

Historical Society Wants to Buy Harrison House from Out-of-State Preservation Group

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The room called “the hall” holds a dining table at the Harrison House of Branford at 124 Main Street. The Harrison House is up for sale. The Branford Historical Society has been leasing the house and now wants to buy the house and the barn that goes with it. | Photo by Peter Hvizdak – New Haven Register (Friday, February 19, 2015)

Joe Naylor escorts a guest on a path through the snow from the barn towards the Harrison House of Branford at 124 Main Street. The Harrison House is up for sale. The Branford Historical Society has been leasing the house and now wants to buy the house and the barn that goes with it. | Photo by Peter Hvizdak – New Haven Register (Friday, February 19, 2015)

BRANFORD >> If the owner of the pre-Revolutionary Harrison House in Branford wanted to advertise the house for sale, the ad might look like this:

For sale in two years or maybe three: On 2 acres, a very old (built in 1724) “two-over-two” saltbox house known as the Harrison House and a not-so-old (circa 1850) barn, conveniently located on Main Street in the Canoe Brook section of Branford. Buyer will have to keep the buildings in museum condition; preservation experts will visit the house annually to make sure buyer is treating the house properly and not making any changes without permission. Priced at \$132,500.

Not a bad price, and to the Branford Historical Society both exciting (“We’ll own a piece of Branford history,” says Ginny Page, BHS president) and daunting (“We simply cannot sell enough strawberry shortcake to buy this house,” she adds). Selling shortcake at the Branford Festival each year is the society’s main fund raiser.

For 40 years, the BHS has carefully maintained the Harrison House, the barn and lawns — without owning the property, although it owns the artifacts collected through the years. The owner since 1947 has been a Boston nonprofit organization called Historic New England.

BHS has leased the property from HNE for \$1 a year, with 20-year lease agreements. But last year, when the second 20-year lease was up, HNE granted only a new two-year lease (with an option to extend the lease a year) and informed Branford that it would be “deaccessioning” (museum-speak for selling) the property.

When the organization was first founded in 1910, it bought “lots and lots of endangered properties,” according to an HNE spokesperson. But for the last few decades, HNE has been selling — partly to fill gaps in its collection. The deaccessions don’t mean that Boston totally forsakes a property. A property is sold with a preservation easement, “a tool that allows a property to be protected,” says Joe Cornish, HNE preservation services manager. The easements, he explains, are tailored for each property and cover the exteriors and interiors of buildings, the landscape and outbuildings — to prevent subdivisions.

Cornish reiterated that he is confident that the Branford Historical Society will be able to raise the sale price. But the BHS people remain on edge — what if they can’t find the money? What would happen to all the wondrous belongings in the house and the barn? The holdings are amazing.

On a frigid bone-chilling day recently, Joe Naylor, who directs the Harrison House guide program, escorted visitors on a path through the snow to the barn where he elaborated on the background of the very motley collection of old stuff:

There is a mail buggy that was drawn by a horse to deliver mail in the outlying district (as it was considered) of Pine Orchard. A man named Burt Shepard drove the buggy from 1902 until 1923 when it was replaced by a truck.

There are farm tools — pitchforks and axes, an augur, block and tackle. There’s a sharp-toothed, two-man saw that a plaque says belonged to Eli Whitney.

There are store or office signs that speak of the commercial side of Branford — Agency for the Oliver Typewriter, Sheldon House Beauty Shop, R. S. Baldwin Ins. Agency.

There’s a fence post that was part of the 50-inch-high fence or palisade that early settlers built to surround the town to keep out wild animals, it is widely believed. Naylor doesn’t like that theory — he thinks it more likely the fence was to keep farm animals from straying.

There’s more stuff back in the house - the two-over-two house, which means two rooms on each floor. On the first floor, in the room called the hall, most of the daily living took place — the cooking, the eating, the spinning. A loom and two spinning wheels are here. The parlor was reserved for more formal activities. If the minister came to visit, explains Naylor, he would be received in the parlor.

So, some of the artifacts in the parlor reflect its formal use. There’s a tiptop table crafted in 1760, another table built of wide boards, of even earlier vintage, 1710. In the massive corner cupboard, there’s an etched flip glass that supposedly Lafayette drank his flip from when he passed through Branford on his way from New York to Boston in 1824. Flip is an alcoholic drink, a mix of juices and wine or stronger stuff. As Naylor tells of this Lafayette journey, the flip glass evokes a life-size picture — the now elderly Lafayette stopping at the Towner Tavern near the town green, cheered by the throngs that hailed him on his route, perhaps feeling celebratory and thinking a flip was called for...

All now possibly on the endangered list. Because, the BHS website says, if the society can’t buy the property, the “museum would be lost, its artifacts scattered...and the flavor of Main Street would change.”

Anyone who wants to save the Harrison House (and the flip glass and the mail buggy) may send checks to P.O. Box 504, Branford, CT 06405.