

Carr-Levalley House Preliminary Historical Assessment

The following preliminary report was prepared by Roberta Randall, staff architect, and Richard Greenwood, deputy director, of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission based on a walk-through the house with for Diane Guillemette and Rev. Peter Levalley Spencer on May 8, 2013.

Historical Significance

The Carr-Levalley House (c. 1722 et seq.) at 42 Fairview Avenue, West Warwick is considered eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in local history as the oldest house in West Warwick and an important survivor of one of the earliest farms in the Pawtuxet Valley interior. The house is a 1-1/2-story timber-framed Colonial farmhouse with an asymmetrical gambrel roof, and a small central brick chimney, set back from the road on a grassy lot. It features cased wooden posts (two of them gunstock in form), period mantels and historic doors, windows and trim. A long, 1-story later ell on the north side and a clapboard-sided barn behind the house were removed in 2008.

The property lies within the western part of the Shawomet Purchase, which was not colonized until the late 17th century. Its development seems to have begun with the Carr family; reportedly it was acquired by Caleb Carr, a Colonial governor, who died in 1695, and subsequently inherited by his granddaughter Sarah Carr. She married the Reverend George Pigot(t), an English missionary sent here by the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. The Pigots held the property while the reverend served as the first rector of King's (later St. John's) Episcopal Church in Providence from 1723-27. In 1727, when Reverend Pigot moved to Marblehead, Massachusetts to assume the rectorship of St. Michael's Church, he traded this property to Peter Levalley in exchange for Levalley's residence in Marblehead. Levalley, reportedly a Huguenot merchant from Lyon, France, settled here and by the time of his death in 1756 had enlarged his holdings into an extensive farm of more 300 acres. Levalley's farm was divided among his children and further enlarged by them and their descendants. The house was the residence at the center of an active farm into the early 20th century when it was a fruit farm managed by Clarence Spencer, a Levalley descendant. In 1948, it was sold out of the family without the farmland and continued in use as a single-family dwelling.

A preliminary inspection of the house indicates that it has early 18th century origins with major modifications in the late 18th-early 19th century and subsequent minor modifications in the later 19th and 20th centuries. The house seems to have begun as a 1-and-a-half- or two-story structure with one main room, probably with an end-chimney, as indicated by the original Peter Levalley's probate inventory of 1756 which specified a great room, back room and chamber (second story bedroom). Presuming that they have remained in place, the handsome paneled chimney breast in the southeast room and a pair of gunstock posts indicate that this was the original great room.

By the early 19th century, the house was rebuilt or enlarged into a two-story gambrel-roofed house with a modified square plan of four rooms arranged around an off-center chimney.¹ The wide Federal-style fireplace surround in the northwest room indicates that this was the kitchen,

¹ Need to review 1818 Michael Levalley probate inventory for room identifications.

complete with a bake oven. The narrow straight-run staircase is enclosed in a narrow stairway between the northeast and northwest rooms. This plan was subsequently modified by the addition of a long one-story gable-roofed ell on the north end of the house in the mid-19th century and a late-19th or early 20th century single-story addition on the south side of the main house. Originally flat-roofed, this addition was later covered by an extension of the lower slope of the gambrel roof.² It may be that this extension, which contains an enclosed entry porch, removed an original front entry on the southern flank of the house.

The single greatest change to interior seems to have been the replacement of the original chimney with a smaller one in the late-19th or early 20th century. The only firebox to remain was the one in the northwest room, which was rebuilt, eliminating the bake oven. The firebox for the southeast room was eliminated (though the mantel was retained) and a stovepipe connection was made to accommodate the installation of a stove in that room. No evidence has been discovered indicating that there were other fireplaces in the original chimney.

Current Conditions

The house is currently in good condition considering it has been unoccupied for 4 years. The roof structure appears fine and there are not significant signs of moisture penetration through the roof, except for some signs of moisture penetration on the plaster around the chimney at the second floor. If this is active leaking then it is most likely a chimney flashing problem. Making sure that the roofing material and the flashing are maintained in good condition is essential for the survival of the building. Roofs are the most vulnerable and water penetration through the roof is also the damaging to the structure.

There are signs of moisture and some insect damage in the basement that can be helped by providing adequate ventilation. Mold, rot and insect infestation will thrive in areas where humidity and moisture exist. Providing a louvered opening or two, if possible, in the foundation will allow air to move through the space. This can be achieved by temporarily replacing basement window sash with a louver to fit the opening. If electricity is available, having a fan or a dehumidifier in the basement will help to ensure a dry basement. It is also a good time to treat the exposed framing in the basement with insecticides, such as borate. This will arrest existing insect infestations and prevent new ones.

Some ventilation at the first and second floor should also be considered. This can be achieved in the same manner. The bottom sash of a window be can temporarily replaced by a louver, leaving the top sash in place. One on either side of the house at each floor should allow enough air flow to keep the humidity at a minimum.

It would be wise to inspect the house closely to make sure that there are no other avenues for moisture to get in. The windows should be inspected to make sure that there are not broken or missing panes of glass, loose sash or rotted frames especially sills. The siding and trim, especially the cornice, should also be inspected for cracked or missing clapboard, rotted or otherwise damaged wood, and missing moldings. These are all areas that will allow water to travel into the building. Temporarily covering the areas where this is occurring can be done if

² See photos of house in 1905 and 1948 newspaper articles.

repair is not an option at this time. It should be done in a reversible manner so that original fabric is not damaged in the process of installation or removal of the temporary covering.

Lastly, securing the building so that animals and vandals are not able to access it is an important step. Seal off all areas where pests may be able to gain access to the building. Pests can be as small as ants, bees and wasps, so making sure that all vents and louvers have screening behind them will allow the air to pass through but keep out even the smallest pest.

Programs

We have several programs that may help with your efforts to save the building and restore it to use. The Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program allows you to take a 20% tax credit on the investment that you make in the restoration of an income producing property. If your desire is to keep this building as a rental property, this program may be one to consider. All of the work that you do to the house, including adding systems like heating, plumbing and electrical, are all eligible expenses. Landscaping and furnishing are excluded.

If you are thinking about selling the house, but would like to ensure that it is saved as a historic property and that the land will not be developed, an historic preservation easement is possible. Such an easement donated to a stewardship organization, such as the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, would protect specified aspects of the property, such as its architectural features, from deleterious modifications by subsequent owners. The value of the easement would be the difference between the property at its highest potential use and its subsequent restricted use. This value could be taken as a charitable contribution against your federal taxes. The financial benefit of the easement may not be great, but the easement provides a powerful tool to protect the property's historic character.

Lastly, the RI Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission has a revolving loan fund that is available to historic building owners wishing to finance a project that is not eligible for traditional financing.

Each of these programs requires that the house be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register program in Rhode Island is administered by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission and we would be prepared to help you complete the registration process. Listing on the National Register does not restrict subsequent use of the property by private owners; only activities that are funded by the federal or state government require a regulatory review.

All of these programs are described in detail on our web site at www.preservation.ri.gov. You can find specific contact names and telephone numbers there or you may contact Richard Greenwood, Deputy Director, if you have questions or would like more information about any of these programs.

Sources:

N.B. The sources for the history of the property are mostly taken from the collection of Rev. Peter Levalley Spencer, which includes newspaper clippings and transcriptions of early documents.

“A Profitable 25-acre Farm,” Providence Sunday Journal, August 20, 1905, (section?) p. 24.

“Old Phenix Homestead Sold,” Providence Sunday Journal, January 1(?), 1948, Home Section, p. ?

Paul LeValley, “Estate of Monteagle” TS, n.d., revised 1989.