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Akin House: Letter Concerning Akin House Historical Structure

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9/28/08

Diana

I was shocked to listen to the guy you have hired as a consultant. I know you visited the Akin House often during its conservation and was surprised that you hadn't understood or explained to your consultant how the structure was to be presented as a Culture Resource Center. From what he had to say Wed. night, I question whether he ever has been involved in this kind of project.

The structure holds the story. 276 years of social, economic and structural influences.
Examples:

The plan for the kitchen ceiling in room D was to leave one half open to show how it was originally; i.e. the original joists exposed and the whitewashed ceiling boards. The joist, presently not attached to the plate, is to be removed as it had been installed for attaching the later plastered ceiling.

To preserve the original exposed ceiling boards the plan was to build a support system above it. The remaining half of the ceiling to be left as is to show the later 1800's plaster renovation.

The west wall kitchen fireplace is of great interest. From a cooking fireplace to a wood stove for heat and cooking, and later a Humphrey Heater when a circa 1940 kitchen was installed in room F.

The kitchen's east wall has a great deal of history. It clearly shows that originally there had been only one small window, no plaster, and the exposed interior of the sheathing boards only whitewashed. Again around the 1880s 2 larger windows replaced the small window and the wall plastered. The beaverboard was placed temporarily to help prevent the plaster from falling off during reshingling.

Part of the floor, south east corner should be left open in order to see the cellar, the foundation wall and an original joist plus the joist pockets in the sill. In addition the top portion of the corner post casing, southeast corner, needs to be removed in order to reveal the actual corner post and the joinery methods used for the plate and end girt connection to the post.

Pieces of the original partition wall for the buttery, Room E, later becoming a bathroom, were stored in the barn including some pieces from Room F east partition wall, that originally was Ruth Akin's bedroom (see Akin's will).

The exterior sheathing boards in the buttery (the later bathroom) were left in order to show the marks of the shelves when the room was originally the buttery.

The framing in Room A is of particular interest as the builder was still using a 17th to early 18th century framing technique that had gone out of fashion by the mid 18th century (a 12" x 9" summer beam, 3" x 4 oak joists 'laid 20" on center, butt and cog joinery). The

builder did not intend to leave this framing exposed but covered it with wide pine boards. (the ceiling boards not damaged by rot are in the barn). The small hand-carved hangers that the builder used to attach the ceiling boards are still evident in the ceiling.

One half of the original summer beam was rotted. To save its history the badly rotted section was removed, a new piece spliced into the original and a full length steel beam was to be inserted in the top. When that is completed it is important that the steel beam is left exposed in the bedroom above the summer beam so an audience can learn another way that original fabric can be conserved.

Work was stopped before the floor in Room A could be repaired. The north end of the room should not be walked on.

The intent for Room A and the bedroom above (Room K) was to leave half of the ceiling open so an audience can look up and see the bedroom. One old iron bed would eliminate words!

The roof above this area leaked for 17 years or more. This moisture caused the wooden laths to swell and push against the plaster, holding the plaster like a clamp. However, after the roof was repaired the lath slowly dried out and shrunk. This in turn caused the plaster to fall off.

The new timber repairs to the frame should be painted a contrasting color.

The fireplace in Room C. was covered with plywood as it was no longer being used, A good way to show the before and after use is to cut the plywood in half lengthwise, replacing that section with see through material so the fireplace can be seen.

Exterior

The 2 frames on the outside of the house were put there to show the outline of the original small window in the kitchen. The other frame on the south wall, to show the impressions on the sheathing boards that clearly tell that the house was originally clapboarded, then later shingled. This is another method to show people social influences and how to look for a house's history. Both displays need written explanations.

I would like to reiterate again the reason why the above ground section of foundation on the north side appears to be falling apart. While working on the east back wall we discovered that overtime the whole back wall had grown 8 inches in width. This caused a section of the house at the northeast to push out beyond the original foundation. At some point somebody decided to add more foundation stones to support the hanging out section. During conservation the back wall was returned to its proper width. In so doing that section of foundations of the improvised stonework was now sticking out making it look to some as if the foundation was falling apart. After we had straighten the back wall the projecting stones were to be removed. However at this time a stop work order was declared.

If you look at my photos you can see how we repaired the feet of the sheathing boards

that had rotted. A time tested method used by conservators.

Concerning the bow in the roof. Even though the 1921 movie "Down To The Sea in Ships" clearly shows the bow in the roof. (See the movie photos of house) we spent a great deal of time with jacks and come-alongs to make sure it was still stable. It didn't budge.

It seems that the bow was caused by a sequence of events – hard to know which one came first:

A rafter was removed when the dormer was installed on the back roof.

The rafters did not sit on the plate in line with the joists to form a truss which would have helped prevent the roof from slipping outwards.

As the ends of the rafters protruded, due to the bow, they were cut off.

I have no time table for the above except for the movie that shows that the bow had been there for at least 100 years. If you must eliminate the bow, for reasons I find difficult to fathom, all new full length rafters will be needed.

This is a small house. As a study house there will not be a great deal of room to add other exhibits within the space, but with explanatory signage the house can speak about 275 years of change in Dartmouth and Southern New England. By presenting the house as a Culture Resource Center, its social and economic influence can be explained by the decorative changes. However, The Akin House can be more than a Cultural Center. It can show how an old house can be saved. My hope would be that this would inspire people to think twice before a decision to demolish or build a replica—And most of that is already paid for!

Peggi and Sally can be a great asset as we all worked together on ways to help the Akin House tell its huge story.

The presentations about the house have been very negative —"Its going to fall down" —"It's in terrible shape"— and so on. All of which is not true. I can only imagine that the many people who supported its conservation would now be discouraged and not vote yes for CPC funds. The future of the Akin House needs a positive attitude

Because the house is eligible for the National Trust Register I have enclosed The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties plus the National Register Bulletin 15. I hope you will pass them on to your consultant.