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Oldest House in Morris Cove Demolished

The 210-year old Pardee House located opposite the Morris Cove sea wall at 265 Townsend Avenue was demolished in mid-July, with City of New Haven approval. The property lies within the Morris Cove National Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in April, 2018.

Known as the Captain Chandler Pardee House, the frame house was built between 1800-1810 and was believed to be the oldest building in the Morris Cove district. A later owner, Samuel C. Thompson, moved the house further north to 265 Townsend Avenue and operated it as the “Pioneer Guesthouse” in the 1870s, offering rooms to visitors in the days when Morris Cove was a summer resort.

Due to its National Register status, demolition of this house should have had special handling, with prior notice to agencies including the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Preservation Connecticut, and the New Haven Preservation Trust. By law, the demolition of National Register properties requires the Building Department to delay issuance of a demolition permit for 90 days after the permit is applied for, so that alternatives to demolition can be reviewed.

Evidence shows that the City violated its own ordinance and failed to impose the 90-day delay. No interested parties were aware of the pending demolition, and by the time the Preservation Trust was notified of the demolition by local residents, it was too late to save the historic house.

The demolition delay ordinance was adopted by the New Haven Board of Aldermen in 1989. It requires the City to impose a 90-day waiting period before granting a permit to demolish a building (or any part thereof) that is historically significant, as defined in the ordinance. The law states that it serves three purposes:

• It encourages the preservation, rehabilitation and reuse of historic places;
• It promotes the cultural, economic, social and general welfare of the City; and
• It increases property values.

The ordinance is intended to inform residents in the surrounding community of pending demolition plans, with time to explore alternatives that could result in the preservation of historically significant places in New Haven.

On the demolition permit for 265 Townsend Avenue, the box for “No Historical Significance-Immediate Demolition Authorized” is checked by City officials. Further inquiry revealed that the
City does not currently recognize the Morris Cove National Historic District, despite written notification of the official listing to the Mayor’s office on April 23, 2018.

The Pardee House demolition led to the discovery that no National Register properties or National Historic Districts have been entered into the City’s database since 2017. City departments are missing information for the Morris Cove District, Orange Street District expansion, Winchester Repeating Arms District expansion, and eight individual property listings. Designated historic properties in those areas would not be flagged in future demolition requests.

In addition, City maps are also missing every National Register site and State Register site which lies outside a historic district, regardless of when those sites were designated. Despite the best efforts of the SHPO in the past, historic designations do not appear on the City’s zoning map or the Assessor’s property cards on the City’s website.

It appears that the City does not make listings on the National Register of Historic Places visible in any way, either to property owners or to its own departments.

City Plan staff acknowledge that their database of historic designations is not up-to-date, due to staff transitions and lack of communication between departments. Assurances were given that the City recognizes the importance of the issue and intends to work internally to discuss updating maps and property data to reflect all of New Haven’s Historic Districts and individual historic property listings. The City also plans to address internal systems to ensure that relevant departments have consistent information about designated historic resources.

While the Preservation Trust welcomes the City’s intention to update its maps and data, there is no timeframe for repairing these issues. In the meantime, the City has taken down the Historic Districts map that was on its website to avoid presenting inaccurate information to the public.

The NHPT and others mourn the loss of 265 Townsend Avenue, part of New Haven’s heritage. We hope that the City’s data can be updated promptly so that no other historic properties are demolished without the proper protocols. Until City maps are updated, the NHPT invites the public to use the maps at www.nhpt.org to see if a property falls within a Historic District or is an individual listing on the National or State Register of Historic Places.
265 Townsend Avenue, New Haven
Image courtesy of New Haven Museum, date unknown (after 1881).