

Amherst Historical Commission
PUBLIC HEARING AND MEETING
Tuesday, September 4, 2012
Room 101, Bangs Community Center
7:15 p.m.

Present

Mike Hanke, Lynda Faye, Matt Cornell, Meg Vickery, and Robert Brainin; Nathaniel Malloy (staff liaison)

Guests

Judy Sechrest, Jim Wald, Sue Hugus, Elizabeth Mundt, Timothy Rohan, Donna Wexler (Attorney representing owner 290 Lincoln Ave.), Laura Lovett, Jennifer Taub, You-Pan Tzeng (owner 290 Lincoln), Paige Wilder

PUBLIC HEARING: DDA2013-0002 - 290 Lincoln Ave (11C-58)
Request to Demolish a c. 1910 wood and timber frame barn

Chair Michael Hanke opened the hearing by reading the preamble and asking if there were any questions regarding the hearing procedures. Testimony was then heard from the following:

Applicant: At this time during the hearing the applicant was not present so that Donna Wexler spoke on his behalf. It stated that the barn was to be demolished because it is in poor shape and being used, and the cost of repairs is too great. The property is currently rented by a family with two kids. The owner has asked that they not use the barn because of its poor condition; it is a liability. It is best to take it down for safety. At his time there are no plans for a new structure. Rather the space will be used for lawn and gardens. Ms. Wexler refuted the claim that the barn was used as a studio by Robert Frost and sited conversations with the previous owner whose family was friends with Mr. Frost.

Staff: Town staff report that the house and barn were built about 1910 by Warren Brown, a notable businessman and historian. The barn's style emulates that of the house and its current configuration was due to additions that occurred shortly after it was built. Staff also explained that it had conversation with the Brown family who denied claims that Robert Frost used the barn as a studio, rather, he was a family friend who visited the property. Staff spoke to the potential future uses of the property, that it could be split into two lots and/or additional units could be added onto the existing house. The barn could also be converted to a dwelling unit.

Commission: Commission questioned the claim that the barn was unsafe, especially when the roof and siding appeared to be in good condition. The applicant responded that it is not safe for general use and for the children in the house.

Public:

- Neighbor across the street said the barn was in fine condition and dry inside; it is not a hazard. It has a good thick concrete foundation and has been well maintained. It is a post and beam two-story barn that was more recently used as studio. Also said that newspapers were delivered to Robert Frost at this address (Priscilla White remembers her

- fathering saying he delivered newspapers to Mr. Frost).
- Neighbor to the west presented evidence that Warren Brown was very active in the community as a businessman, realtor and writer for the local newspaper; he is a significant person in his own right. She cited letters from Mr. Brown that said Mr. Frost was a ‘wise and good friend, and that the two called each ‘old man Brown/Frost’. Said the property is valuable to community even if Robert Frost did write in the barn. Neighbor pointed out that the Ray Stanley Baker house nearby was lost long ago and that the neighborhood is threatened and under stress by student rentals. It is getting very difficult for families to live in the area.
 - Neighbor points out that there is no assurance that if the barn is demolished for gardens, that the space would remain a garden. This is a prominent property on a busy corner and is pivotal to the character of the neighborhood.
 - Chair Michael Hanke reminded those in attendance that the Commission’s purview is the demolition request and supporting information about the history of the property. The Commission does not make decisions based on zoning or future uses. A local historic district would be an effective tool to preserve structures.
 - Neighbor said that this house, although not in the National Historic Register District is part of its fabric and character. Said that Brown wrote “Amazing Amherst”; and the property is significant because it was built by Brown.
 - Owner: Brown’s family cannot corroborate that Frost used the barn as a studio, only that he was a friend who visited often. He reiterated that the demolition is for the safety of the tenants of the house.
 - Neighbor asks Commission to delay the demolition because the owner will degrade property and turn it into student rentals.
 - Neighbor said that up until very recently the barn was used for agricultural purposes and that its setting and use speak to urban agriculture.
 - Neighbor said that she read that Mr. Brown’s wife designed the house; a unique and unusual role for women to design a barn, especially in the early 20th century.

Chair Michael Hanke asked if there were additional comments. The public hearing was closed at 8:09 p.m.

The Commission continued the public meeting to discuss the demolition application. The Commission acknowledged that the demolition of ancillary structures changes the character of the Town, but it is difficult for the Town to require property owners from keeping buildings from falling into disrepair. Commissioners noted that the barn is not architecturally significant even if designed by Mrs. Brown; it is not emblematic of a certain style or high level of craftsmanship. Commissioners also discussed whether the connection to Mr. Frost and Mr. Brown, who were both important and well-known publicly, was enough to delay the demolition. Commissioners pointed out that the barn has a Swiss Chalet style and has been dramatically altered from its current style, such that it looks more like a late 20th century barn—there is a sliding door, second story balcony and features that are not historic. When discussing if the site was highly visible, the Commission said that because of the barn’s location it is established and familiar, but not enough that it is highly visible; many commissioners said that they did not notice the structure even though they passed by numerous times. It does not have enough presence to affect the character of the streetscape although this could change if the trees are also removed. The barn does not have physical characteristics or unique features that would make it historic. It was said that the property is shaded and a poor spot for gardens and lawn; it would be better to keep the

trees. The Commission reiterated that the structure looks to be fine condition with a solid roof and does not need to be demolished for safety reasons.

Following Article 13 of the Zoning Bylaw the Commission voted as follows:

	Y	N	
13.40		N	It is listed on, or is within an area listed on, the National Register of Historic Places, or is the subject of a pending application for listing on said National Register, or;
13.410	Historical Importance		The structure meets the criteria of historical importance if it:
13.4100	2	3	Has character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the town of Amherst, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts or the nation, or;
13.4101	0	5	Is the site of an historic event, or;
13.4102	0	5	Is identified with a person or group of persons who had some influence on society, or;
13.4103	0	5	Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historic heritage of the community.
13.411	Architectural Importance		The structure meets the criteria of architectural importance if it:
13.4110	0	5	Portrays the environment of a group of people in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style, or;
13.4111	0	5	Embodies those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type, or;
13.4112	0	5	Is the work of an architect, master builder or craftsman whose individual work has influenced the development of the Town, or;
13.4113	0	5	Contains elements of architectural design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represents a significant innovation.
13.412	Geographic Importance		The structure meets the criteria of geographic importance if:
13.4120	2	3	The site is part of, or related to, a square, park, or other distinctive area, or;
13.4121	2	3	The structure, as to its unique location or its physical characteristics, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, village center, or the community as a whole.

The Commission did not find the barn historically significant because it did not meet one criterion from Article 13. The Commission informed the applicant that there would be no delay issued.

The Commission ended the proceedings by encouraging the owner to re-evaluate the decision to

demolish the barn, stressing that the property is part of a community and that one owner's actions can have a considerable impact on the neighborhood.

Announcements

The CPA Committee meets Sept. 6th.

Minutes

None.

New Business

CAFs

The Commission discussed possible applicants to fill the three vacancies.

North Amherst LHD

The Commission decided to table it.

249 South Pleasant Street - removal of shutters

Staff will communicate with the Planning Board that the Commission would like the shutters to be preserved and put back on the building.

235 East Pleasant Street (Hawthorne Property)

Commission agreed that the Town could develop a list of resources and preservation consultants/contractors that could be distributed to property owners and would help with the initial assessment of properties. For Hawthorne the estimated cost of rehabilitation is not financially feasible: \$750,000 for two dwelling units. Commission agreed to contact consultants about salvaging material from the house and the possibility that it could be reused during new construction.

Old Business

Civil War tablets

Staff said that the Request for Proposals for an architect/engineer to design the installation was solicited.

CPA projects

West Cemetery tomb

Staff said that the Request for Quotes has been solicited and are due soon.

Emily Dickinson plot

Staff updated the Commission that there will be bidding with alternates to ensure the project comes within budget.

West cemetery signing

No activity.

Historical awards

Meg has letters drafted and is waiting for staff review.

Materials distributed at meeting

Agenda
Demolition Application
Maps of property
Map of 249 South Pleasant Street
Section 13 of the Bylaw