



Commercial District Revitalization ■ Historic Preservation ■ Non-Profit Organizational Development

Celebrating Our Tenth Anniversary 2004-2014

May 6, 2014

To: Woodbridge Heritage Tourism Steering Committee

From: Donna Ann Harris and Dr. Emily Cooperman

Subject: Assessment of Heritage Activities in Woodbridge

Thank you for participating in the stakeholder interviews held on March 31, April 2 and April 23. Our interviews with all Steering Committee members were insightful and constituted a very helpful snapshot about all the history and heritage events/activities and organizations working in Woodbridge Township. This memo outlines our assessment of these activities in the form of observations and recommendations at the beginning of the NJHT funded Heritage Tourism project.

We are looking forward to speaking with you about these observations and recommendations during our conference call on Thursday May 15 at 2:00PM.

I. Historic Preservation Commission of Woodbridge Township (HPC)

1. Observations

The Historic Preservation Commission of Woodbridge Township (HPC) was created by Township ordinance in the mid-1990s and the eleven-member commission oversees a variety of vital preservation activities for the Township as a whole. In their role providing advisory, educational, and informational functions to promote historic preservation in the Township, the Commission hosts a variety of educational and outreach activities. These include: an annual essay contest for students, placing historical markers on historic buildings in town, conducting annual walking or driving tours, and creating annual brochures that focus on important historic buildings and sites among the ten towns that make up the Township. In addition to these duties, the Commission has other important functions.

The Commission will, according to its enabling legislation:

- prepare a survey of historic sites of the Township;
- make recommendations to the Planning Board on the historic preservation plan and the implications for preservation of historic sites;
- advise the Planning Board and the Board of Adjustment on applications for development, and

- advise the Planning Board of the inclusion of historic sites in the recommended improvement program.

These are important advisory functions, but there is no demolition delay or demolition prohibition in any aspect of the current legislation.

The February 2009 Master Plan Historic Preservation Element notes that:

“The Planning and Zoning Board refer development applications on historic properties identified in the Historic Preservation Element of the Master Plan to the Historic Preservation Commission for advisory comment.” (Page VII-3)

In contrast to municipalities with Certified Local Government ordinances, the Woodbridge HPC does not currently regulate local landmark buildings, nor does it issue Certificates of Appropriateness for repairs, restoration or new construction for individually listed local landmarks or local historic districts. Recognizing the lack of such powers, the Commission members are studying strong preservation ordinances with the intent of eventually drafting a new, strong, preservation ordinance that would permit them to become a Certified Local Government. We understand that the intent of this self-study is eventually to seek the support of the Mayor and Township Council to consider enacting a strong local preservation ordinance in the future.

Finally, the Commission maintains its own web site <http://www.wthpc.org/> and has a series of pages on the Township’s web site <http://www.twp.woodbridge.nj.us/Departments/BoardsandCommissions/HistoricPreservationCommission/tabid/309/Default.aspx>. Both of these web sites carry similar information, but the independent HPC web site <http://www.wthpc.org/> presents greater potential to inform the public about and to promote all the history and heritage activities in the Township in a single place.

2. Recommendations:

- **A stronger historic preservation ordinance:** The Commission should continue its efforts to study strong local preservation ordinances and should be certain to understand all the implications for creating such an ordinance. Once the Commission’s internal study is complete, we suggest that Commission members invite the State of NJ Certified Local Government Coordinator to visit with them to discuss best practices for approaching the Mayor and Township Council members about the need to enact a stronger preservation ordinance. We support the HPC’s efforts to consider such an ordinance seriously.
- **Public education:** One of the first, and crucial main tasks that the Commission will have to undertake if its members wish to establish a strong local preservation ordinance, is to

undertake a very broad effort to educate the general public about the benefits of designating local landmarks and how the new ordinance will actually work if enacted. Transparency, consistency, and the highest standard of professionalism in project review are crucial components of best practices for bodies like the HPC. We encourage the Commission to work closely with the CLG Coordinator to create a multipronged and high quality public relations (PR) effort to educate local residents about the need for a new, strong preservation ordinance.

The campaign should use traditional as well as new media to be most effective. The CLG Coordinator can provide samples of well-constructed PR efforts to pass strong preservation ordinances from other communities across the state. This new ordinance will add significant new powers and responsibilities to the Commission, and local residents must understand why designating and regulating historic properties is essential. Even if the Commission is not ready for another year or more to consider suggesting a new ordinance be introduced for consideration by the Township Council, we recommend that the Commission begin to offer quarterly educational programming about preservation issues in Woodbridge as a lead up to the time when an ordinance is proposed. The CLG Coordinator is your best source for planning your educational and PR campaign to pass a new ordinance.

- **Historic resources inventory:** The recent completion of the Township historic resources inventory by Commission member Miguel Martin will help the Commission to identify individual landmark buildings and local historic districts to designate under a stronger historic preservation ordinance. The inventory is a crucial step in the process of identifying both what properties might qualify for designation and the development of a complete set of eligibility criteria. We strongly recommend that you make the CLG Coordinator aware of the existence of the inventory and seek the CLG Coordinator's opinion about whether the materials in the current inventory are sufficient to meet the CLG standards for historic resources inventories to be regulated under a local CLG ordinance. If the materials already gathered are not sufficient, learn what additional research is needed to bring the survey into compliance. We also recommend that you consult the CLG Coordinator with regard to designation criteria and relevant language in comparable ordinances.
- **Historic preservation element:** The February 2009 Township Master Plan includes a very brief historic preservation element in Section VII. The element notes the three properties on the National Register and seven others identified in earlier Master Plans as being worthy of designation. All of these sites are mapped in pages VII-4 and 5. This element does not acknowledge the recent completion of the Historic Resources Inventory as a listing of additional properties that the HPC wishes to review for the purposes of providing advisory comment to the Planning and Zoning Boards. We suggest further discussion with the CLG Coordinator about how to go about amending

the existing historic preservation element of the Municipal Master Plan to include references to the historic resources inventory.

- **Other educational activities of the Commission:**

- **Historic tour brochures:** The historic tour brochures, funded by the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission each year, are substantial and available on brochure racks at the Barron Art Center and Township Hall and as downloadable PDF files on the Commission and Township web sites <http://www.wthpc.org/>. These tour brochures represent a great deal of research by Commission members over the last six years and deserve to be presented in a variety of online formats to assure that the information is well used. We believe there are many ways to utilize your existing tour brochures as well as the historic resources survey materials, especially to create interesting and useful web site content for the Commission's web site.
- **Tours:** We understand that the once a year walking or driving tours utilizing the brochure content from the year before are sell outs with more than 75 people participating. This is an excellent level of participation. These yearly tours, modestly priced at \$5.00 for adults, are eagerly anticipated and generate great word of mouth.

These six tours have the greatest potential for involving more residents and tourists in the history and heritage of Woodbridge Township. We encourage the Commission to consider, as a first step, offering the tours as currently constructed more often, perhaps a different tour each quarter. It would be ideal to add to the current the tour content offerings. A future goal might be to create more frequent tours on a fixed weekend schedule, such as first Saturday of the month walking tours. We can make suggestions about how to incrementally add new tours, revise existing tours or create a yearlong tour schedule that can be expanded over time as more trained guides become available (see below).

- **New docent training:** We understand that Commission members now offer the tours themselves; any increased tour frequency has the potential to tax these knowledgeable volunteers. To broaden the number of qualified volunteers who can provide such tours, we recommend that the Commission consider offering a high quality training class for potential volunteer tour guides (docents) and publishing this class series widely. Creating a fixed curriculum and training program has many benefits, as it can train new people to offer tours, but it can also be a way to expand local knowledge and interest in the Township's 300 year history and historic buildings. We can provide samples of training curricula from other communities in the region if the Commission is interested in exploring this option for the future.

- **Historic markers:** Currently, the Township pays for the creation of the historic markers or house plaques and Township public works staff installs them. Mini plaques are available for purchase by residents, but this program has not yet taken off. This program may need to be rethought to encourage more individuals to purchase plaques to mark their historic building, or the Commission may wish to seek other funding for donations of plaques to property owners.
- **Seventh grade historic essay contest:** The current school essay contest for seventh graders studying local history is an important educational effort of the Commission and should be continued in its current form. The five best essays are collected from the five middle schools, and five winners are awarded small cash prizes by the awards panel. This is a highly effective program that involves young people in history and heritage. We can suggest other ways to involve students in history and heritage in Commission activities if desired.
- **Expansion of web site:** The HPC has an independent URL and web site <http://www.wthpc.org/> that is the most likely entity to host the “all History page” mentioned in the Heritage Tourism project proposal if the Commission would agree. Additional web site updates might be needed to the Commission’s web site including creating a simple to use calendar that event sponsors could use to upload their own history events throughout the year. We can make suggestions about navigation and adding additional content as the Heritage Tourism project progresses if the Commission were to agree.
- **New award program:** We recommend that the Commission consider offering a series of annual awards to homeowners and commercial property owners who have completed high quality restoration and rehabilitation work during the year, or to property owners who have been particularly noteworthy stewards of historic properties on an ongoing basis. An application form should be made available, and a yearly deadline. Commission members or others could be invited to participate in judging applicants. The ideal time to make these awards would be during National Preservation Month in May each year. It would be ideal if these awards could be made during a Council meeting so that the Commission and the Award Winners would get maximum exposure through Cable 35 TV, and the Township e-newsletter. The Commission could award a certificate to the winners as appropriate. We can advise on how to start an award program if the Commission is interested.
- **New endangered properties program:** If the Commission wished to undertake a more assertive advocacy role for historic properties in the Township, whether designated or not, the Commission might consider establishing a “most endangered properties program.” Preservation New Jersey, the National Trust,

and countless other preservation organizations nationwide find that this annual list, when presented with appropriate fanfare, is an excellent way to call attention to historic properties that are subject to imminent danger due to development pressure, public projects, or private sector neglect and abandonment. The Commission could issue a call for nominations to the general public to gain maximum exposure. We can provide advice on how to start a “most endangered properties program” if the Commission is interested.

- **Current location of HPC in Township government structure:** One interviewee suggested that it might make sense to bring the HPC under Recreation Department, as the Barron Arts Center is already in this department. This should be discussed with the HPC to determine any benefits for such a move.

II. Historical Association of Woodbridge Township (HAWT)

1. Observations:

In the period leading up to the Bicentennial, the Historical Association of Woodbridge Township (HAWT) took the initiative to build the Parker Press Building located in the small park adjacent to the commuter parking lot along Poillon Street. Since that time, as we understand from several interviewees that the organization has had periods of difficulty. However, all of our interviewees agreed that the organization now has momentum and direction, especially around its signature project, the creation of a museum (discussed below). The HAWT’s tax exempt status has lapsed, but we understand that the museum committee is working to get it reinstated. The HAWT has a full board, active officers, a strategic plan, a growing Facebook page, monthly programs, and about 70 active members. The minutes of the organization as circulated to members include a calendar of events. Only a handful of members use email.

2. Recommendations:

The HAWT automatically extends membership to the HPC and we agree this is a powerful partnership to maintain and expand. There is considerable Board overlap between both entities. Both groups agreed that current partnerships are working well and more should be encouraged.

III. Museum Committee of Historical Association of Woodbridge Township (HAWT)

1. Observations:

A committee of the HAWT has been formed to press forward with plans to build and open a museum of Woodbridge history. This has been a long-held dream of the LaPenta family.

Current estimates for the construction of the museum building attached to the south end of the Parker Press Building are nearing a million dollars, despite donations of volunteer labor by soil boring and site preparation firms. The Mayor has been highly supportive and we understand that he is planning to approach the County Freeholders about Green Space funding for the building, which will pay for a portion of the construction. We understand that the HAWT received a bequest for \$150,000 several years ago to be used for exhibits. We further understand that they have raised about \$30,000 in the last three years from a variety of fundraising events and activities. A strategic plan has been completed for the museum. As plans progress, the museum committee would like to create a separate board of directors for the museum, and hire a strong museum curator to lead the organization.

The current architect is Jim Franko of JVF Associates in Martinsville, NJ. He is taking over from Thomas Baio who will be credited with the design of the museum building. The plans are now being prepared for a 40 x 100 foot, two story building. The display area will be 60 x 40 feet, with rear area for receptions and other outside events. The museum office will be upstairs.

The Museum Committee is hoping for an interactive display space using much technology. They also hope for changing exhibits and space for each of the ten towns in the Township to provide displays of interest. Currently there are about 175 objects that have been donated and put in storage until the museum is completed.

2. Recommendations:

Right now, museum planning is just beginning and funding for the complete construction and installation of museum displays is not fully in hand. Therefore, it is too early in the development of this property to offer any further recommendations.

III. Historical themes

Observations: Woodbridge Township has more than 300 years of history to explore and interpret for the public. Despite the fact that Woodbridge is the oldest continually extent Township in NJ, many interviewees offered suggestions about the dominant themes that deserve further study and discussion since “all roads lead to Woodbridge.”

- Immigration in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries
- History of tolerance and acceptance of all ethnic groups
- Pre Revolutionary settlements
- Revolutionary War battles fought in the township
- Rapid suburbanization
- From Neighborhoods to Township
- Downtown retailing and the advent of the mall
- Transportation in general: railroads, highway system, marinas, deep water ports, trolleys, rivers and The 1951 Train Wreck

- Industrialization and the Pike Gauge
- Growth of unions

Other repositories to check for historic content: Trinity Episcopal Church in Woodbridge for their archives, the Quaker Library at Swarthmore, and the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia. The local history room at the Woodbridge Library is a primary source as are the 115 Oral History tapes also on deposit there. Other groups that should be investigated are: Revolutionary and Civil War Roundtables, Crossroads of the American Revolution National Heritage Area, and the Washington Rochambeau Revolutionary War Route (W3R). The Reading Railroad had a tight-knit Reading Railroad worker-community, the McMiller coal dumper as it relates to Port Reading should be investigated. The Clay Pits and clay seam/deposit running from Carteret to Sayreville supplied the Penn Valley Brick Kiln for bricks should be considered for its heritage potential.

Recommendations:

We will be pursuing these as well as other potential topics for the Interpretive Themes.

IV. Current history and heritage activities in the Township

1. Observations:

There are an assortment of history and heritage activities that occur in the Township now that could, along with the HPC Tours, lead to an annual calendar of events to be used to market to and attract tourists and residents. In all cases, the event sponsoring organization would need to cooperate to establish dates for events far in advance, so they could be listed and promoted on any kind of annual calendar. Below is a list of event that interviewees identified.

- Black History Month exhibits or programs at Barron Art Center (February)
- St. Patrick's Day Parade (March)
- Historic Preservation Commission yearly tour (April)
- Multicultural Day (May)
- Old Time Baseball game (May)
- Independence Day fireworks (July)
- Music on Main, Summertime Concerts Wednesday nights, downtown Woodbridge
- Farmers Market in Parker Press Park in summer
- Civil War Encampment in Parker Press Park (August)
- St. James Street Fair (August)
- Barron Art Fest (early October)
- Ghost Walk organized by the Township Recreation Department (October)
- Columbus Day Parade (October)
- Veterans Day Parade (November)
- Holiday Stroll in Downtown Woodbridge (with carriages) (December)

- HAWT monthly lectures/programs

2. Recommendations:

Some but not all of these events listed above, deal with history and heritage in the Township. The events that do focus on history and heritage should be included in an annual calendar on the “all history” web site. These events or activities would also be candidates for listing on any kind of printed rack card if produced in the future. See a sample of similar kind of brochure from New Castle DE attached.

V. Oral History

1. Observation:

Woodbridge local historian Brenda Velasco has collected 115 oral histories of Woodbridge residents over the last ten years. This is an exceptional resource to use for this project and we look forward to digging in.

2. Recommendations:

Continue to collect more oral histories and promote their use as valuable records of the last 75 years in Woodbridge and continue to explore ways to make them more accessible to the public.

VI. History Trail

1. Observations:

Several years ago the Township received a grant from Congressman Ferguson to research, write and create almost 50 large (approx. 3' x 4') plaques dealing with all aspects of Township history. These markers include brief text and historic photos, and will be covered with Plexiglas and mounted to stanchions that sit at an angle for easy reading. They will be distributed along an existing trail in the Township's “Central Park.” We understand that each marker will also be loaded as searchable PDF's on the Township's web site. The information including the photos and images will go alongside stories that are published in the *Woodbridge News*. These plaques have been fabricated and will be installed by Public Works Department in spring 2014.

2. Recommendation:

Work with the HPC to determine how this historic asset can be better marketed to residents and visitors once it is installed. Determine if there is a way to repurpose the text and photo content for other web sites or brochures.

VII. Heritage Tourism and Economic Development in Woodbridge

1. Observations:

Based on our interviews, we learned that there is no specific effort to attract heritage or other types of tourists to Woodbridge Township. This is typical, when there are only a handful of historic sites in a community.

A variety of entities deal with larger economic development issues in the Township, but none of these focus on tourism as their main objective. The Woodbridge Township Economic Development Corporation (WEDCO) undertakes traditional business and industrial recruitment and retention activities. Hotel/motel tax collected by hotels in the Township fund the Township's general operations. An active Woodbridge Downtown Merchants Association manages the downtown in Woodbridge and hosts the holiday stroll with horse drawn carriages in December. The Woodbridge Metro Chamber of Commerce works throughout the Township and hosts events such as the street fair/craft show this year on May 17 this year. The Recreation Department hosts the farmers market and summer concert series.

2. Recommendations:

The Heritage Tourism project will help the history community in Woodbridge Township understand what visitors want to see and learn about when they visit the community. As part of this project we will make recommendations to expand an existing web site to include a calendar of all existing history/heritage events in the Township. This web site should also include links to partner organizations; visitor information, and a heritage tab which can be a place to link and list all things heritage in the Township, including the eventual new "heritage product" to be produced as part of this grant. We will also make recommendations about marketing existing and new events/activities to a broader audience via traditional and social media as this grant progresses.

VII. Middlesex County Partnerships to Explore

1. Observations:

We learned that there is no active county historical organization, but the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission is a well-regarded entity that provides grants and assistance to a very broad range of arts, cultural and heritage organizations in the county. They should be a major partner in for this effort. Additionally the Middlesex Convention and Tourism board is a likely partner, as well as the Raritan-Millstone Heritage Alliance

2. Recommendations:

Interviews will be scheduled with these partner organizations soon to determine the extent of their willingness to help and support the Woodbridge Heritage Tourism effort.

VIII. Communication and marketing

1. Observations:

We learned during our interviews that there are a variety of traditional and new media channels being used to promote history and heritage events in the Township now.

- **Traditional Media**

- **Paper newsletters, mailing lists:**

- A quarterly paper newsletter goes to every Township resident, and this newsletter has a dedicated column Spotlight on History that can be used to great advantage to publicize events. The HPC, Barron Arts Center and the Library have email and mailing lists that they use to promote their events. These entities send media notices through John Hagerty's office at the Township Communications Office.

- **Media list**

- There is no media list for history and heritage. To get the word out, the HPC uses the list from people who have signed up for the tours. They post information to the Bulletin board on TV35.

- **Brochures, books, and publications about Woodbridge history:**

- Interviewees mentioned several books published about Woodbridge history over the years. No one mentioned new publications being written. The HPC publishes their annual history tour brochure with a grant from the County Cultural and Heritage Commission.

- **Cable TV 35**

- The HPC, BAC and Library use the Cable TV channel to shoot events, and to announce events on the station's bulletin board. One interviewee suggested a weekly show exploring and discussing history. It could run on TV35 and be archived on a web site, and linked to YouTube.

- **New media**

- **E-Newsletters, email lists and web sites:**

- The HPC and Barron Art Center work closely with John Hagerty to promote their events/activities on the Township web site, and through the weekly e-newsletter. The Township's weekly e-newsletter is an important tool for timely news events that the HPC and the Barron Art Center use consistently to promote their activities and

events. The Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission has a very active social networking effort led by their social media coordinator. The Barron Arts Center works closely with them.

- **Facebook pages:**

There is no one Facebook page for history and heritage in the Township. Several neighborhoods have developed their own Facebook pages to promote their areas. For these Facebook pages, history and heritage is not the major emphasis. The Barron Art Center has a Facebook page, as does HAWT, Avenel Group, Colonia, Iselin, and Woodbridge according to interviewees.

- **Web sites:**

There is no single web site promoting all the history and heritage events and activities in Woodbridge. The following organizations have web sites: Barron Arts Center, HPC, HAWT and some of the neighborhoods. The HPC and Barron Art Center web sites are hosted through the Township's larger web site. One interviewee mentioned a www.07095.com web site. The HAWT and HPC have independent web sites, as does Colonial Independent Club according to interviewees.

- **You Tube:**

There is no history or heritage You Tube Channel for Woodbridge.

- **List serves:**

The HPC posts events to the NJ History L List serve, which has a statewide reach, we understand that HAWT does not post to this list serve or others. The League of Historical Societies of New Jersey has a regular email blast they send listing events of members. This email has statewide reach too, and can be very effective for promoting events that would be of interest to the broader heritage audience in the state.

- **Twitter:**

Only the Barron Art Center has a Twitter account according to interviewees.

2. Recommendations:

- **Coordination and cooperation:**

Promoting history and heritage in the Township must utilize many public relations tools including both traditional and new media. Given the potential audience for these activities, we must use a variety of methods to promote events, as not everyone uses a computer or smart phone to access information for weekend activities. Below we offer some suggestions

- **Collecting email lists:**

The Library, Barron Art Center and HPC have been collecting email addresses for blasts and e-newsletters and this should be encouraged and expanded if possible. The HAWT should also begin collecting email addresses.

- **List serves:**

The HPC is already posting their events to the NJ History List serve, and other organizations should do the same. The Association of New Jersey Historical Societies also has a popular list serve that should be regularly used to promote events.

- **Cross promoting existing events:**

The current history and heritage activities and events need to be better coordinated and marketed. Partner organizations may need to set dates far in advance so that an annual calendar can be published. A formal effort to cross market every history and heritage activity will benefit all the groups presenting such activities and will help to formalize relationships between organizations. Cross promoting events and activities to Facebook pages would be an effective method to generate additional traffic for every history related event held.

IX. Wishes and Dreams

1. Observations:

Interviewees mentioned a range of wishes and dreams for history and heritage in the Township. Several people focused on the completion of the museum as a centerpiece for these interests in the Township. Others wanted:

- to create a municipal archive;
- promote the Township at the train station and Newark airport;
- to create a full time paid “history czar” to unite and coordinate existing history events, organizations and activities;
- to grow awareness of the Barron Arts Center and HAWT;
- a new, strong preservation ordinance;
- to create a National Register district along Rahway Avenue and Green Street;
- to provide more accessible genealogical information and
- harnessing the popularity of the Recreation Department’s Ghost Walk, despite that it is less focused on accurate history according to one interviewee.

2. Recommendations:

All of these suggestions are worthy of discussion, but a general consensus is needed among the greater history and heritage community about how to spend the very precious resources available both in terms of money and volunteer hours to pursue any these projects in the future. Some of these projects are currently in the works, such as the planning for the Woodbridge Township History Museum or studying a new local preservation ordinance. Some

require Township action (such as a paid history czar or municipal archives), while others projects can be pursued by volunteers working through existing organizations.

The Heritage Tourism Assessment project can provide a platform for discussion about specific goals for history and heritage in the Township over the next eighteen months and beyond.