

Athol Daily News

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A safety warning, and a plea from Worcester

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ADN Columnist

Worcester is one of the oldest and largest cities in New England, and I have grown to respect and admire it even though I hardly heard of it before moving to Massachusetts.

Not especially known for its beauty, the city does have some fine buildings, and an effort is underway to preserve just a portion of one of them - the clock tower at the old Worcester State Lunatic Asylum/State Hospital, built in the 1870s.

My interest in this began some weeks ago when Marcia Gagliardi of Athol, my friend and book publisher, needed a ride to the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Marcia fell on stairs in her house and had a complicated break in her ankle, which required surgery in Worcester, plus several follow-up appointments. She was carrying boxes of small antique items down stairs while wearing improper footwear. Falls in the home are a major cause of serious injury, even death, so be aware and be careful!

Athol artist Pat Spaulding came along for the ride that day, and while at UMass, the three of us all noticed and admired a beautiful clock tower on Belmont Hill, not far from the campus.

As I was curious about this red brick structure, I



OLD PHOTO — This image shows the Worcester hospital for the mentally ill as it was about a century ago. Most of these buildings have been demolished, but the clock tower remains.
Photo courtesy Preservation Worcester.



GOTHIC BUILDING — Preservation Worcester is working on a campaign to save this structure.
Photo courtesy Preservation Worcester

contacted a friend in the Boston area, a Worcester County native named Steve Jerome, who is an architectural historian and preservation buff. He told me that a campaign led by Preservation Worcester was underway to save the tower, which he described as "outstanding High Victorian Gothic style."

Jerome said most of the old building had been demolished, but the tower was supposed to remain and a new psychiatric hospital built around it. However, he said, state officials decided that funds to preserve the tower were much more than originally projected because it needed to be made earthquake proof, something the preservationists dismiss as unnecessary.

The organization's web site, www.preservationworcester.org, has photos and details about the uphill effort. Letters to state officials are urged with the following suggested text: "Both architecturally and historically significant, [the building] is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. With its soaring tower visible for miles around, it is a powerful physical reminder of the important role that both Worcester and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts have played in the humane treatment of the mentally ill in the United States since the opening of Worcester State Lunatic Asylum (now Worcester State Hospital) in 1833. This outstanding structure deserves the extraordinary efforts by both the city and the state for its preservation and reuse. The demolition of this monumental building would represent an irreplaceable loss to both the historical memory and architectural heritage of Worcester and the Commonwealth."

Letters may be sent to the following: Division of Capital Asset Management, Carole Cornelison, Commissioner, One Ashburton Place, Boston, MA 02108, Email -- Carole.Cornelison@state.ma.us; and Department of Mental Health, Barbara Leadholm, Commissioner, 25 Staniford Street, Boston, MA 02114, Email -- Barbara.Leadholm@state.ma.us.

With a population of 181,000, Worcester beats out Providence and Springfield for the title of "second largest city in New England." An hour or less from the North Quabbin Region, Worcester is a place that is important to many of us. I've met many people hereabouts who were born in Worcester or who lived there in the past, while others commute to jobs there, or go there for other reasons.

Health care may be the most common reason, as it was for Marcia Gagliardi. There are also shopping, dining and entertainment opportunities.

Erin Williams of New Salem is Worcester's cultural development officer and also executive director of the Worcester Cultural Coalition. For more details, consult the web site www.worcestermass.org/arts-culture-entertainment.

Top notch performers come to Worcester's Mechanics Hall, another architectural treasure that once fell into disuse but was rehabilitated and is now a source of community pride. And here's another interesting North Quabbin connection: the architect who designed Mechanics Hall, Elbridge Boyden, also designed the Orange Town Hall.

In addition, aside from the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester has several other important educational institutions -- Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Clark University, Worcester State University, Assumption College, College of the Holy Cross, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, Quinsigamond Community College and Becker College, and I have met people in the North Quabbin who have attended most of them.

All of this, including the architectural heritage embodied in the endangered clock tower, are what make Worcester a great city -- and in many ways the one not only closest but most important to us.