

Introduction

Local historic districts are geographical areas in which the majority of buildings, sites, and structures are of historic or architectural interest. Historic districts are established under law in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (M.G.L Chapter 40C, enacted in 1960) for three purposes: to preserve and protect the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant to the history of the Commonwealth and its cities and towns; to maintain and improve the settings of those buildings and places; and to encourage new designs compatible with existing buildings in the district.

There are presently over 200 local historic districts in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Nearby towns of Holliston, Marlboro, Framingham, Northboro, Grafton, Sherborn, and Wellesley all have historic districts. Hopkinton has had an historic district for over 30 yrs. Established in 1979, the Historic District encircles the Town Common and includes important structures, public and private, on Hopkinton's Main Street. It was expanded in 2000 to include additional properties, and in 2005 a second district, the Woodville Historic District, was created.

Historic districts were first established in the U.S. in 1931 and first came into use in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1955. An historic district differs from a National Register District in that the National Register of Historic Places is a listing of buildings, structures, sites and objects of significance to our nation's history, as deemed by federal designation. Such designation confers preservation incentives and limited protection from the effects of federally funded, licensed, or assisted processes, but generally provides no restrictions, review or oversight on changes made by an owner to an historically significant property. Historic districts are established at the local level, through a vote of the town meeting or city council. They are administered locally by an Historic District Commission, which conducts a regulatory review process for all changes to exterior architectural features visible from a public way. A local historic district, with its review authority established under local and state law, is a far more powerful preservation device than the National Register. The proposed Elmwood Farm Historic District is not designated as a National Register District.

The proposed Elmwood Farm Historic District is a 12.3 acre residential parcel that is part of a larger 94 acre site that constitutes Hopkinton's historic Elmwood Farm. The farm and its owners have been a significant part of the town's history since the 1700's, when it was the home of the Reverend Elijah Fitch, the second minister of Hopkinton's First Congregational Church. For almost a decade now, the farm has been dormant since the death of its last

owners, and the Hopkinton Historical Commission ranked it the #1 most at-risk historic property in the town.

In May 2012, a preservation plan for the Elmwood Farm was presented to Town Meeting, proposing a combination of land conservation measures and an historic preservation mechanism to permanently protect this treasured piece of town history. Town Meeting approved the purchase of the 81.8 acres of farmland, preserving it in perpetuity for conservation and agricultural use by enacting conservation and agricultural restrictions. However, the desired preservation of the historic farmhouse and barn is still uncertain. The property's handsome circa 1810 brick house and its massive 1850's barn are the visual anchors of the Elmwood Farm site and its most historically significant features. These structures, on a separate 12.3 acre parcel, are to be sold for private ownership and are in need of protection through an historic preservation construct, to insure that this key piece of the Elmwood Farm remains. Placing these structures in a single-property historic district will provide oversight of exterior changes and prevent demolition. Without such protection, the heart of the Elmwood Farm may well be lost.

Methodology

The proposed Elmwood Farm Historic District would establish a single-property historic district consisting of one 12.3 acre parcel of land, containing a circa 1810 house and an 1850's era barn. This parcel constitutes the residential portion of the larger 94 acre Elmwood Farm site, whose 81.8 acres of farmland and woodlands were purchased by the Town of Hopkinton in 2012 by Town Meeting vote, with funding from the Community Preservation Act, a grant from the Bafflin Foundation, and a land grant from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The town has since permanently protected this part of the site with conservation and agricultural restrictions on the rural land. Therefore, the character of the larger area surrounding the proposed district and its historic setting has already been protected. The parcel containing the historic farmhouse and barn is the missing piece in preserving the Elmwood farm.

The existing Historic District Commission has undertaken the investigation, report, and public hearing process, rather than an historic district study committee, as provided in M.G.L. Ch.40C Sec. 3. The Elmwood Farm site is located less than a mile from the town center Historic District, and its needs conform to the requirements of the existing Historic District by-law. Therefore, it is recommended that the proposed new district be

administered by the existing Historic District Commission, because of the small number of residents and/or individual property owners, as provided in Section 4 of M.G.L. Ch. 40C.

Preserving Hopkinton's Elmwood Farm and protecting its agricultural history has been a community concern since farming operations ceased almost a decade ago. The farm's last owners, William and Rose Abbott, left their own rich legacy by farming the 80 acres of land for 50 yrs. and donating its produce to Boston and Worcester-based shelters, through their "Food for the Needy" project. After the owner's death the farm sat idle, its buildings falling into disrepair and concern growing. In keeping with the Abbott's wishes for charitable or community agriculture to continue on the farm, administrators of the Abbott Trust explored community farming options for the property and sought to establish a branch operation of the Grafton-based Community Harvest Project. Meanwhile, worried by the property's decline and disuse, the Hopkinton Historical Society's board of directors, members of the Planning Board, members of the Historical Commission, a descendant of the 1782 owner Elijah Fitch, and concerned neighbors toured the property, walked the land, and met with representatives of the Abbott Trust to discuss repurposing and preservation of the Elmwood Farm. During this time, the Hopkinton Historical Commission deemed the farm the town's #1 most at-risk historic property.

Finally, in 2012, working with the conservation organization The Trust for Public Land, a proposal was presented by the Community Preservation Commission to Town Meeting to save the Elmwood Farm. The aforementioned town purchase of the rural land for open space and agricultural use was passed by a large majority vote of the townspeople. Because town ownership of historic homes is impractical and problematic, private ownership was determined to be a more practical method for the long-term care and preservation of the farmhouse and barn. Therefore, the 2012 plan presented to the townspeople proposed protecting the historic Elmwood farmhouse and barn by means of a preservation restriction or other preservation mechanism.

Since the May 2012 Town Meeting, efforts to sell the residential property with a preservation restriction have been unsuccessful. At the close of 2012, the original 6 month marketing window was extended for another 6 months, but further extensions are uncertain. With the realty trust anxious to sell the property and settle its obligations, a slow real estate market, and town doubts about the legal obligations imposed by a preservation restriction, time is running out to save the Elmwood Farm's historic house and barn. The Hopkinton Historical Commission thus determined that establishing a single-property historic district would be a strong, practical, familiar and publicly acceptable preservation

mechanism that would meet community expectations for preserving the Elmwood Farm. They therefore requested the Historic District Commission to undertake this task.

As the proposal moves forward, the Historic District Commission plans to hold a public hearing on approximately April 1, 2013. It will present the resulting final report and proposed by-law change for a vote at Hopkinton's 2013 Annual Town Meeting, which will convene on May 6, 2013.

Significance

The Elmwood Farm is located on Ash Street, one of Hopkinton's designated Scenic Roads, which is a narrow, winding ancient road, characterized by fieldstone walls, mature trees, and many 19th century older homes, interspersed with new development. With the exception of the farm, most of the area has been built out with single family residences, many on large lots. Elmwood Farm is a key contributor to the rural character of Ash Street but is also the only remaining farm parcel in this once agricultural area and is one of the very few remaining farms in the town of Hopkinton. Despite the many new homes in the vicinity, the remaining older homes combined with the narrow curving roadway, the gently rolling topography, and the mature vegetation help to shield and harmoniously blend newer structures with old and maintain the rural feel of the neighborhood. Thus the Elmwood Farm continues to compliment and be complimented by the surrounding area.

The Elmwood farmhouse is a two and a half story brick, five-bay, center-entry building, described by the Massachusetts Historical Commission in its 1989 architectural survey as Federal/Greek Revival. The main structure was built circa 1810 and includes Greek Revival details such as templar gable ends with full returns, granite window lintels and sills, six-over-six sash, Palladian windows in the templar gable ends, traceried half-sidelights flanking the entrance door, and a four light transom over the side entrance door. There are two chimneys near the end walls. The house also has 1870's era Italianate updates of two single-story polygonal bays flanking the front entrance, connected by a flat porch roof with bracketed cornice. There is a 1996 one-story clapboard-sided rear ell which sits on the footprint of the original 1780's house. The massive 1850's era detached barn is a clapboard-sided Greek Revival, gable-end structure with a cupola. It has had modern alterations to the roof and siding on the north side.

The Elmwood Farm property was originally owned by the Reverend Elijah Fitch, from the late 1700's. He was Hopkinton's second minister of the First Congregational Church, from 1772 until his death in 1788. He was an eloquent speaker, a prolific writer and a beloved minister, who is credited with planting ash trees to purportedly rid the area of rattlesnakes, which gave Ash Street its name.

Reverend Fitch's heirs sold the property to John and Johanna Adams in 1813, who built the present brick house around this time, attaching it to Fitch's original 1780's structure. In the 1850's the property returned to the Fitch family, purchased by the Reverend's descendants John A. and Lucy Ann Fitch, who built the large barn. The Fitches were strong abolitionists, and family as well as local lore tells of the house being part of the Underground Railroad, with runaway slaves hidden in the pantry.

Granddaughter Lucy Fitch Perkins, who spent summers at the farm and lived there as a child during hard times after the Civil War, later became a noted author with her "Twins" series of children's books about international sets of twins. Her books, "The Dutch Twins"(1917) etc. are still in print. In 1956 her daughter, Eleanor Ellis Perkins, published a biography of her mother, "Eve Among the Puritans," which tells of her girlhood times on the Elmwood Farm. This book also is still available.

In the 20th century Edward Goddard, the architect of New York City's Waldorf Astoria, lived at the Elmwood Farm. In the early 1950's, the farm was purchased by William and Rose Abbott, who established the "Food for the Needy" program, later to become the "Community Harvest Project," a volunteer farming organization, growing food at the Elmwood Farm for both Boston and Worcester area hunger relief programs.

The two historically significant structures in the proposed Elmwood Farm District – the house and the barn – are generally intact. The house's key architectural elements remain, although there is deterioration which must be reversed. The 1996 ell which replaced the 1780's house is not architecturally significant, but because it follows the footprint of the original house, future improvements could bring it into greater harmony with the 1810 structure, including a possible return to the roofline of the Reverend Fitch's original house. The barn is believed to be structurally sound, but its siding is dilapidated in some areas, and modern alterations to the north side have caused water damage that needs to be addressed. It is hoped that with historic district oversight, this piece of Hopkinton history can be restored to its 1850's appearance. There are two contemporary intrusions on the property near the historic structures, a greenhouse and a small modern garage. As changes

are made to the property, under historic district review, it is anticipated that these structures will be improved, removed, or appropriately replaced.

The Elmwood Farm is not presently listed on the National Register of Historic Places. However, because of its architectural and historic significance, including its important local association with the development of the Town of Hopkinton, in November, 2012 the staff of the Massachusetts Historical Commission found the property to be individually eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Justification of the Boundaries

As explained earlier in this report, the 12.3 acre property proposed for the Elmwood Farm Historic District is the residential parcel of the 94 acre Elmwood Farm. Hopkinton's citizens voted to preserve the 81.8 acres of farmland by purchasing the land at the 2012 Annual Town Meeting and protected it with conservation and agricultural restrictions. Enacting an historic preservation mechanism to protect the farmhouse and barn when sold to a private owner is the remaining piece of the preservation plan for Hopkinton's historic Elmwood Farm.

The 12.3 acre parcel contains vacant land to the north and east of the house and barn. The Town is in the process of placing a Conservation Restriction on this open land around the historic structures, as conditioned by the aforementioned Town land purchase and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts land grant. Its objective is to advance the agricultural purpose of this property in perpetuity. While this would prevent residential building, and it is intended that this land be farmed or left in its natural state, it would not preclude the construction of agricultural outbuildings or other related structures. Because future plans for the land are unknown, it does not seem necessary or practical at this time to attempt to divide up the parcel for district boundary purposes, and it seems prudent to protect more rather than less of the property. Should an owner seek to build on the north or east portion, the Historic District Commission, the Conservation Commission, and the Open Space Preservation Commission could work with an owner to make sure that any new structures are carefully sited, screened, and work with the downward-sloping topography to not detract from the settings for the historic structures. Depending on future ownership and uses, there remains the option for the boundaries of the historic district to someday be reduced, if warranted, as provided for in M.G.L. Ch. 40C.

For the present time, the proposed boundaries for the Elmwood Farm Historic District follow the property lines of the 12.3 acre parcel, fronting on Ash Street to the west, abutting Elmwood Farm conservation land eastward to the rear. The parcel touches neighboring residential lots to the north and south that are sufficiently set back and screened to create a relatively congruent rural neighborhood setting for the proposed historic district.

Options and Recommendations for the Bylaw

The Historic District Commission recommends that the Elmwood Farm Historic District be governed under the same bylaw as the existing Historic District. As its needs conform to the current Historic District, no exclusions from the present bylaw are called for. Because of its small size, it is most practical for this single-property district to be administered by the existing Historic District Commission. Appeals will be handled by the same appeals process set forth in the existing bylaw, which is stated as follows:

“Any person aggrieved by a determination of the Commission may, within twenty days after the filing of the notice of such determination with the Town Clerk, file a written request with the Commission for a review by persons of competence in such matters, designated by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. The finding of the persons making such review shall be filed with the Town Clerk within 45 days after the request, and shall be binding on the applicant and the Commission, unless further appeal is sought in the Superior Court as provided in M.G.L.c.40C, sec. 12A.”