset again, on June 30th. There are bills in the House (H7754) sponsored by Representatives Speakman, Donovan, Ajello, and Carson, and Senate (S2604) sponsored by Senators Euer, DiPalma, and Felag, to extend it. The Senate bill was scheduled for a hearing on April 7th. He has not heard how that went nor has he heard a date for the House bill.
- c. The Old State House Exterior Rehabilitation Project Ribbon Cutting event will be held today at 12:30. Governor McKee, Lieutenant Governor Matos, Senator Zurier, new director of DCAMM David Patten, and staff from Senator Reed's office are coming, among others. He invited the commissioners to come by after this meeting.

- d. A reporter from the *Boston Globe* is doing research for an article about the *Endeavour* shipwreck. He submitted an Access to Public Records Request to our office. The article could be about the relationship between RIHPHC and the RI Marine Archaeology Project/Dr. Kathy Abbass, or we're hearing that it might be primarily about Dr. Abbass and her organization. Mr. Emidy explained that he wanted the commissioners to be aware that something might come up.
 - e. At the March meeting, we talked about a policy for easement reviews by staff and the Commission. Mr. Emidy has not had a chance to pursue that further.
 - f. On March 28th, Preserve Rhode Island released the nomination forms for the annual Rhody Awards for Historic Preservation. We have included the announcement on RIHPHC social media. Nominations are due May 9th.
 - g. One staffing update to report is that Mr. Emidy submitted the initial paperwork to request authorization to fill Joyce Gervasio's CFO position. That is moving slowly through state HR. The request is to use a different job title than Ms. Gervasio was working under, one that is more specific to what we need; she was working under a very general job description. Mr. Abbott asked about progress to fill other vacancies. Mr. Emidy explained that some of them are being considered for changes in the job descriptions or salary increases, so we are holding off on those until those changes are processed, in order to attract more or better candidates.
4. For consideration: State Historic Preservation Review Board action
Final approval: Woonsocket Company/Bernon Mills Historic District –
Additional Information
Front Street, Woonsocket

Mr. Emidy reported that the State Historic Preservation Review Board had, at its meeting on January 3, approved a nomination for additional information on the Woonsocket Company/Bernon Mills Historic District to be sent to the National Park Service for inclusion. The district was listed in the National Register in 1973. The property has been partially vacant and partially redeveloped since about 2008. The current proposal to redevelop the remaining buildings using tax credits required a reassessment of the 1973 nomination. MacRostie Historic Advisors' Ryan Cameron wrote the additional documentation.

The mill complex is located in the center of the city, along the east bank of the Blackstone River, just downstream of the flood control dam and Market Square and east of Main Street. When the complex was listed in 1973, six resources were noted in the inventory, the period of significance was "19th century," and areas of significance were architecture and industry. The history recounted in the nomination is thin and focused on the textile use of the property. As was the norm at the time, contributing and non-contributing status for the resources was not assigned, so everything that was mentioned in the nomination is presumed to be a contributing resource.

The 1973 nomination's property map is a sketch; it is not to scale, building footprints are not accurate, and it does not include all of the buildings on the site. Resources included in the 1973 nomination include: the Number 1 Mill, built in 1827-28 for the Russell Manufacturing Company - the oldest factory in the country using slow-burning construction; the Number 2 Mill, built in 1833 for the Woonsocket Company, that building was converted into condominiums between 2005 and 2007; the Number 4 Mill, which was built in 1859; a small commercial building that was built by 1911; and a Power Plant that was demolished about 2008 during a redevelopment effort. With the exception of the Power Plant, these all remain today as contributing resources.

The information being added to the nomination includes twentieth century use of the site. The Woonsocket Company went out of business in 1883, and the complex was purchased by the Woonsocket Electric Machine and Power Company in 1887. This company would become the Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric Company in 1912. The Woonsocket Electric Machine and Power Company played a vital role in the spread of electrical use within Woonsocket, but also to neighboring towns in Rhode Island and just over the state line into Massachusetts. Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric (BVG&E) followed suit, eventually providing services to Woonsocket, Cumberland, Lincoln, Pawtucket, Central Falls, and North Smithfield. Valley Gas was eventually split off from BVG&E. In the 1980s, Narragansett Electric purchased BVE, then National Grid purchased both the former Valley Gas and BVE.

This additional documentation more accurately defines and extends the period of significance for the district from "19th century" to "1827 to 1968" to include the use of the property for electrical generation and to end when BVE built its new headquarters in Lincoln in 1968 and moved most of its operations there. They would all eventually be moved to Lincoln.

Three extant buildings were not included in the 1973 nomination, a garage, a power house, and a gate house. The garage was built in 1904 for the Woonsocket Electric Machine and Power Company as its garage and auto repair shop. It is a two-story, brick building. An interesting feature is a set of double doors on the second story that used to open to an exterior ramp that allowed trucks to be driven up and inside the building for maintenance. The building has a steel frame for the second floor, with a concrete floor containing pans or openings so you can access the bottom of a vehicle or for draining fluids.

The power house is a small, concrete structure that was constructed between circa 1903 and 1911. It has been truncated somewhat at the top and one end. The earlier power trench was diverted to supply water to run equipment in this building. The small, wood-framed gate house was constructed at the Front Street entrance to the lot in 2007. It is considered non-contributing.

The additional documentation that is being added for the Woonsocket Company/Bernon Mills is not meant to be a re-write of the nomination. It does not really contribute a lot of new historical information to the period that is already covered. However, it will provide a better, more accurate map, with a more accurate boundary for the property and more accurate building footprints both on, and adjacent to, the parcel. It will update the building and structure count to remove the power plant and add the power house, garage, and gate house. It will extend the Period of Significance from “19th century” to 1827-1968 to include not only the textile manufacturing use of the property, but also the electrical generation use, and also to explain the context of the electrical generation history of the property. It will also provide updated photographs of all of the buildings on the site. The staff agree that this additional documentation makes the case for adding the later, electricity generation facilities to the nomination, with the garage and power house as contributing resources.

Mr. Schoettle noted that the western boundary of the property is drawn in the middle of the Blackstone River on the 1973 map, but on the eastern edge of the river on the new map. He asked which is correct. Mr. Emidy explained that the new map is correct; it conforms to property lines.

A motion to support the Review Board action was made by Dr. Grefe and seconded by Mr. Abbott. The Commission voted unanimously to approve the motion.

5. For information: Update on Rhode Island Cemetery Weeks

Sarah Zurier reported that Rhode Island Cemetery Weeks program, the RIHPHC’s collaboration with the R.I. Advisory Commission on Historical Cemeteries, has begun. As of today, there are 87 programs being offered, and it is likely that a few more will be added. She reminded the Commission that this all started with them; when we spoke about the 2022 RIHPHC conference, Dr. Grefe asked if we could look at landscapes. When the conference was cancelled, that theme remained. Cemetery Weeks has really been an effort to connect people and it has already received some good press coverage. Ms. Zurier encouraged the commissioners to check our website for the schedule and to try to attend one or more events.

6. For information: Update on RIHPHC executive director hiring process

Ms. Taylor reported that there hasn’t been progress since our last meeting. The state employment specialists have approved the hiring, and now it has moved on to the budget department. Mr. Abbott stated that the budget should not be a problem since we’ve always had an executive director. Ms. Taylor stated that she will continue periodically checking in with her state HR contacts.

7. Announcements

- a. The next Commission meeting will be held on May 11, 2022.
- b. Mr. Emidy stated that he has an announcement that came in after the agenda was posted, but which is important. We found out on Monday that we have been awarded a \$50,000 Underrepresented Community Grant by the National Park Service. This will allow us to hire a consultant to prepare a Multiple Property Documentation Form for African American Civil Rights in Rhode Island and to nominate four properties to the NR. This builds off a partnership that we had with the R.I. Historical Society and the R.I. Black Heritage Society in 2019 to document, interpret, and preserve sites associated with Rhode Island's Civil Rights history. He thanked Joanna Doherty, Sarah Zurier, and Katy Pomplun for preparing our grant application.

Ms. Ryan asked if the properties to be nominated have already been identified. Dr. Grefe stated that they were, in the initial project, which yielded a report and two exhibits at the Historical Society. Mr. Abbott asked if the Commission could contribute more funding for more listings. Joanna Doherty replied that we are preparing a Multiple Property Submission, which will make it easier to add more individual properties later. The earlier effort only looked at 20th century resources. We built a look at earlier resources into the application for this new grant, so we should pick up some more.

8. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:07am.

Minutes recorded by,



Jeffrey D. Emidy
Interim Executive Director