

Stetson-Ford House Study Committee

Final Report and Recommendations

August, 2009

History

The Stetson-Ford House is a well-preserved example of a Georgian colonial home with a center chimney and timber frame. The earliest section of the house was built in 1674 by Thomas Stetson, son of Cornet Robert Stetson (the first colonial resident of what is today Norwell). The house remained in the Stetson family until 1781 when shipbuilder Michael Ford purchased the house and renamed it "Ford Harbor". Circa 1785, Mr. Ford constructed the current larger dwelling.

The Town of Norwell purchased the Stetson-Ford House in 1971 by way of Town Meeting vote and it was put under the stewardship of the Norwell Historical Commission. Since that time the house has been rented to various families. Rents have been low, and rental revenues have gone back into the Town's General Fund. As a result, it has been difficult for the Historical Commission to compete with other demands on the General Fund for maintenance of the house, and it has fallen into disrepair. The last tenants vacated the property in September, 2008 and the house has remained vacant since.

The 2008 Town Meeting voted \$150,000 from the Community Preservation Fund for the restoration and renovation of the house. The Community Preservation Committee was given oversight of the expenditures pending the development and approval of a Management, Operating and Maintenance Plan. Also in 2008, Town Meeting created a Stetson-Ford House Revolving Fund whereby revenues from renting the property would be deposited in a dedicated account to be used for on-going maintenance of the house.

Stetson-Ford House Study Committee

In order to seek alternate opinions and innovative ideas, the Norwell Historical Commission asked the Board of Selectmen to create a Stetson-Ford House Study Committee (SFHSC). The charge of the Committee was to research various long-term uses for the house and develop the required Plan.

The SFHSC has met monthly since January, 2009. At the first meeting, Committee members agreed that any long-term solution for the house must accomplish two goals:

1. Keep the property financially stable and sustainable
2. Preserve the house's historic integrity and setting

Other very desirable, but not critical, factors were:

1. Maintain public access to the house and approximately 3-acre site
2. Include an educational component

With these priorities in mind, the following possibilities arose:

1. Keep the house town-owned but enter into a long-term lease (possibly with an educational/non-profit organization)
2. Rent the house
3. Sell the house and approximately 3 acres of land

For the past several years, there has been some confusion as to whether or not the house could be sold. When the article was submitted requesting \$150,000 of CPA funds for the house, it was the assumption of the Historical Commission and the Community Preservation Committee that the house could *not* be sold. However, Selectman Rick Merritt, former Historical Commission Chair Joe Carty and others have been making a case that it could in fact be sold, and the SFHSC agreed from the beginning that sale of the house should be considered a viable option.

Lot Creation Issues:

In order to be saleable, the Stetson Ford House needs to be on its own lot which must have adequate frontage and access on a qualifying road and be shown on an “ANR” or Approval Not Required plan. It currently sits on a 144-acre, town-owned lot commonly known as Stetson Meadows.

Past Town Meeting votes have given certain Town Committees oversight of acreage within Stetson Meadows. Currently the Historical Commission oversees 3 acres (including the Stetson Ford House), the Conservation Commission oversees ‘more or less’ 121 acres, and the Cemetery Committee oversees ‘more or less’ 20 acres. Currently the Stetson Meadows lot has not been divided into separate parcels. Any transfer of town-owned land must be approved at Town Meeting.

In Spring 2009, the Conservation Commission submitted an ANR Plan for approval by the Planning Board to set the boundaries for the parcels of land within Stetson Meadows. The Planning Board denied that ANR Plan due to technical deficiencies. The Board of Selectmen then became involved due to a potential interest of the in being able to sell the Stetson Ford House and develop a cemetery on the site. Involved in this process are the following Town and State agencies and boards, each with their own primary agendas:

<u>Committee</u>	<u>Primary Agenda</u>
Conservation Commission	Record and protect the Conservation Land on the Stetson Meadows property
Cemetery Committee	Create a new town cemetery at Stetson Meadows
Historical Commission	Record 3 acres of land surrounding Stetson Ford House as an ANR lot to allow the house to potentially be sold in the future
Planning Board	Endorse a plan in conformance with Town Meeting votes without creating any precedents for future town development
State Natural Heritage Program	Protect the endangered wildlife at Stetson Meadows

In order to make the Stetson Ford House lot saleable, one of the following scenarios must occur:

1. The Stetson Ford House lot must have frontage and access on a way determined by the Planning Board to have adequate width, grade and construction for the intended use.
2. A new lot for the Stetson Ford House, providing 80' of frontage on Stetson Shrine Lane, 150' at the 50' setback, and 80' minimum width must be created (a "rat tail" lot). This lot could be created over the current "Meadow Farms Way" extending to Stetson Shrine Lane. This land would encompass about 7 acres.
3. Proof that "Meadow Farms Way" was a "way in existence prior to zoning (1953)" and therefore could qualify to provide frontage for the Stetson Ford House lot.

The Board of Selectmen is researching Option #3 as of August, 2009. Unfortunately even if this option is proven, there are many other issues (such as the plans for the cemetery and its relation to the endangered species on the land) that must be resolved before anything can be recorded and the house and lot could be made saleable.

Stetson Ford House Study Committee Recommendations

1. Historic Preservation Restriction

The Stetson-Ford House is one of the most historically significant structures in town. Regardless of whether or not the Town owns it in the future, we ought to ensure that it can never be torn down or remodeled in such a way as to be rendered historically obsolete. Therefore, a Historic Preservation Restriction that would run with the deed should be drafted and recorded as soon as possible.

2. Renting the House for the Short-Term

The SFHSC has come to the conclusion that because of the uncertainty regarding the recording of an ANR Plan, the great number of parties involved in the process, and the need for Town Meeting approval of any altered lot size, the best short-term solution is to find a tenant for the house as soon as possible—hopefully by November 1, 2009.

It is not good for the house, or the town, to keep the house vacant any longer. Discussions with the Town insurance agent have revealed that insurance for the Stetson Ford House currently costs \$4,255 per year because it is vacant. Having a tenant in the house will decrease the annual fee to about \$450. Also, because of the house's vacancy last winter, the heating system was drained and turned off to save money. The lack of heat resulted in a never-before-seen mold issue in the attic. Therefore, the heating system will be activated this winter and will require a minimum temperature of 50° and any oil required to maintain that temperature. Having a tenant on premises will both pay for the minimum heat requirements (as heat is not included in the monthly rent) *and* will save the Town thousands of dollars in insurance costs. The SFHSC recommends entering into a tenant-at-will lease for a fee of at least \$1200/month.

3. Selling the House in the Long-Term

If the ANR Plan issues can be resolved so that the house is able to be sold, the SFHSC recommends that the Historical Commission submit an article requesting the sale of the house as soon as practical, but no later than Spring, 2014 Town Meeting. While members of the SFHSC agree that the house is important to the Town, the limited access and visibility make it extremely difficult to create any sort of high-traffic, revenue-generating use.

However, if any party is able to create a financially-sustainable business plan and model that includes keeping the house as a Town-owned asset, they should seek majority approval from the Historical Commission and Board of Selectmen.

If the house is in fact sold, all monies that have been spent from the Community Preservation Fund shall be reimbursed into the Community Preservation Historic Preservation sub-account. All remaining funds in the Stetson Ford House Revolving Fund shall return to the General Fund.

If it is determined that the house cannot be sold for any reason, the SFHSC could then be reactivated to determine the future of the house.

Preparation for Renting the Property:

Study Committee members and Historical Commission members have toured the house extensively and many carpenters and workmen have visited the site and opined on necessary repairs. Aesthetics, liability issues, and minimum requirements for rental units were taken into account so that a minimum of \$1,200 per month rent could be charged. Attached is a compilation of tasks that were deemed necessary to make the house rentable.

Item/Repair	Time Frame Recommendation	Estimated Cost
Install ½ louver vents in attic and attic fan	immediate	\$300
Remove ceilings in 1 st floor big room: evaluate and repair or replace	immediate	\$3,300
Paint walls, ceilings and trim in all downstairs rooms & in upstairs 2 front bedrooms	immediate	\$24,000
Stabilize downstairs bathroom sink, replace handles, repair bathroom floor and re-tile ~12 sq. ft., & new toilet	immediate	\$2,000
Fix hole behind fridge	immediate	\$400
Refinish downstairs wood floors	immediate	\$4,000
Clean/polish upstairs wood floors	immediate	\$500
Annual maintenance of water treatment system	immediate	\$500
Repair plumbing under kitchen sink	immediate	\$500
Very good professional cleaning	immediate	\$1,000
Sill work on West wall	immediate	\$2,000
Purchase stove and refrigerator	immediate	\$921
Minimum foundation repair	immediate	\$3,000
Repair broken window panes (\$90/pane)	immediate	\$1,440
Remove SW corner wainscoting board and examine buckle and fix bottom step	immediate	\$400
Dehumidifier for basement	immediate	\$500
Misc. door repairs	immediate	\$3,000
Bleaching attic	immediate	\$400
Insulating attic floor	immediate	\$4,000
Loam & seed the lawn	immediate	\$1,000
	TOTAL	\$55,161

Conclusion:

In order to release funds, the CPC requires a Management, Operating and Maintenance Plan for the Stetson Ford House. Due to the nature of the lot creation issues associated with the property and the Town's subsequent inability to sell the house at this time, the SFHSC requests that the CPC accept this Final Report as an interim plan.

The Historical Commission has a detailed list of additional work to be done on the house to maintain its long-term historic integrity (see Attachment 1). None of these tasks will need to be addressed during the 2-5 year rental period, but if unexpected repairs are required, the Historical Commission plans to use monies from the Stetson-Ford House Revolving Fund (which has a current balance of \$0). The Historical Commission does not anticipate asking the CPC for the release of additional funds beyond those detailed on page 4 for the foreseeable future.

Respectfully submitted,

The Norwell Historical Commission

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David DeGhetto, Vice-Chair
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Stetson Ford House Study Committee

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Anne Merna
Chris Mickle, Conservation Commission
Bob Norris
Patricia Shepherd
Sally Turner, Planning Board
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Future Work to be Done on the Stetson Ford House (to maintain its long-term historic integrity)

Item/Repair	Recom'd By...	Time Frame Recommendation
Repair/re-build cellar windows	Burrey/ Pfieffer	1-2 years
Remove debris from cellar	Burrey/ Pfieffer	1-2 years
New joists in SW room	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years
Rear ell—install post to stiffen roof	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years
Remove concrete covering on fdn	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years
Install French drains in S & W fdns	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years
Repoint fdn (outside)	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years
Repoint fdn (inside)	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years
Apply vapor barrier to cellar floor	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years
Install basement fans	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years
West Sill replacement/examine studs	Burrey/ Pfieffer	3-5 years