



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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MINUTES
RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
October 4, 2021 9:30 am

Community College of Rhode Island – Knight Campus
Room 4090 (aka Board Room)
400 East Avenue, Warwick, R.I.

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
Dr. Marisa Angell Brown
Dr. Tripp Evans
Vacant
Vacant (archaeologist)
Vacant (landscape architect/historian)

STAFF PRESENT

Ms. Joanna Doherty, Principal Architectural Historian
Mr. Jeffrey Emidy, Deputy Director
Ms. Elizabeth Rochefort, Principal Architectural Historian

II. AGENDA

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:43 A.M. by Chairman Onorato.

Dr. Onorato welcomed new board member Keith Stokes to his first meeting.

Dr. Onorato announced that there was an inadvertent omission in the agenda and asked for a motion to add the John Bliss House, in Newport, to the agenda for preliminary National Register consideration. The motion was made by Mr. Sanderson and seconded by Dr. Malone. The Board voted unanimously to approve the motion.

2. Approval of minutes of June 7, 2021 meeting

On a motion by Ms. Werenfels, seconded by Mr. Sanderson, the Review Board unanimously VOTED TO APPROVE the Minutes of June 7, 2021 without changes.

3. Interim Executive Director's Report

- a) Jeffrey Emidy welcomed Keith Stokes to the Board and to his first meeting. Mr. Stokes will hopefully be appointed as a member of the Commission when the legislature gets back so he will be doing double duty for us. We thank him for his willingness to do so.
- b) Mr. Emidy reported on National Register processing:
 - i. Joanna Doherty is working on the nomination for Saint Columba's Chapel, in Middletown. She has been working on final edits to the Beaver River Road Historic District in Richmond. The National Park Service (NPS) returned a few questions on the nomination. Ms. Doherty and the Public Archaeology Laboratory and NPS have had some calls and correspondence going back and forth to get that where it needs to be. There isn't a question as to whether or not the district is eligible, it's just details. Ms. Doherty is also looking at Saugatucket Park in Wakefield as a potential addition to that district. And she has the Federal Street Historic District, in Woonsocket, and the John Bliss House, in Newport, to present at this meeting. We have a half dozen or so properties coming into the pipeline, so Ms. Doherty is scheduling some site visits to get information on those.
 - ii. Elizabeth Rochefort is working on a final nomination for Saint Mary's Church in Portsmouth and continuing to work with the property owners at Loop Drive, in Wickford. She has been reviewing and editing the Newport Spring nomination, which is an addendum to the Newport Historic District and a Certified Local Government Grant project. She will show you the Memorial Hospital, in Pawtucket, today. At our next meeting, it looks like she will probably bring two churches: St Peter's-St Andrew's and Holy Ghost, both in Providence.
 - iii. Mr. Emidy reported that the Stedman and Fuller Manufacturing Company Complex, in Providence, was listed in the National Register on June 14th.
- c) Mr. Emidy reported that the Executive Director search is currently held up at the state human resources (HR) division, as we await being told that we can advertise the position. Commission Chair Ruth Taylor is leading the search committee, so she is working with state HR. Once we have approval, she will form a search committee and we will post the position.
- d) Mr. Emidy reported that our State Preservation Plan, entitled *A Big Plan for the Smallest State: A Comprehensive Statewide Historic Preservation Plan for Rhode Island 2021-2027* was approved by the National Park Service last month. We have posted the final copy on our website, but we haven't made an announcement about it yet. Mr. Emidy thanked Liz Rochefort for all of the hours she put in on that project.
- e) Mr. Emidy reported that October is Archaeology Month. Tim Ives has put together a smaller group of presentations by professionals from around the state. Most of the events are on Saturdays. There is information about the schedule on our website.

f) Mr. Emidy reminded the board members that the Rhody Awards for Historic Preservation will be held on October 16th and 17th. The Rhode Tour will have award-winning sites open on the 16th, and the 2021 awards will be presented on the 17th at Linden Place, in Bristol.

4. For consideration: National Register of Historic Places final review
Woonsocket Company/Bernon Mills Historic District – Additional Information
Front Street, Woonsocket

Ms. Werenfels recused herself from discussion of this nomination as her employer is working on the project. This left the Board without a quorum, so the matter was not presented.

5. For consideration: National Register of Historic Places Preliminary Review
Federal Street Historic District
Woonsocket

Joanna Doherty made a presentation for preliminary National Register approval for the Federal Street Historic District, in Woonsocket. Federal Street is a one-block-long street located to the east of Main Street. The Federal Street Historic District is composed of six buildings constructed between 1908 and ca. 1930, all but one of which were executed in the Revival styles popular in the early 20th century. Three of the buildings were designed by Walter Fontaine, Woonsocket's best-known architect.

The oldest building in the district is the Gothic Revival-style First Methodist Church, built in 1907-1908, which features lancet-arched window and door openings, stained-glass windows with tracery, and a prominent bell tower. The exterior walls, which appear to be constructed of concrete block, were stuccoed at an unknown date. In 1910-1911, the YMCA Building was constructed to the north of the church. The three-story, red-brick building has a raised, granite-block foundation, concrete trim, and brick quoins at the first-floor level. The facade is seven bays wide with an entrance in the fifth bay, within a shallow, three-bay pavilion with classical pilasters. First-floor windows are arched. Window openings throughout the building are, for the most part, filled with replacement sash. Around 1976, the YMCA constructed an additional building across the street and connected the two structures with an enclosed bridge that penetrates the 1911 building just above its principal entrance. The third building to be erected in the district was the Woonsocket Commercial School, later known as Hill College, which was built circa 1923. Constructed of brick with concrete and wood trim, the two-story building has a deeply-recessed entry with a modern door and replacement window sash. Details like the decorative cornice and door hood survive, along with the wood spandrel panels between the first and second-floor windows. The First Methodist Church, the YMCA and the Woonsocket Commercial School were all designed by Walter Fontaine.

Around 1928, Oliva Provencal built an automobile salesroom/repair shop on Federal Street; it was purchased by the Industrial Trade Union in 1942 and served as the union's

headquarters until 1971. The two- to three-story, brick building is three-bays-wide; the bays are delineated by brick and concrete, banded pilasters, some of which are topped with a concrete shield. The main entrance is centered on the facade and recessed; it now has a glass-and-aluminum door. On the interior, a concrete ramp system speaks to the building's historic use. Morningstar Lodge #13, a unit of the fraternal organization known as the Masons, built a Masonic Temple immediately to the north of the Woonsocket Commercial School in 1929. The building is composed of two parts: a two-story, stone-fronted Greek Temple with fluted Ionic columns, which faces Federal Street, and a four-story brick block with Classical Revival-style detailing. The Masonic Temple was designed by William G. Upham of Norwood, Massachusetts.

The last building to be erected in the district was the Firestone Building, on Clinton Street, which was constructed circa 1930. The one-story, L-plan, yellow-brick building was expanded to the north and east in the 1960s. The original portion of the building has limestone and concrete trim and brick piers accented with Art Deco-style medallions; storefront windows and an entrance set at an angle in its north end; and garage bays elsewhere.

Federal Street was constructed around 1908, connecting Main and Worrall Streets and roughly paralleling Clinton Street to the east. Unlike Main Street, which was lined with theaters, saloons and shops in the early 20th century, Federal Street was home to a variety of institutions and organizations -- the First Methodist Church, the YMCA, the Woonsocket Commercial School, the Masons and, beginning in 1942, the Industrial Trade Union. The two commercial properties in the district -- Oliva Provencal's automobile showroom/repair shop and the Firestone Building -- reflect the increasing importance of the automobile in American society.

The First Methodist Church was organized in 1834 and initially occupied a building on Main Street. The Woonsocket YMCA dates to 1902, and originally operated out of the top floor of the Hope Building on Main Street. The YMCA offered social services, recreational opportunities and educational programs to men throughout northern Rhode Island. In the first decade of the 20th century, both institutions built new edifices on Federal Street, which had only recently been laid out. The Woonsocket Commercial School was established in 1897 to provide training for office jobs, including secretarial and accounting positions. When the school's owner, Edwin Hill, erected a new building around 1923, he chose to locate it on the newly-established Federal Street. Morningstar Lodge #13, established in 1811, followed suit with its new Masonic Temple in 1929. The Industrial Trade Union (initially called the Independent Textile Union) was established in 1931 and purchased Oliva Provencal's auto showroom/repair shop in 1942, using it as the union headquarters until 1971. In 1971, the Catholic Youth Organization purchased both the ITU and Woonsocket Commercial School buildings.

Water F. Fontaine, who designed the First Methodist Church, the YMCA and the Woonsocket Commercial School, began his architectural career in 1887, studying under a local engineer, Willard Kent. After travels to France, he worked for Stone, Carpenter & Willson, the noted Providence firm, from 1893 to 1903. Fontaine then established a practice in Woonsocket with Elmer Kinnicutt and, after Kinnicutt's death in 1910,

practiced on his own. He became the best known architect in Woonsocket, designing schools, commercial buildings, mill complexes, and churches in the city, as well as buildings in other parts of Rhode Island, and was adept at a variety of Revival styles.

William G. Upham, who designed the Masonic Temple, studied at Harvard and opened an architectural practice in Norwood, Massachusetts in 1912. He designed the Masonic Lodge in Norwood, built in 1916-17, as well as the Norwood Trust Company building in 1916, the Norwood Odd Fellows Hall in 1912 with Clarence Blackall, and the Norwood Memorial Municipal Building in 1927-28.

Dr. Onorato asked questions about architectural details of the YMCA and automobile building. The answers are not known at this time.

Ms. Werenfels stated that this is an interesting small district. If the period of significance extends to 1971, we probably do not want to capture the connector of the YMCA buildings. She recommended closing out the period of significance with the construction of the last building. She stated that she is struggling with façade alterations on the YMCA and stucco on the church, but that overall, the district seems okay.

Mr. Sanderson stated that downtown Woonsocket was an important place before some demolitions took place. He believes this is part of a larger downtown, but it doesn't connect any longer because of demolitions, and he doesn't think it rises to be a standalone district. He suggested that, in writing the nomination, the author should include a heavy dose of the downtown history and how this area relates to it. The author should identify the nearby pieces that "remember" the architecture and civic heritage of Woonsocket and emphasize this as a remnant of that. He stated that another aspect of analysis that could help is that, without the business and social institutions, the industrial economy in the city couldn't have persisted. Looking at the industrial property locations and how these institutional properties are located may help. Tying these to the city's industrial history is important.

Dr. Malone added that the labor history of Woonsocket is also critically important. This ties into the ethnic history of the city.

Ms. Werenfels stated that the gaps between this and the existing district don't seem too large, only two buildings or so. She asked if we would consider extending the existing district. Ms. Doherty replied that the railroad overpass and track feel like a natural boundary, and it is really five demolished or unsympathetically redone buildings between the existing district and Federal Street.

Mr. Sanderson asked what is near the Stadium Building. Ms. Doherty replied that the USJB, post office, and Civil War monument, all of which are individually listed, are there, plus one good commercial building that is not listed.

Mr. Sanderson stated that there are questions of significance and integrity for a standalone district, but in the context of downtown Woonsocket, it has significance. He made a motion to encourage further research into the nomination. The motion was

seconded by Mr. Stokes and the Board voted unanimously to approve the motion.

Ms. Werenfels added that the interiors of these buildings could be important and that she would feel better if we had a better sense of the interiors. Ms. Doherty replied that we do not typically look at interiors in a district nomination. Ms. Werenfels asked if we could if that would add to the significance. Ms. Doherty stated that we could if it would help, but we likely would not want to include that information if it would not help. We could do it because these are public buildings, whereas, we would not if they were residences.

6. For consideration: National Register of Historic Places preliminary review
Memorial Hospital
111 Brewster Street, Pawtucket

Ms. Rochefort made a presentation for preliminary review of Memorial Hospital, at 111 Brewster Avenue in Pawtucket. The 13.4-acre property consists of 13 buildings, many of which are connected. The hospital was established in 1901, and the property today reflects the institution's evolution from a small community hospital into a major medical center. The earliest building on the property was constructed in 1898 and predates the hospital, though it was converted for use by the hospital. The newest building on the property was built in 2005.

The creation of Memorial Hospital was funded by a \$200,000 bequest from Pawtucket industrialist William F. Sayles in 1894. He founded the W.F. & F.C. Sayles Company, a large bleachery in the Blackstone Valley during the area's heyday of textile production and processing. Sayles and his brother, Frederic, began their empire in the eponymous Saylesville and later expanded into Pawtucket and with additional operations throughout Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, North Carolina. The Sayles Bleacheries were among the largest in the country. Sayles donated the money for the establishment of the hospital in memory of his wife and daughter, under the direction of his son.

Memorial Hospital was established in 1901 as Pawtucket's first and only purpose-built hospital. It was originally called the Pawtucket General Hospital. The approximately 13 acres purchased for the hospital were formerly owned by Pawtucket's prominent Goff family, and included the Lyman T. Goff House. The house, which survives, was constructed in approximately 1898 in a transitional Queen Anne-Colonial Revival style.

The hospital was established at a time of rapid growth and change in the healthcare industry, as it became a professionalized and rapidly evolving industry after the Civil War. The first general hospital in Rhode Island, Rhode Island Hospital, opened in 1857 in Providence. Homeopathic hospitals such as Roger Williams Hospital and the Rhode Island Homeopathic Hospital, both in Providence, opened in the 1870s and 1880s. Between 1885 and 1925, hospitals quickly evolved into expensive, modern medical institutions that served people from all walks of life. Driven by increased migration to the United States, a rapidly industrializing society, and new concerns over public health, urban hospitals began to resemble the sprawling complexes that we see today.

Memorial Hospital fits into this context. When it was established in 1901, it represented the modern concept of the hospital as an institution devoted to healing and as a center for research and teaching. The hospital's first purpose-built structure was designed by architect Guy Lowell of Boston in 1907. The building, which does not survive, contained operating rooms; separate wards for men, women, and children; and modern baths and kitchens.

From these modest beginnings as an institution with only 30 beds, Memorial Hospital quickly professionalized, expanded, and became a critical healthcare resource for communities across the Blackstone Valley. The Goff House was donated to the hospital in 1910 and converted into a dormitory for nursing students. The hospital began its first dedicated building campaign between 1916 and 1923, during which they erected two inpatient wards and an outpatient ward, which do not survive, and a boiler house, which does. The boiler house is a one-story, flat roof building clad in buff brick with cast stone trim.

During this period, the hospital expanded its teaching program for nurses, and the Nurses Alumni Association established a scholarship program at The University of Rhode Island.

In 1931, the hospital received a \$200,000 bequest from Mr. and Mrs. James MacColl in memory of their daughter. The hospital constructed the MacColl Building to house 44 beds for children and 25 maternity beds. The building is steel joist construction with concrete floors. It is clad in a salmon-colored stucco with a red terra cotta roof. While basement and first floor windows have been replaced, the building retains its historic 2/2 wood sash windows on the second story and wood oculus windows in the cross gables.

Also in 1931, the hospital expanded its nursing facilities with the construction of Buildings B and C, adjacent, and now connected to, the Goff House/Nurses Home. The three-story, rectangular buildings are clad in buff-colored brick with granite trim and have asphalt roofs. They were originally two stories, and in the 1970s received additions to the third floors. Both buildings incorporate Colonial Revival ornament. Windows are replacement sash in the historic openings. The interiors are typical of 20th century healthcare buildings, with double-loaded corridors with patient rooms on either side.

Memorial Hospital began to establish itself as a pioneer in regional healthcare during this period. In 1939, Memorial Hospital established the first blood bank in the State of Rhode Island. In 1951, the first cardiac surgery in Rhode Island without bypass was completed at Memorial Hospital.

That same year work began on the Richardson Building, named for E. Russel Richardson, who left \$285,000 to the hospital upon his death in 1931. It added 56 beds, bringing the total bed count to 214. The siting of the Richardson and MacColl Buildings, which today seem unusual due to the way they jut out from the Sayles Building, are remnants of the hospital's early 20th century site plan, which was redesigned in the 1960s. The 3½ -story Richardson building was used as a private hospital ward. The building is steel frame, clad in a light gray stucco with a red terra cotta tile roof. The building includes the same modillioned cornice and oculus windows in the gable as seen on the MacColl Building

and Buildings B and C.

In the early 1960s, the hospital began a long-term campus modernization program. Noted hospital architect Donald Ritchie, of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, was hired to develop and implement a modernization and expansion plan for the hospital buildings. His master plan is a turning point in the hospital's history; it transformed the campus's architecture with intention, and the designs for new buildings were related to the requirements of federal grant funds at that time. Most of the hospital's infrastructure expansion between 1965 and 1987 was financed by federal funds under the Hill-Burton Act of 1946. That act provided funds for the construction and expansion of community hospitals and had a monumental impact on healthcare facilities in the immediate post-war period. Hospital construction quadrupled by the end of the 1940s as a result of the Act. Ritchie designed a multi-phase renovation process that, in practice, would take over 20 years to execute. The Richardson and MacColl buildings were retained, and the Memorial Building and 1930s wards were replaced with larger, connected buildings intended to centralize services for ambulatory care, accidents, doctors' offices, and other services.

The Wood and Hodgson Buildings, constructed in 1965 and 1976, respectively, are the dominant buildings at the hospital campus and can be seen across Pawtucket. The Wood Building was named for the president of the hospital trustees, Harold W. Wood, and Hodgson for Mr. Percy Hodgson, the general chairman of the building fund campaign that financed the Ritchie master plan implementation. The six-story, steel frame buildings are clad in brick veneer with pre-cast concrete trim and piers and a flat roof. The three-story base housed service, administrative, and operations activities, and the three-story raised block housed patient rooms. The Wood Building added 150 new medical, surgical, and maternity beds and a new emergency department, x-ray facility, and cafeteria. The Hodgson Building added 80 modern patient rooms, including intensive and coronary care, and a new operating theatre with eight operating rooms, a pharmacy, and administrative space.

The construction of the Wood Building also allowed Memorial Hospital to expand its research and teaching efforts. The hospital affiliated with Brown University Medical School in 1969. At this time, Memorial Hospital was also the state's second largest teaching hospital. Brown University also centered its Family Medicine and Internal Medicine residencies at the hospital. The level and quality of research taking place at the hospital were direct results of the Donald Ritchie-era building campaigns that expanded and altered the hospital campus. The Wood building obscured the classical Memorial Building, necessitated the removal of the original circular driveway and some landscaping features, and created a new visual relationship between the hospital property and the surrounding neighborhood.

The Sayles Building was designed by Ritchie and constructed in 1987 on the location of the former Memorial Building and 1930s patient wards. The Sayles Building was designed in a Postmodern idiom, using red brick veneer with cast concrete trim to complement the Wood/Hodgson building. The Sayles Building is now the gateway to the Wood/Hodgson Building, serving as an entrance to all of the interconnected buildings in this section of the campus. It represents the full realization of the Donald Ritchie master

plan for the transformation of Memorial Hospital. It is the final building designed by Ritchie at the completion of a 20-year building campaign. It reoriented the entire complex and utilizes an interesting, yet compatible, Postmodern style. It is critical to the understanding of the current day Memorial Hospital.

Outside of garages, there are three buildings that we would consider non-contributing: the Ambulatory Care building constructed in 1985, the Center for Primary Care constructed in 1999, and the Endoscopy Center constructed in 2005.

Despite the hospital's academic and research success and the important relationship with Brown University, it had faced financial struggles since the early 2000s. In 2013, Memorial Hospital merged with Care New England. Five years later, in October 2017, Care New England abruptly announced plans to close Memorial Hospital. Only two months later, the intensive care unit and emergency room were closed, and the complex was reused as an outpatient care center to cut costs. While the majority of spaces on the hospital campus are now vacant, some auxiliary spaces are still used for outpatient services.

RIHPHC staff feel that Memorial Hospital is significant at the state and local levels under Criterion A in the areas of health/medicine and social history and Criterion C in the area of architecture. The Sayles Building is only 34 years old and the Hodgson Building is 46 years old. Buildings younger than 50 years old are not typically eligible for listing, however, National Register Criteria Consideration G allows for buildings under 50 to be listed if they "have achieved significance within the past fifty years...if they are an integral part of a district which qualifies for National Register listing." Sayles and Hodgson satisfy Criteria Consideration G because they have achieved significance and exceptional importance within the last 50 years as integral parts of a district which qualifies for National Register listing.

Memorial Hospital was critically important to providing quality medical care for the residents of Pawtucket and the Blackstone Valley for over one hundred years. The campus represents the evolution of the architecture of healthcare during this period, in particular community-focused urban healthcare. It is the only institution of its type in Pawtucket, and its buildings retain sufficient integrity for inclusion in the National Register. The staff recommend Memorial Hospital in Pawtucket for listing in the National Register.

Dr. Onorato stated that it could have significance for the Ritchie design, but we should know more about the plans that other hospitals were pursuing at the time to put it into context. Ryan Cameron, of MacRostie Historic Advisors, who brought this to the staff, stated that Ritchie was an internationally known hospital architect. When his father died, he renamed the firm "The Ritchie Organization" or "TRO". Hospitals were their specialty. It is rare to see a master plan carried out over a 25-year period by one architect. As part of the master plan, Ritchie also redesigned the interiors of the MacColl and Richardson buildings. Also significant is how the Hill-Burton Act influenced this design.

Mr. Sanderson stated that there are types of civic architecture that are important because

everyone has to have them. He has seen the argument that, because the function was so important, the building must be eligible, a view he has never shared. It was important for Pawtucket to have a first-rate hospital, but that doesn't mean that it has NR significance. It has to be specifically important or so representative of a "thing" to carry eligibility. Part of the reason he is not seeing this it is because we don't have interior views. He asked what makes this building more important than Rhode Island Hospital, for example.

Ms. Rochefort replied that Memorial Hospital shows the evolution of health care: from the Goff House to federally-funded health care. These are emphasized through the architecture. Regarding the interiors, she stated that the plans are largely intact. Historic materials survive in many areas, but have been updated in others. She believes that the interiors retain integrity.

Dr. Onorato stated that planning implies something else beyond care. They will have to establish what characteristics of each phase tell you about the changes that are taking place in health care. The master plan is interesting, but he doesn't know how it relates to the health care thinking of that time. There may be some larger dynamic at work here that reflects the changes.

Ms. Werenfels stated that the story has to relate back to the Ritchie plan, because that is what is really interesting here. Ms. Rochefort stated that there are two tracks on planning: architectural and health care. The evolution of the campus in both is worth looking into.

Dr. Malone stated that one interesting aspect of the story is the inferiority complex of the Blackstone Valley to Providence. Hodgson was a textile manufacturer with an enormous ego, and the president of Rotary International. The MacColls, Goffs, and Sayleses all go back to the industrial aristocracy of the Blackstone Valley. They felt that Pawtucket needed to have a competitive hospital.

Dr. Onorato asked if Dr. Malone would make a motion that this should be explored further. Dr. Malone replied in the affirmative. Ms. Werenfels seconded the motion, which was approved unanimously by the Board.

7. For consideration: National Register of Historic Places preliminary review
John Bliss House
2 Wilbur Avenue, Newport

Joanna Doherty made a presentation for preliminary review of the John Bliss House, at 2 Wilbur Avenue, in Newport. The John Bliss House was built between 1680 and 1715 in the north end of Newport, near its border with Middletown. It is notable as the oldest extant stone-ender in Newport and, possibly, the oldest surviving residence in the city. The two-story, timber-framed building is four bays wide and two bays deep and is topped with an asphalt-shingled, gambrel roof. The front - west elevation - is sheathed in wood clapboards while the other elevations feature wood shingles. The north elevation is dominated by the stone chimney mass, which includes a reconstructed, protruding beehive oven. The chimney is brick above the roofline, a later alteration. The primary

entrance is located in the northernmost bay of the west elevation and includes a wood-paneled door, a transom, pilasters and a segmental-arch pediment. Window openings are filled with 12-over-12 wood sash. A small, gable-roof ell extends off the north end of the east elevation; probably added in the mid-20th century, the ell was originally open on its south side but was enclosed at a later date.

The floor plan of the John Bliss House is similar to that of other stone-enders. It is likely that the house originally followed a two-room plan and was later expanded with the addition of two smaller rooms to the south. The shallow entry vestibule is located in the northwest corner of the house and provides access to a narrow, spiral stair that runs to the attic. The stair hall has plank walls except for the north wall, which is composed of the stone chimney mass. The large fireboxes in the northwest chamber and northeast chamber – the former keeping room - have simple wood surrounds; the mantel in the keeping room features historic graffiti, including the date "1791," which may indicate when the house was updated. The keeping room firebox has a beehive oven. Typical interior finishes include wide plank flooring, plaster walls, corner posts and historic wood doors with original hardware.

The farmland surrounding the John Bliss House began to be subdivided in the early 1900s, a process that accelerated in the mid-20th century. The house now sits on a small corner lot and is surrounded by fairly dense, mostly mid-20th-century residential development.

The John Bliss House has long been the subject of scholarly interest. It is discussed in Downing & Scully's "The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island"; James Yarnall's "Newport Through its Architecture"; and the "AIA Guide to Newport", and was documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1937. These sources differ in their opinions about the construction date of the house and the extent and timing of later alterations. However, a recent research report by the Newport Historical Society provides strong documentary evidence that the house was constructed between 1680, when John Bliss was first taxed on property in Newport, and 1715, when he prepared his will, which mentions a "message." John Bliss was married to Damaris Arnold, the daughter of Governor Benedict Arnold. He served as a deputy in the General Assembly, a major of the Militia, and was a member of the Seventh Day Baptist Church. The property, which originally had considerable acreage, remained in the Bliss family until 1807, when it was sold to Anthony Wilbur. The Wilburs retained ownership and kept the property in agricultural use until 1906. After a series of owners, the property was sold in 1948 to Restorations, Inc. The house had reportedly fallen into disrepair by this time, and Restorations, Inc. restored it, keeping much of its historic fabric and floor plan intact while also rebuilding the beehive oven, adding the gable-roof ell, and installing a Classically-inspired door surround that recalls the 18th century.

In addition to its architectural interest, the John Bliss House is significant for its role in the Revolutionary War, when Newport was occupied by the British. During the 1778 Battle of Rhode Island, British forces used the house – located between the British first and second lines of defense – as a field headquarters.

Ms. Werenfels asked how this house compares with the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House. Mr. Stokes replied that the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House was constructed circa 1698. The Bliss House is one of the most extraordinary houses in Newport. Its connections to the Bliss and Wilbur families are important. It is possibly the only surviving colonial home in the north end of Newport.

Dr. Onorato stated that he is happy that the period of significance will go to the 1950s to include the rehabilitation. The house still has its 17th century form, though there is a change of taste represented that brings it back in the mid-twentieth century. The house deserves nomination to the Register.

Mr. Stokes made a motion for further consideration, adding that the Bliss House is clearly eligible. Mr. Sanderson seconded the motion, which was approved unanimously.

8. Announcements

The next meeting will be held on Monday, December 6, 2021.

9. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:37 A.M.

Minutes recorded by,



Jeffrey D. Emidy
Interim Director
Interim State Historic Preservation Officer