

Tour of the Old Academy Building in New Salem, MA

June 5, 2012

Attendees: Sheila Dubman, Alex Fiandaca, Anne Marie Hurley, Phil Mighdoll, Faith and Larry Pistrang, Karen Rossow and Judy Tyler. New Salem Historical Commission Chair Ta Mara Conde

Ta Mara led the Friends on a tour of the Old Academy Building which is in its final stages of restoration. Photographs from the visit have been posted on mechanicshall.net.

Historical significance

The Old Academy Building is the oldest remaining structure of New Salem Academy and is featured on the Town seal. Two of its former teachers, Harriet Giles and Sophia Packard, went on to Georgia to establish the first college for African American women. The two women founded Spelman College in 1881, known at that time as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary.

The Old Academy Building is also known for its unique construction known as ‘stack plank’ or ribbon construction and is one of the oldest and largest examples of its kind. Walls were built using wooden planks stacked horizontally and overlapping in the corners. Plaster was applied directly to the planks as there was no need for lath. Small display windows have been created in the walls to expose portions of this rare style of construction.

Ta Mara encouraged the group to dig deep into Mechanics Hall’s history and highlight the historical gems that surface. She also suggested establishing a trail of previous uses.

Funding Timeline

In 1997 the Old Academy building was awarded a **Massachusetts Preservation Project Fund (MPPF) grant** in the amount of **\$108,562** “for the purpose of securing the building for future use as a museum of New Salem and New Salem Academy’s history”. The previous year the building earned statewide attention as one of the Massachusetts’ **Ten Most Endangered Historic Resources**.

Also in 1997, the Town of New Salem voted to establish a restricted Endowment Fund of **\$36,187** to use the interest generated to pay for maintenance of the building.

That same year, the **New Salem Academy Trustees** donated **\$15,000** for architects, engineers and preservation consultants to oversee restoration of the building.

The **New Salem Historical Commission** raised **\$36,000** and secured **\$24,000 of in-kind services** to complete exterior repairs.

In 1998, a second **MPPF grant** was awarded in the amount of **\$8,562**. The New Salem Historical Commission raised a matching **\$8,500**.

In 2005, the building was awarded a **Save America's Treasures grant** in the amount of **\$172,568**. The matching **\$173,000** was provided by the Mass. Legislature.

Additional Notes

A local resident not present for our tour, Jean Derderian, spearheaded the project from the beginning. She identified grant opportunities and wrote several proposals.

The first phase of the building's restoration included stabilization and window restoration.

Ta Mara explained that when rehabilitating an historic building it is important to 'pick a year' around which restoration will focus. Organizers chose the Old Academy Building's founding year of 1837. Interestingly, this meant replacing the 1879 two over two windows with historically accurate twelve over twelve windows.

Paint chip analyses revealed the original colors of the interior which were then duplicated.

The expansive and ornate tin ceiling in the main room of the first floor which looks new is actually restored. Wallpaper samples dating to the later part of the nineteenth century were recovered and documented. Organizers are looking into the possible commercial value of the designs in terms of historic wallpaper reproduction.

One of the building's new uses will be a Town museum. New Salem's documents and artifacts have been maintained by the Swift River Valley Historical Society, which is dedicated to preserving the history of the towns flooded by the Quabbin Reservoir (Prescott, Dane, Enfield, Greenwich and portions of New Salem). New Salem's historical items will be transferred to the Old Academy Building. In addition to serving as a museum of local history, there are plans for a museum shop featuring items created by local artisans. Plans are also underway to display local artists' work in a way that does not impact the walls (i.e., easels vs. wall mounting).

A second floor classroom holds original desks and chalk boards and will become a living history classroom, allowing the public to learn about local history in an 1830 classroom.

New mold has developed in the basement stairwell and has organizers concerned that the building is now too tight. Ta Mara noted that old buildings were built to 'breathe' and that proper ventilation is critical.

Ta Mara strongly recommends restoration contractor Tom Paske. James Wright was also recommended.

Organizers held an open house and slide show presentation at the Old Academy Building on Patriots Day. Ta Mara encouraged the Friends to hold similar events to showcase

accomplishments. Ta Mara also recommended reaching out to as many press outlets as possible and to submit photos of events as well as prewritten stories.