

September 19, 2022

The statewide advocate for Rhode Island's historic places

Letter to the Editor

Unless conditions change, very soon Bristol will lose an architecturally important historic building to demolition. The fate of 135 Ferry Road was put in jeopardy in 2020 when the owners were granted permission to build a new house behind the historic building. Since zoning allows only one house on a lot, the approval to construct a new house seems to require the demolition of the historic house.

Known in the survey of Bristol's historic properties as the Sandford Place/Isaiah Simmons House, 135 Ferry Road is a wonderful example of the Gothic Revival style which flourished in America from 1835 to 1875. Gothic Revival style became a popular architectural trend when Andrew Jackson Downing, a writer and designer, inspired middle class Americans to use Gothic elements to give a "picturesque" appearance to their homes. Local carpenters copied designs published by Downing, inventing the "Carpenter Gothic" style. Steep gable roofs, drip molding capping windows and doors, peak arch windows, and vergeboards (wood trim on the roof edge) are emblematic of the style. The building at 135 Ferry Road is a wonderfully intact and imaginative version of this style – "picturesque" indeed.

Can the demolition be stopped? Maybe – it's not too late yet. At a time when housing is a critical concern, it seems downright wasteful to demolish a perfectly fine small dwelling, particularly one that is part of the Town's historic character. Behind the scenes, efforts to save the building by moving it to a new location have proven infeasible. Now, saving the old building would first take the current owners' willingness to seek planning approvals for the house to remain. Then both the Town's planning and zoning boards would need to approve and grant relief for variances for either the creation of a new lot or for an accessory dwelling to remain on the existing lot. While in April 2021 the Town's Planning Board indicated enthusiasm for reviewing a proposal that would save the historic house, so far, the owners have not sought planning approvals.

With the demolition of this delightful building a looming possibility, Bristol citizens should ask themselves whether they are satisfied with the existing strength of ordinances that protect the town's historic places. Currently there is no protection on the structure at 135 Ferry Road – although eligible, it is not listed in the National Register of Historic Places nor protected through Bristol's Local Historic District zoning. Either designation would have given town planning officials the ability to at least ask for the consideration of preserving the historic structure, as well as allow for community input. If consideration of the historic building had been required, an outcome could have been envisioned where the owners' desire for a new building was configured in a way that would allow the historic building to remain, satisfying both the urge to build new and to save the old. Without historic designation, town officials were hamstrung and left no option, and the fate of the old building was set on the trajectory towards demolition.

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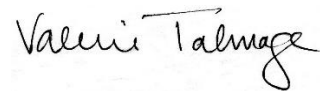
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The Comprehensive Plan for the Town of Bristol condenses its goals into the following statement: *The Town of Bristol shall in all its planning efforts attempt respect and reflect its historic character and its close association with the surrounding bays and harbor. These resources shall be protected and enhanced and used as the foundations upon which future change should be built.* Clearly, Bristol cherishes its historic character, but are current ordinances and historic designations sufficient to give the Town the preservation tools to live up to that ideal?

The concept of historic character is that the whole is made up of the sum of its parts. How many demolitions like 135 Ferry Road will it take for the Town's sense of place to be eroded? The historic character of Bristol is created building-by-building, block-by-block. The Town cannot do a good job of protecting its historic character unless it is empowered do a good job of protecting individual historic places. Right now, the Town lacks the power – and unless the townspeople call for change, demolition of 135 Ferry Road will not be the last case where the public interest in preserving the look and feel of historic Bristol will take a back seat to private owners' land use decisions.

We at Preserve Rhode Island, the statewide advocate for historic places, would be sad to see the demolition of this beautiful building and hope that the combined efforts of the owners, preservation advocates and the town officials will affect a last-minute rescue. However, if the building does come down, we hope its loss may result in a call from the citizens in Bristol to strengthen the tools to protect historic places. As Joni Mitchell famously observed: *Don't it always seem to go/ that you don't know what you got/ 'til it's gone?* The pending demolition of 135 Ferry Road is a wake-up call that the beloved historic character of Bristol is easily jeopardized, and the townspeople of Bristol ought to do something about it!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Valerie Talmage". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Valerie Talmage
Executive Director
Preserve Rhode Island