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Akin House: Request to MHC to Amend Criteria Statement

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DRAFT
Mr. Michael Steinitz
Director
Preservation Planning Division
Massachusetts Historical Commission
Massachusetts Archives Building
220 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, MA 02125

Re: Elihu Akin House, 762 Dartmouth Street, Dartmouth, MA – Request to Amend
Criteria Statement

Dear Mr. Steinitz:

I am writing in regard to W H A L E's Elihu Akin House and our original criteria statement that was submitted to you in 2004. At the time we had just begun research on the house. Since then Anne W. Baker, our preservation consultant, has completed a historic structures report. With assistance from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Massachusetts Historical Commission, we have nearly completed Phase I stabilization of the house. In March 2007 with stabilization completed, W H A L E will formally deed the house to the Town of Dartmouth. Our plan is that the Town or another non-profit organization will use the Akin House as a cultural heritage center

We are now ready to proceed with our National Register Nomination for the Akin House. Before submitting the nomination, however, we are asking to amend the original criteria statement to reflect new research. Our belief is that the new information gives the house and its history more than local significance.

In 1921 the Akin House became a part of film history as a location for *Down to the Sea in Ships*. The silent film classic clearly shows the condition of the Akin house in 1921. The house is called the "Old Homestead" and appears in a late sequence of the film. The film's hero, actor, Raymond McKee, enters through a gate at the rear of the property. He studies the house, walks to it and sits on the rear steps. A barn and shed are visible to the right of the house. The dormer is present. The film provides the only photographic evidence of the barn and shed. It also provides visual evidence of early twentieth century landscaping and the presence of a wall and gate on the rear property line.

The Akin House is described in the official program for the film's premiere in New Bedford on September 25, 1922.

"The Old Homestead – The house is more, than two hundred years old, and the sag in the roof has been there for a century. During production an elderly woman told Mr. Clifton of having played in the house when she was seven years old and in turn of hearing her grandmother tell of using the house for a play-ground at the age of seven/ It may be

interesting to note that this is the birthplace of the late Eugene Canfield, the noted gambler and sportsman.”*

*This is incorrect **Richard** Canfield was the son of Julia Akin; however, he was born in New Bedford. There is documentation of extended visits to his grandmother at the Akin House.

Down to the Sea in Ships contains rare footage of a whaling voyage filmed on the Wanderer and the Charles W. Morgan. The whaling footage is considered the best ever filmed and among the rarest. The height of the New Bedford whaling industry was the mid-nineteenth century long before film was available. Portions of the film were regularly shown at the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

The romantic plot is set in 19th century New Bedford and onboard a whaling ship. Other film locations included the Seamen’s Bethel, the Weston Howland house in Fairhaven, the Apponegansett Meeting House, the W. A. Robinson oil refinery and the New Bedford wharfs. Both whaling ships, Charles W. Morgan and the Wanderer were used to film the whaling voyage.

The film was financed by New Bedford residents who formed the Whaling Film Corporation. Dartmouth, Fairhaven and New Bedford residents were extras in the film. Director Elmer Clifton was an assistant to the legendary D.W. Griffith and went on to have his own distinguished career. The film made Clara Bow a star. Technically it was her second film; however all of her scenes were cut from her first film. The lead was played by Raymond McKee. He later became a scrimshaw artist and collector. . His son donated his father’s collection to Mystic Seaport.

Down to the Seas in Ships was released nationally on March 4, 1923 after its world premiere at New Bedford’s Olympia Theater. Recently the film achieved new life as a meticulously restored DVD. An original print is at the UCLA Film Preservation Library in California.

Additionally we can now answer the questions you asked regarding the age of the house. Anne W. Baker has provided the following description. We are also submitting with this letter a copy of her Historic Structures Report, amended framing drawings, a criteria statement reflecting the *Down to the Sea in Ships* material and a copy of your April 8, 2004 letter.

Fireplace Hearths

After removing linoleum from the three hearths the measurement are 1' 6", 1' 7" and 2' 0" in depth. These depths are typical of hearths found in early to mid 18th century Southern Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

All three hearths are incorporated in the chimney foundation. See attached plan.

The fireplace, in the Kitchen/Chamber with a beehive oven located on the face of the chimney stack is included as part of the existing hearth. It should be noted that the firebox has been rebuilt. The brick size is 8" x 4" and the face courses are at a right angle to the firebox.

We will not know if there is a larger firebox behind the present one until the chimney is repaired.

Surviving early fabric:

First Floor:

90% of the framing had been replaced.

Second Floor Framing. Rooms D, E, and F.:

The oak joists in rooms E and F are 3 x 4 spaced 30" on center.

The east/west oak chimney girt in D room is a 6" x 6" beam with a 1' chamfer on each side. The oak joists in D room are 3 1/2" by 6" deep with a 1" chamfered on each side.

Their average spacing is 30" on center.

The oak beams, ceiling boards (the underside of the second floor boards) and the interior side of the vertical oak sheathing in D, E, and F are white-washed.

These rooms remained this way until lath and plaster was applied to the walls and ceiling in the late 18th or early 19th century.

During conservation the location of an early window was discovered on the east wall of room D (Kitchen/Chamber). See drawing.

Second Floor Framing. Room A— (North West parlor) The oak summer beam is 8 1/2" x 6 1/2" and is not chamfered. The oak joists are 3 x 4 spaced 20" on center.

Ceiling—Ship lapped pine boards (average width 19") are attached to the joists by hand carved wooden hangers fastened with wrought nails.

The south fireplace wall, and the east and west walls have whitewashed, hand planed, ship lapped vertical pine boards which are attached directly to the vertical sheathing boards with wrought nails. The north wall has been replaced with studs.

A corner cupboard, federal door trim and raised 4 panel door were added in the late 18th or early 19th century.

Second Floor Framing. Rooms B and C:

Because the condition of these rooms did not require conservation the framing is not visible at this time.

Second Floor:

The partition boards dividing the 4 bedrooms are whitewashed. The North West bedroom was plastered in the late 18th or early 19th century.

The 5 x 5 oak rafters are spaced 4' 6" on center and are mortise and tenoned, and pegged at the peak. The oak collars are 2 3/4" x 3 7/8" deep.

W H A L E is requesting your review before proceeding further with our National Register Nomination. The Elihu Akin House is a pure stabilization and conversation project with a planned public use. We hope to make the National Register Nomination as accurate and complete as possible reflecting the architectural and historical importance of the property.

Sincerely,

Peggi Medeiros
Director of Education & Preservation Services

Anne W. Baker
Preservation Consultant