



A happy hour for Stearns Tavern

By Tom Quinn
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Stearns Tavern – one of the oldest documented buildings in Worcester – has a new home at the edge of Coes Pond, after a years-long project to save and repurpose the historic structure culminated with a triumphant drive from Park Avenue to the corner of Mill and Coes streets.

“It’s just really satisfying to see that this important piece of Worcester’s history has been preserved,” City Manager Ed Augustus Jr. said. “It’s the culmination of a few different goals.”

The previous owner had applied for a demolition delay waiver, and was legally able to demolish the building, if he so chose starting in June 2015. But Ed Salloom told Preservation Worcester he would rather see the building preserved – just not on his land. So the advocacy group partnered with the city and the Seven Hills Foundation to find a new home and a new purpose for the building.

“The new use for the building is so great,” Preservation Worcester Director Deb Packard said. “You don’t want to move a building just to move it.”

The original use for the building when it opened in 1812 was a house of entertainment in “New Worcester,” the term for the area of Main Street on which the tavern was originally opened. It was bought and sold many times through the years, and was moved to Park

Ave in 1974, most recently serving as a Bank of America branch. Preservation Worcester has called it the city’s “best surviving example of Federal vernacular architecture.”

Seven Hills, a health and human services agency that helps people with disabilities, will occupy the building, using it, in part, for a cafe and food services that may include catering.



Mary Harrington talks about living in the Sterns Tavern building with her parents when she was a child.

“There’s a host of opportunities there from a job training standpoint,” Seven Hills Vice President of Government and Community Relations Bill Stock said. “It’s tough to replicate this kind of facility.”

Stock, like many others, was impressed with how the city, Preservation Worcester, 38 private businesses, five not-for-profits, two unions and two utilities pulled together under the direction of project coordinator Phil Niddrie to save the building from the wrecking ball.

“It’s fascinating what Phil Niddrie and the city have accomplished,” Stock said. “The number of businesses that stepped forward. I don’t know that any other place could have done this as well as here.” A large crowd of onlookers lined Park Ave. and other streets this week to watch the structure get towed to the old Coes Knife site, which will be turned into a multi-generational, universally accessible playground. Among them was Mary Harrington, who learned of the move on Facebook the night before it happened.

Stearns Tavern has special meaning for Harrington – she lived in the house from the time her father bought it in 1960 until the early 1970s, when it was home to Harrington House of Carpets. When asked whether she felt the historicity of the building at the time, Harrington shrugged.

“We were teenagers,” Harrington said. “We knew people stopped by just to see it. [My father] was very proud to preserve it. To do his part ...It’s good that the city and [Preservation Worcester] are doing something with it.”



Stearns Tavern is a success story, but Preservation Worcester still has work to do. Packard said she has been contacted by two property owners offering to give historic buildings away if the society can find a home for them and come up with moving money. One she can’t disclose, she said, but the other is the old Bhadon Gift Gallery at 1075 Pleasant St., a 200-year-old structure. The demolition delay for that building expires in December of this year.



Besides those immediate threats, Packard said, Preservation Worcester is concentrating on downtown, where accelerated city redevelopment efforts are yielding fruit in terms of new tenants and businesses, but may also be accelerating the demolition of historic buildings.

“We’re really concerned about downtown,” Packard said. “Some buildings are being reused, but others are being threatened. It’s a double-edged sword.”

One of those is Notre Dame Church. Packard recently co-authored a guest column in the Telegram & Gazette about saving the building, which is currently only being saved by a demolition delay order that runs until April 2017.



Even though the Stearns Tavern move was years in the making and took a heroic effort from a coalition of community organizations, Packard noted, “the cost of moving a building is probably much cheaper than building a building.”