



NEWBURYPORT  
PRESERVATION TRUST

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Linking the past with the present and future



Quarterly Newsletter of the Newburyport Preservation Trust

Summer 2022

# Crowds return to Preservation Week events following a two-year pandemic time-out

*Standing-room only keynote program and walking tours return . . . in-person*

Thanks to all who attended Preservation Week 2022 events – finally back in-person this year after a two-year pandemic time-out.

This year's Preservation Week theme, "The Mills of Newburyport The Dream That Ran Out of Steam," focused on the city's industrial buildings, past and present. The May 20-22 activities featured the keynote lecture at the Custom House Maritime Museum, two guided outdoor walking tours, and two self-guided tours.

Central to this year's Preservation Week was the illustrated lecture by R.W. Bacon on Friday evening, May 20, that surveyed the city's industrial history and provided context for Saturday's guided walking tours and self-guided explorations.

Saturday's guided outdoor walking tours drew crowds eager to learn about the city's re-purposed mill sites. In the morning NPT board members Rita Mihalek and Bronson de Stadler presented a tour of the former Ocean Mills (1846) at Kent and Monroe Sts. In the afternoon NPT founder and co-president Linda Miller led a tour of the former Globe Steam Mill (1845) site on Federal St., now the Tannery Marketplace.

Two self-guided tours of the Towle Building (Merrimac Arms, 1866) on Merrimac St., and the James Steam Mill (1843) on Charles St. were informed by detailed handouts with maps and photos.

Although the schedule was scaled back compared to pre-pandemic years, it was satisfying to return to in-person events with our valued members and friends. ■



Preservation Week 2022



## Popular 'If This House Could Talk' program featured at Yankee Homecoming July 30-Aug. 7

"If This House Could Talk," the popular do-it-yourself house history program that has energized residents in the city's historic neighborhoods since 2016, is back again this year for Yankee Homecoming week.

Each year participants make and display a poster detailing some historical or trivial

aspect of their house. Neighborhood strollers can download a map of the sites and plot their own course to read all the entertaining and informative posters. At this writing, more than 60 houses of singular loquacity are listed on the map.

Sponsored by the Newburyport Preservation Trust and the Newburyport Public Library's Archival Center, the program began in 2016 as the initiative of NPT member Jack Santos. Since then, Jack and enthusiastic volunteers have propelled the program to its current status. ■

## Powder House open for tours Sat., July 30

NPT's Powder House Park & Learning Center is open for tours from 1-3 p.m. on opening day of Yankee Homecoming, Saturday, July 30. The Acton Minutemen will be on hand to demonstrate marching maneuvers and the use of a flintlock musket.

This year the Yankee Homecoming schedule is packed with architectural and history tours, so we encourage members to attend and cheer the efforts of all presenters. ■



# City's reconstituted Planning Board reverses previous decision; bank expansion approved despite neighborhood opposition



## If This Block Could Talk?! What a marvelous idea!

Prospect Street happens to be along your editor's cross-town running route. Since July 6, when the Planning Board approved the Institution for Savings expansion, passing by the site has prompted my low mutterings of disgust, but has not altered my pace.

But one day I noticed a sign in a Prospect Street window: "If This Block Could Talk," the headline beckoned. I stopped dead in my tracks to read.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am This Block," the profile begins, and it goes on to chronicle the block's exasperating – but ultimately futile – two-year fight for enforcement of the city's pro-preservation zoning laws.

Immediately I wondered what a lot of other blocks might have to say if they had a voice. If my own block could reflect back on the last dozen years or so, it might say something like this:

"Well, I'm hanging in, even though my fully-functioning extremities at each end of the block were allowed to be mutilated – one was crushed and replaced by an ill-fitting prosthetic. A few years ago part of my still-sturdy midsection was removed even before the doctor's diagnosis. The cosmetic replacement holds me together okay, but the mishandled process left me feeling queasy in the gut ... gutted, actually. What's the deal with all this rampant malpractice? Hey, I love all my original body parts. I don't want to be a plastic block ... made up from a Newburyport-themed Lego set. And I'm just a little block. When I look at what's happening on other blocks, I have to admit that I kinda get down in the Dumpsters. I thought the city had laws to keep us from being picked apart."

If your block could talk, what might it have to say? I'll be on the lookout! ■

On July 6, 2022 – after more than two years of proposals, debate, citizen opposition, revision, decisions, reversals, and a bullying court challenge aimed at dismantling the city's pro-preservation zoning laws – the city's Planning Board voted 6-2 to approve the Institution for Savings expansion plans on Prospect Street.

Plans for the bank's expansion were first filed in January 2020, apparently with zero notice to its many neighbors on Prospect Street and Otis Place. Public hearings ensued, and public opposition coalesced.

In March 2021, the Planning Board denied the Special Permit by a vote of 5-3, after determining that the project's size, scale, and character did not meet the requirements of the Downtown Overlay District (DOD). [The DOD and the DCOD (Demolition Control Overlay District) are the city's two pro-preservation zoning laws that were unanimously approved by the City Council in 2014.]

The Institution for Savings appealed the decision to Land Court, challenging the validity of the DOD. In September 2021 a

settlement was announced between the city and the bank, although the negotiations did not address the size of the 16,000 sq. ft. two-story addition. In November 2021 the settlement was rejected by the City Council. The 2021 City Council was in favor of the city defending its DOD law in Land Court.

In April 2022, however, the newly-seated City Council elected to revisit the issue for some reason. The settlement was approved, which meant the newly-seated Planning Board would have to reconsider the Special Permit application.

The reconstituted Planning Board, with four new members since the 2021 vote, approved the Special Permit by a 6-2 vote on July 6. Prior to the vote at that public hearing, more than a dozen citizens spoke in opposition to the expansion plans. One person spoke in favor of the project: The bank's lawyer.

Those on the attack – and those on the pro-preservation defense – will do well to take notice, because this case may have written the new playbook for circumventing our preservation zoning laws. ■

## 'NBPT@3mph' articles are now on Facebook

In recent years local newspaper readers have enjoyed the "NBPT@3mph" articles based on research conducted for NPT's Historic House Plaque Program. Now the latest articles, prepared by NPT researchers Barb Bailey and Ellie Bailey, are available to read on NPT's Facebook page. The most recent article by researcher Barb Bailey is "The History of Beck and School Streets," a fine analysis of 18th-century land deeds on a 3.5-acre parcel in the South End. ■

At right is a current map overlaid with the seven land divisions noted in the 1747 probate record of Joshua Beck (1691-1747).



## We've got something in common with Paris!

Even when we were in the middle of the recent heat wave, we were secure in knowing our city is a real cool place.

And now we've got something in common with an internationally cool city that proves it – an outcry over removal of shady, cooling, air-cleansing trees.

The removal of about two dozen trees along the rail trail and the more recent removal of trees on State Street both came to city-wide public notice just a few weeks ago. This coincided with reportage by international news organizations on

citizen outcry in Paris that successfully thwarted the removal of 20 trees in the park surrounding the Eiffel Tower.

In the case of trees, it appears that both Paris and Newburyport face preservation pressures. (But objectively, Paris probably holds a slight edge on coolness. After all, the Parisians managed to save the trees.) ■

Rail Trail 2012



Rail Trail 2022

