



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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MINUTES
RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
April 3, 2023
9:30 am

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
Dr. Patrick Malone
Mr. Keith Stokes
Ms. Martha Werenfels, AIA

MEMBERS ABSENT

Dr. Ronald Onorato, Chairman
Mr. Edward F. Sanderson
Vacant
Vacant
Vacant (archaeologist)
Vacant (architectural historian)
Vacant (landscape architect/historian)

STAFF PRESENT

Ms. Joanna Doherty, Principal Architectural Historian
Mr. Jeffrey Emidy, Executive Director

II. AGENDA

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:37 A.M. by Ms. Werenfels.

2. Approval of minutes of December 5, 2022, meeting

On a motion by Mr. Abbott, seconded by Mr. Stokes, the Review Board unanimously VOTED TO APPROVE the minutes of the December 5, 2022, meeting, without changes.

3. Executive Director's Report

Mr. Emidy reported that:

- a) Regarding nomination processing updates:
 - i. Joanna Doherty sent the nomination for St. Mary's Episcopal Church, on East Main Road in Portsmouth, which the Board approved at the December meeting, to the National Park Service (NPS). It was listed in the National Register on March 24th. Ms. Doherty had to do a little extra work on this nomination because it was sent back to us with some questions that she had to resolve. This may be due to us having a new reviewer at the NPS. Thank you to Ms. Doherty and to Kathy Cavanaugh for preparing the nomination.
 - ii. A few other nominations are in the pipeline:
 1. Arctic Mill, in West Warwick: a tax credit project. We have returned the draft nomination to the preparer to ask them to add a few resources that were part of the complex but which are not part of the rehabilitation project. These include waterpower infrastructure and a couple of industrial buildings that are on separate parcels.
 2. Federal Street Historic District, in Woonsocket: the Board saw this as a preliminary. We have received a draft and are in the process of reviewing it. Sarah Zurier is working on that nomination.
 3. The Thomas Allin House in Barrington. We were first contacted about this a couple of years ago. The homeowner is writing the nomination. We reviewed a draft and provided substantial comments and edits, then we didn't hear anything for a long time. A few weeks ago, a revised draft came in. The draft is in the queue for review.
 4. Roger Williams Memorial, Providence. The NPS prepared this nomination. When we reviewed the initial draft, we found a lot of problems with it. We returned our comments to the NPS and recently received a revised draft. That draft is in the queue to be reviewed.
- b) Deputy Director hiring process: The Deputy Director will be the head of the National Register program, among other things. Since our last meeting, the application process has opened and closed. We received some very good applications and have been conducting interviews. We hope to offer the job to someone very soon.
- c) National Register staff update: Also since our last meeting, Sarah Zurier has moved over to the National Register/survey program. For administrative purposes, this is essentially a reassignment of responsibilities. Because of the way our job descriptions are written, she didn't have to change jobs in the state system. She is filling the spot vacated by Liz Warburton around November 2021. Because we are short staffed and just getting started with hiring, Sarah is doing double-duty in her old job and new, so she's not fully on National Register duties yet. We'll move her over completely once we fill her old position. The timeframe for that remains to be determined.

- d) Rhode Island Cemetery Weeks update: Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Awareness and Preservation Weeks 2023 are underway throughout April and May. We are working with the R.I. Advisory Commission on Historical Cemeteries again. Sarah Zurier and Charlotte Taylor are organizing on our end, as they did last year. The calendar is available via a link on our website.

Dr. Malone stated that he has noticed a lot of lichen growing on the stones in the Prince's Hill Cemetery in Barrington, and asked if there is a treatment for this. Mr. Stokes stated that in Newport, on slate stones, they use warm water and soap as a gentle treatment. He thinks it might be the result of trees that are not natural to cemeteries, but which have sprouted or been planted over the years. Mr. Emidy stated that he would mention this to Charlotte Taylor to take the question to the Cemetery Commission. Mr. Abbott asked if the Cemetery Commission could put out a 'white paper' on what people can do to help.

4. For vote: National Register of Historic Places preliminary review
Gideon Burgess House
24A Burgess Road, Foster

Ms. Doherty made a presentation for preliminary National Register review of the Gideon Burgess House, at 24A Burgess Road in Foster. The owner is interested in listing. In the RIHPHC's 1982 report entitled *Foster, Rhode Island, Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-F-1*, the property is recommended for further study to determine if it meets National Register criteria. The Gideon Burgess House was built ca. 1820 and sits at the end of a long entry drive lined with dry-laid stone walls and trees. The south-facing, two-story, Federal-style home is five bays wide and has a center entry with a Greek Revival-style door surround that is likely a later alteration. The foundation is granite, exterior walls are clad in wood clapboard with plain wood corner boards, and the side-gable roof is sheathed in asphalt shingles. A brick center chimney rises from the ridge of the roof. Window openings have simple wood surrounds and are filled with six-over-six, double-hung wood sash on the first and second floors; windows in the attic include one six-over-one wood sash and two vinyl sash. A one-story, shed-roof porch – added in the early 20th century – extends off the east end of the house. The house has a typical five-room floor plan, with two rooms to either side of the vestibule/stair hall and three across the back of the house. Historic interior finishes include wide-plank wood flooring, four-panel doors, plank doors, and wood window and door trim. There are several fireplaces in the home with wood surrounds; the kitchen fireplace has a massive granite header and a beehive oven. The property, which totals approximately 18 acres, also includes a small family burial ground known as Rhode Island Historic Cemetery FR002, a stone-lined well, a pre-1939 wood-frame barn, and two ca. 1980 outbuildings.

The Burgess family owned the property until at least the late 19th century. Three generations of Burgesses served in the Rhode Island General Assembly: Gideon Burgess II (ca. 1779-1845), who built the house; his son, Gideon Burgess III (ca.

1807-1883); and his grandson, Albert Burgess (1828-1910). In addition, the house is the birthplace of Nelson Aldrich (1841-1915), who served as a United States Senator from 1881 to 1911. The property was farmed for decades; aerial photographs indicate that it was planted with orchards into the mid-20th century.

There was a discussion among the Board members, Ms. Doherty, and the property owner about the window configuration, as the historic photograph shows two-over-two sash in the front, right room on the first floor. Ms. Doherty pointed out that those sash are shown in photographs as late as 1935.

Ms. Werenfels asked if Senator Aldrich's importance would factor into the significance consideration for the nomination. Ms. Doherty replied that birthplaces are not generally eligible because they are birthplaces of historic figures. Senator Aldrich would, of course, be mentioned, but the significance of the nomination would not hang on his importance.

Ms. Werenfels asked about the role of the cemetery in the nomination. Ms. Doherty stated that it certainly adds to the property's significance.

Mr. Abbott stated that the property looks very interesting and he believes it is eligible. He will be interested to see more information on the barn.

A motion to confirm that the Gideon Burgess House is a good candidate for listing in the National Register was made by Ms. Werenfels and seconded by Mr. Abbott. The Board voted unanimously to approve the motion.

5. For vote: National Register of Historic Places preliminary review
The Blue Garden
74 Beacon Hill Road, Newport

Ms. Doherty made a presentation for preliminary National Register review of the Blue Garden at 74 Beacon Hill Road, in Newport. The Blue Garden is privately owned by a charitable trust and is open to the public one day per week during the summer months. The request for a National Register evaluation was made by the garden's director.

The Blue Garden is located within the boundary of the Ocean Drive Historic District, which was listed in the National Register in 1976. However, at the time of listing, the garden was in ruins and the mansion with which it had been associated had recently burned. Consequently, the garden is not mentioned or otherwise accounted for in the district nomination. The inventory entry for the estate talks only of some surviving outbuildings and "untended" grounds. Since that time, the garden has been re-established. The Blue Garden is now on its own lot, which also contains an office/maintenance building and a greenhouse.

The Blue Garden was designed by the Olmsted Brothers and constructed in 1913. It was part of “Beacon Hill,” the estate of Arthur Curtiss James and Harriet Parsons James. Arthur Curtiss James was a railroad magnate; he purchased the property in 1908. In the 1920s, the estate included the mansion, carriage house, and a telescope house on axis with the Blue Garden. In the original Olmsted plan for the estate, there was an informal garden northeast of the house. By 1912, at the behest of Harriet James, the Olmsted Brothers had replaced this informal garden with the very formal Blue Garden.

The Olmsted Brothers created a scheme for a garden with two separate, but related elements: a cruciform-shaped garden delineated by walls and filled with geometric planting beds to the south and an open swath of lawn to the north. Both ends of the garden would be marked by a pergola – each visible from the other across a long vista. A long pool, which was shallow and lined with blue tiles arranged in a Persian-inspired pattern, had fine spray jets along the sides and was connected to a lily pond by a narrow runnel. Plantings were, as the name of the garden suggests, perennials and annuals in shades of blue, purple and white.

The south pergola incorporated granite columns from the original mansion on the estate, which the Jameses had replaced. A waterfall and rock garden provided a backdrop for the pergola. The north pergola was built of local fieldstone, contrasting with the granite and concrete of the south pergola. It was rebuilt and restyled in a more Classical form in the 1920s.

Arthur Curtis James and Harriet Parsons James died in 1941 and a long period of decline of the property commenced. The mansion burned in 1967. By 1981, the estate had been subdivided, a new house stood near the location of the James’ mansion, and the Blue Garden was in ruins, with a house built at its north end, partly on top of the site of the north pergola.

In 2012, Dorrance Hamilton, who owned an adjacent parcel, purchased the lot that contained the Blue Garden. She had the 1979 house torn down and began the process of re-establishing the garden, working with landscape architects Reed Hilderbrand to develop a scheme that renewed and reinterpreted the garden. It was not a strict restoration, but was based in part on what original material had and had not survived and a desire to create a more sustainable, less maintenance-heavy planting scheme. What remained included the blue-tiled long pool, lily pond, head pool, and the runnel that connected them, and degraded portions of the stucco garden walls. The southern pergola was very degraded- its western end was severely damaged and at the eastern end were remnants of the concrete steps and tile borders. Its stucco surfaces were in very poor condition. The northern pergola was gone, as were the planting beds.

Where possible, historic material was retained in the re-establishment of the garden: the patterned blocks and coping around the long pool, and whatever could be salvaged from the south pergola were removed, numbered and stored for re-installation. These elements were also used to replicate items that were missing and needed to be recreated. Portions of the treads at the south pergola

served as molds for replacements. The southern pergola could not be re-built in its exact original location, because when the James estate was subdivided, a property line was drawn through that spot. The solution was to rebuild it slightly to the north – in a location where it appears in an early plan by the Olmsted Brothers, not the final plan. No remnants of the northern pergola survived, and there were few plans – so it was recreated based on some Olmsted sketches and historic photos. Local stone was used, in a pattern that reflected the original rustic character of the pergola as designed by the Olmsted firm. The head pool was recreated with a new sea creature, based on historical drawings. The walls and tiles of the pools were cleaned, making it possible for repairs to the concrete to match the original color. The planting beds were re-established, but utilizing a simplified palette with drought-resistant, long-blooming plants – still in blue, purple and white hues.

Because of the nature of the work, staff have a number of questions that they would like the Board to consider.

- Has the Blue Garden lost its historic context? It was one element of a larger landscape plan for the James' estate; that larger landscape does not survive. Is it by itself National Register eligible?
- Does the Blue Garden retain enough historic material and integrity to be National Register eligible?
- Is it more of a reconstruction than a restoration? If most or all of a resource's fabric is not original, then it must meet National Register Criteria Consideration E:
 - *A reconstructed building [may be eligible] when accurately executed in a suitable environment and presented in a dignified manner as part of a restoration master plan, and when no other building or structure with the same association has survived*
 - *Accurately executed means:* the reconstruction must be based upon sound archeological, architectural, and historic data
 - *Suitable environment means:* the reconstructed property must be located at the same site as the original. It must be part of a larger group of historic structures that retain integrity
 - *Part of a restoration master plan means:* it must be an essential component of a master plan that encompasses the entire area, and which emphasizes restoration not reconstruction
- If the Blue Garden is not individually eligible for the National Register, could the Ocean Drive Historic District nomination be amended to include it as a contributing resource?

The Board spoke briefly about the issue of restoration versus reconstruction. Ms. Werenfels stated her opinion that the Blue Garden is a reconstruction, not a restoration, because approximately 80 percent is new material.

Dr. Malone stated that he is in favor of including the Blue Garden as a contributing resource in the historic district. He stated that landscapes change over

time, so he thinks changes at the Blue Garden are acceptable.

Mr. Abbott stated that he is in favor of eligibility because it is a landscape, a resource type that is underrepresented. Also because the design survives – he applauds them for putting it back together. Ms. Werenfels agreed.

Ms. Werenfels also stated that she is favor of discussing the situation with the NPS. Mr. Stokes agreed and stated that he would like to see more information about how much of the garden is new and how much is restored. Ms. Werenfels agreed, stating that staff should ask the NPS first. She further stated that this was a great project.

Ms. Doherty read emails on the topic from Review Board member Edward Sanderson and chair Ron Onorato, who could not attend the meeting. Mr. Sanderson' conclusion was that, "I'm a big fan of the Blue Garden, and I agree with the design and planting decisions made; but I'm not convinced that Blue Garden meets the National Register criteria considerations for reconstructed properties." Dr. Onorato's email stated, "I know that the garden as it now is reflects a recreation of what was there (albeit after much research) and while landscapes do certainly evolve over time, was [sic] what remained before the restoration/recreation retain enough integrity to suggest a continuity with the original...put another way, is it more a reflection of contemporary restoration efforts and ethos than a century-plus old garden?"

6. Announcements

The next meeting will be held on Monday, June 5, 2023.

7. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 10:50 A.M.

Minutes recorded by,



Jeffrey D. Emidy
Executive Director
Interim State Historic Preservation Officer