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204-year-old Stearns Tavern begins a new chapter

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WORCESTER - How difficult is it to negotiate a Mack truck carrying a two-story historic tavern through a city intersection and up a residential street?

“It is uneventful,” said Kevin Winget of Falmouth, a foreman with Gary Sylvester’s Building Movers and Excavations, who drove the truck bearing the main section of the historic Stearns Tavern on a nearly half-mile trip Tuesday from 651 Park Ave. to a new location off Mill Street.

“You let the clutch out and let it roll,” Mr. Winget said. “Low gear, it just creeps right along. We don’t back up. Got this handy little headset, so everyone else is watching around me outside and telling me what to do.”

History was on the move here Tuesday. The circa-1812 Stearns Tavern, one of the city's oldest buildings, was cut in two and moved by truck to its new site four-tenths of a mile away on the banks of Coes Pond.

The procession took more than three hours and was a feat of spatial dexterity, requiring traffic lights to be swung, tree limbs to be trimmed and utility poles to be moved as the two sections of the historic house made their cumbersome way from Park Avenue up Mill Street.

Gary Sylvester of Falmouth, whose company specializes in moving houses, oversaw the job. The biggest challenge? "Keeping it coming this way, instead of going that way," he said, as the main section of the tavern made its way uphill on Mill Street.

For the relocation, the landmark structure, most recently used as a bank, was separated into two sections: the main house, about 1,428 square feet, and the annex, about 1,260 square feet.

Onlookers clustered in the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot and lined Mill Street to watch the procession. Camera drones, hired by the city to videotape the event, buzzed overhead.

The job required light poles to be temporarily removed and tree limbs to be sawed along Mill Street to allow the main house section, the wider of the two, to pass freely.

When both sections finally had been successfully deposited on their new site by Coes Pond, shortly after 1:15 p.m., viewers applauded and cheered.

This was the second time in its 204-year history the Stearns Tavern had been moved. The building originally stood at 1030 Main St., where it served in the 19th century as a hotel and stagecoach stop, and in the mid-20th century as quarters for different businesses.

Stearns Tavern moved

In 1974, the structure was moved to 651 Park Ave. for use as a bank, and where an annex was added. Bank of America vacated the building three years ago.

At its new location, in a city park on the site of the former Coes Knife Co. at 72 Coes St., the building will be used by the Seven Hills Foundation as a training and education space and community center.

The tavern, which is listed on the National Historic Register, had been on Preservation Worcester's list of most endangered structures.

The building had been facing a date with the wrecking ball, but the city and Preservation Worcester managed to work out a deal to save and move it. The city used \$150,000 in federal block grant funds to pay for the move.

“The stress level of not dropping a 200-year-old building on the street has got to be phenomenal,” City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. said with a laugh Tuesday as the trucks bearing the tavern were about to get underway.

Mr. Augustus recalled as a youngster watching the building moved the first time, from Main Street. He said he was pleased the building not only has been saved but will be put to productive use.

“It’s going to give it a relevance and a life it couldn’t have imagined when it was built,” he said.

“Imagine what this building, if it could talk, has seen? From horses and cows going up a dirt path that was Main Street, to the modern world that allows us to pick up a building and move it. It’s incredible.”