



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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MINUTES
RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
June 5, 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

Dr. Patrick Malone
Dr. Ronald Onorato, Chairman
Mr. Edward F. Sanderson
Mr. Keith Stokes
Ms. Martha Werenfels, AIA

MEMBERS ABSENT

Mr. Michael Abbott, AIA
Vacant
Vacant
Vacant (archaeologist)
Vacant (architectural historian)
Vacant (landscape architect/historian)

STAFF PRESENT

Ms. Joanna Doherty, Deputy Director
Ms. Sarah Zurier, Principal Historic Preservation Specialist

II. AGENDA

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:26 A.M. by Dr. Onorato.

2. Approval of minutes of April 3, 2023, meeting

On a motion by Mr. Stokes, seconded by Ms. Werenfels, the Review Board unanimously VOTED TO APPROVE the minutes of the April 3, 2023, meeting, without changes.

3. Deputy Director's Report

Ms. Doherty reported that:

- a) Regarding nomination processing updates:
 - i. There have been no new National Register listings since we last met.
 - ii. Several nominations are currently undergoing staff review and will be presented to the State Review Board for final approval in the coming months, including:
 1. Arctic Mill in West Warwick
 2. Federal Street Historic District in Woonsocket
 3. Thomas Allin House in Barrington
 - iii. Staff continues to receive inquiries regarding potential National Register properties on a regular basis. Recent inquiries have concerned properties in Providence, Burrillville, Cranston, East Greenwich, Smithfield, and Warren.
 - iv. The Commission will be voting on a slate of Certified Local Government grant awards at its meeting on June 14; those grants will generate some survey and National Register projects.
- b) African American Civil Rights grant project update: The Commission received \$50,000 from the National Park Service's Underrepresented Communities Grant program to undertake documentation of sites related to the African American civil rights movement in Rhode Island. This builds on a previous project, done in partnership with the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, which focused on sites associated with the 20th century; this project will focus on properties related to people, events, and organizations significant to the struggle for African American equality in the 19th century and earlier. The project will result in 50 survey forms, a survey report, and the nomination of one property to the National Register. The Public Archaeology Laboratory has been hired as the project consultant and work has begun. Ultimately, the goal is to create a Multiple Property Documentation Form for the theme of Black Civil Rights, which will streamline the nomination of properties related to that theme, though that is not part of the scope of work for this grant project.

4. For consideration:

National Register of Historic Places preliminary review

Portsmouth Camp Meeting
69 Hedly Street, Portsmouth

Ms. Zurier made a presentation for preliminary National Register review of the Portsmouth Camp Meeting at 69 Hedly Street in Portsmouth. The owner is interested in listing.

Portsmouth Camp Meeting (PCM) is located on a five-acre rectangular parcel in central Portsmouth. It is bounded by Hedly Street to the south, Town Access Road to the west, largely Town-owned land to the north, and Portsmouth Evangelical Friends Church to the east. While the four-lane corridor of East Main Road is located 600 feet east of the property, the immediate surrounding area has a rural character with large expanses of open space and scattered single-family residences on large lots. PCM's setting is also rural, with a low fieldstone wall running along Hedly Street and trees and woods encircling the site. The landscape consists of lawns and fields, groves of largely deciduous trees, rock outcroppings, unpaved circulation paths, as well as recreation features like a basketball court and a horseshoe court.

When the property was first used to host a religious camp meeting, it was occupied by canvas tents. While none of the original tents survive, the locations of existing buildings (like the Tabernacle) may provide information about the original configuration. According to the Portsmouth Tax Assessor, there are 35 buildings and structures on the site. More than two dozen 1- and 1.5-story buildings (dwellings, sheds, a bookstore, a dining hall, and a small chapel) are arranged along the perimeter facing the center of the property. Most of the community buildings, such as the 1-story Tabernacle, 2.5-story girls dormitory, 2.5-story boys dormitory, 2-story new hall, and 1-story children's chapel are located near the center of the property. Most buildings are wood-frame with gable roofs; one cottage incorporates a century-old trolley in its construction. The buildings display various states of repair. A handful have been winterized, but most are in use only during the summer months. Siding includes clapboards, wood shingles, novelty siding, and vinyl siding. Some buildings retain their historic wood sash windows, while others have replacement windows. While a few cottages display vernacular expressions of period styles (such as jigsawn porch balusters, a gambrel roof, etc.), the construction is, as architectural historian William H. Jordy put it, "plain and to the point." Built over the course of a century or more, the majority of buildings and structures continue to serve the purposes for which they were erected.

The Portsmouth Camp Meeting describes itself as a "non-denominational Christian family camp with a 10-day camp meeting each August." It originated in July 1891, when Seth Cook Rees (1854-1933) of the Portsmouth Friends Meeting (the congregation's first professional pastor) walked west of the Friends Cemetery and discovered an undeveloped parcel. He and his wife Hulda Johnson Rees drew followers to the site to clear land, build tents, and worship together. By 1892, she

wrote that “37 tents have been engaged already which with 8 large tents and the large tent Tabernacle which will seat 400 and the cook and eating house make quite a town.” In the summer of 1896, the property held 100 family tents, 8 society tents, a house for preachers, a 20-room rooming house, a dining hall, and the Tabernacle building (which could hold 1300).

Over time, all of the early canvas tents were replaced by wood-frame dormitories, cottages, and sheds – though each summer, dozens of temporary tents and trailers pop up for the 10-day camp meeting. Buildings have been altered over time, to incorporate new systems and accommodate new users. The Tabernacle was expanded to the east and north after 1976 to provide additional seating. The original pews and light fixtures were replaced with fixtures from another church.

The Portsmouth Camp Meeting is representative of the post-Civil War camp meeting movement among several American Christian sects, including Methodists, Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Adventists. A new wave of camp meetings spread across the country, drawing the faithful to rural and resort destinations to live and worship together in the summertime. Seth Cook Rees emerged as a national leader in the Holiness movement and became affiliated with several other organizations including the independent Emmanuel Church in Providence, International Holiness Union and Prayer League, Church of the Nazarene, and Pilgrim Holiness Church.

In Rhode Island, other examples of camp meeting sites and non-denominational resort architecture include Cliff Cottage Association of Newport (1860s development with a few surviving cottages); Buttonwoods Beach Association in Warwick (resort founded in 1871 for worship and summer living, listed in NR 1984), Conanicut Park in Jamestown (development started in 1873; some altered cottages survive), Watch Hill Union Chapel in Westerly (built 1876-77+ for non-denominational worship, listed on NR as contributing resource in Watch Hill HD in 1985), Adventist Camp Meeting Grounds in Coventry (active 1880-1990s but now abandoned), and the Bailey Camp Meeting Association in Johnston (met in early 20th century on grounds outside Shang Bailey Hotel in Johnston (NR, 1984)). The Portsmouth Camp Meeting represents the most complete and intact such site in Rhode Island.

Ms. Werenfels asked if the Tabernacle had originally been open-sided, as was typical at other camp meetings. Mr. Onorato said that was the case at Ocean Grove in New Jersey. Ms. Zurier replied that a historic photo, possibly from the 1920s, shows that it was enclosed at that time but that more research could be done.

Dr. Onorato wondered how long the camp meeting remained connected with the Quaker meeting next door. He also asked if the camp-owned buildings are concentrated in a certain part of the grounds, separate from the privately-owned buildings, and if the boundary could be drawn to exclude privately-owned buildings if some owners object to listing.

Mr. Sanderson asked if people who own buildings on the property, but not the land on which those buildings stand, would be considered property owners and thus have the power to object to listing. Ms. Doherty replied that this could be clarified with the National Park Service.

Mr. Sanderson stated that it might make sense to nominate the Portsmouth Camp Meeting as a Traditional Cultural Place (TCP), given its continuity of use. Ms. Zurier stated that she would recommend the end date of the period of significance be as recent as possible.

Ms. Werenfels stated that, although the architecture is simple, it is significant and helps to define the place. Dr. Onorato noted that the buildings may have been less simple originally and this would have to be taken into account when evaluating integrity, if the nomination moves forward.

Dr. Malone wondered if National Register listing might inspire building owners to maintain and repair their buildings. Mr. Sanderson suggested an easement could be a good tool for the long-term preservation of the site.

A motion to confirm that the Portsmouth Camp Meeting is a good candidate for listing in the National Register was made by Ms. Werenfels and seconded by Mr. Sanderson. The Board voted unanimously to approve the motion.

5. For consideration:

National Register of Historic Places preliminary review
Conant Thread/Coats & Clark Mill Complex District Update
Central Falls and Pawtucket

Ms. Doherty made a presentation for preliminary National Register review of the Conant Thread/Coats & Clark Mill Complex District, which straddles the boundary of Central Falls and Pawtucket. Listed in the National Register in 1983, the complex has lost several buildings over time, some to a massive fire in 2020. The request for a National Register evaluation was made by Urban Smart Growth, via its preservation consultant, which owns about half of the complex and is considering redevelopment using historic rehabilitation tax credits.

The Conant Thread/Coats & Clark Mill Complex occupies approximately 50 acres in a heavily industrial area and was listed in the National Register for its significance in a number of areas, most notably architecture and industry. At the time, there were a total of 24 resources, all but one of which was contributing.

The contributing resources included six large brick mill buildings as well as smaller, ancillary structures (e.g., dyehouse, office, bleachery, finishing mill, recreation building, power plant, storehouses, and a reservoir) and ranged in construction date from about 1869 to 1923, reflecting two phases of development at the complex, the first being from 1869 to 1895 and the second from ca. 1917 to ca. 1923.

Since the nomination was prepared, four buildings have been demolished (dates unknown) and an additional four buildings were destroyed in a fire on March 14, 2020. Demolished buildings include Old Bleachery (1870), Mill No. 4 (1875), Mill No. 5 (1881), Box Shop (1870–1882), Storehouse Nos. 3 and 4 (1880–1882), Shop (1882–1887), Warehouse (1887–1895), and Print Shop (1887–1895). The fire also damaged two structures: Mill No. 3 (1872) and Storehouse Nos. 5 and 6 (1880–1887). All of the demolished or fire-damaged buildings date to the complex's first period of development. The 15 extant and undamaged buildings are: Mill No. 2 (1869–1870), Mill No. 3 (1872), Old Dyehouse (1877), New Office (1880–1882), Storehouse Nos. 5 and 6 (1880–1887), Carpenter Shop (1868–1869, or late 19th c.), Reservoir (1887–1895), Mill No. 6 (1919), Mill No. 7 (1919), Recreation Building (1921), New Bleachery (1922), Finishing Mill (1923), Power Plant (by 1917), Gatehouse (early 20th c.), and Shop (early 20th c.). Seven of these are from the first phase of development and eight are from the second.

The Conant Thread Company was established in 1868 by Hezekiah Conant, an inventor who developed multiple improvements to thread winding technology. He constructed a mill on site in 1868. The following year, Conant entered into a business arrangement with J & P Coats, the largest thread manufacturer in Britain. This allowed Coats to avoid import tariffs imposed in the years following the Civil War and infused a lot of capital into Conant's company. Subsequently, the Conant Thread Company embarked on a major construction campaign in Pawtucket, building four mill buildings between 1870 and 1881, along with a number of ancillary buildings like a bleachery, dyehouse, warehouses, and office. By 1895, there were about 20 buildings on site and Conant Thread was a major force in the manufacture of thread in America. In 1896, J & P Coats merged with four other British firms, three of which had manufacturing facilities in the U.S., creating somewhat of a monopoly; by the turn of the 20th century, J & P Coats and one other firm, the American Thread Company, controlled between 2/3 and 90% of the American thread industry.

Around 1917, J & P Coats converted the power system at the complex from steam to electricity, and a brick powerhouse was built at the corner of Rand and Pine Streets. After World War I, J & P Coats undertook a major expansion, likely in response to changing technology and the introduction of synthetic fibers, such as rayon. Mills No. 6 and 7 were built in 1919, and a bleachery, finishing mill and recreation building followed in the 1920s. It was around this time that textile and

thread manufacturers began decamping for the Southern states, but J & P Coats continued a robust operation in Pawtucket/Central Falls through World War II. In 1939, for example, the company employed about 4,000 people at its Pawtucket/Central Falls location. After the war, J & P Coats entered a period of decline. In 1952, the Pawtucket/Central Falls complex shifted from large-scale manufacturing to research; it was here that J & P Coats developed machinery and a dyeing process that made the manufacture of Dacron, a synthetic fiber, commercially viable. Although production continued at the Pawtucket/Central Falls facility into the early 1960s, by that time only 550 were employed there, and the plant was closed in 1964.

Mr. Sanderson and other members of the Board spoke about the possibility of creating a larger National Register Historic District in the area, composed of this property and the Jenckes Spinning Company Historic District, located just across Pine Street. This might help minimize the impact of the loss of several buildings at the Conant Thread/Coats & Clark Mill Complex District.

Dr. Malone noted the national significance of the site, which was the largest textile complex in Rhode Island. He suggested several areas of inquiry to explore in an updated National Register nomination, for example: where were the spools produced for the thread being manufactured at the complex? Do any of the belt towers survive? Several of the mill buildings in the complex have mansard-roof towers, but do not have mansards on the main block, for fire safety reasons.

Mr. Sanderson suggested a good next step might be to get industrial experts on site to help evaluate integrity. If the nomination were rewritten (and not combined with the Jenckes Spinning Company Historic District), it should include a substantial amount of information on other, nearby industrial complexes to provide context and to demonstrate how various manufacturing concerns in Central Falls and Pawtucket were strongly interrelated. Mr. Sanderson also wondered if the current property owner could be encouraged to develop guidelines for the design of new construction at the location of demolished buildings such that the integrity of the complex would not be further compromised in the future.

Dr. Malone suggested research into the history of the site in the second half of the twentieth century; did the buildings become incubators of small industrial companies? For example, Paramount Industries, a greeting card company, was located there for a time.

A motion to confirm that the Conant Thread/Coats & Clark Mill Complex District retains sufficient integrity to remain listed, and that an update to the National Register nomination should be prepared to expand upon the site's significance and reflect changes since 1983 was made by Dr. Malone and seconded by Mr. Stokes. Dr.

Malone, Dr. Onorato, Mr. Sanderson and Mr. Stoles voted to approve the motion. Ms. Werenfels recused herself.

6. For information:

Ms. Doherty explained that at its June 14, 2023 meeting, the Commission will be voting on four new appointments to the Board, which will bring the membership to ten. According to the Board's rules and procedures, the Board must have at least six and no more than eleven members, and members must represent certain fields. The four proposed members are Shantia Anderheggen, a preservation consultant who would fill the preservation planner position; Karst Hooegeboom, a landscape architect; Itohan Osayimwese, an architectural history professor at Brown University; and Kate Wells of the Providence Public Library, who would serve on the Board as a historian. Board members received a handout with brief biographies of all four members. Ms. Doherty noted that these individuals will bring useful expertise to the Board and will help ensure that future meetings have a quorum, which is sometimes a challenge with only six members. If the Commission votes in favor of these appointments, we should expect them at the August 7, 2023 Board meeting.

Dr. Onorato noted that these names were generated from a list of potential Board members created in consultation with Executive Director Jeff Emidy and Commission Chair Ruth Taylor and that all four people being put forward are enthusiastic about joining the Board.


7. Announcements

The next meeting will be held on Monday, August 7, 2023.

8. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 10:59 A.M.

Minutes recorded by,



Joanna M. Doherty
Deputy Director