

Happy New Year! We hope you are looking forward to the coming months with cheerful anticipation. At the historical society, the winter and early spring are times for planning and organizing. We're lining up colonial re-enactors to participate in a Battery Day in May, selecting the houses for our annual house tour in September, beginning work on the summer exhibit in the museum, and planning our spring and summer programs.

Several articles about Jamestown history are in the works. A photo essay about the old Jamestown Bridge — excerpted from Sue Maden's "The Jamestown Bridge, 1940-2007: Concept to Demolition" — will appear in the next issue of "Newport History." The spring 2009 issue of "Newport History" will feature an article — also by Sue — on Dr. Bates Sanitarium, which operated in Jamestown from 1900 to 1944, and a photo essay by Jim Buttrick on Charles L. Bevins, the architect who designed Horsehead and more than 40 other homes in Jamestown in the 1890s. We're working on articles for the Jamestown Press about the lighthouse keepers on Dutch Island and researching "what might have been" stories about developments in Jamestown that never went beyond the drawing board.

The Town Council has asked JHS for comments and recommendations on a recent request that the town establish a local historic district. While the JHS Board hasn't had a chance to discuss the request yet, we have collected information about local historic district zoning that we want to share.

Historic District Zoning

Historic district zoning isn't a new idea in Jamestown. Jamestown's current Comprehensive Plan contains the goal "to protect and preserve all significant historical and cultural resources." Further detail is provided in a policy that states, "Consider the establishment of historic districts in Jamestown. . ." The Jamestowners who participated in the vision project in October



Jamestown Historical Society News

By Rosemary Enright

2007 agreed that preserving the rural and historic characteristics of Jamestown continues to be of prime importance. One of the recommendations in the Jamestown Vision Charrette Report was "Consider establishing one or multiple historic districts, possibly voluntary, which would give an additional measure of protection to the village's historic architectural resources."

Over the past several years, JHS has co-sponsored two programs at which a representative of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission explained what a historic district is, its advantages and disadvantages, and how and why it may be established.

What a Historic District Is

A historic district is a special zoning area created by a town to help save historic buildings and to preserve a special sense of time and place. The town then monitors and guides construction activity in the designated historic areas.

In order to establish a local historic district in Jamestown, the Town Council must pass an ordinance to establish a historic district commission and to identify at least one area for designation as a historic district zone. Other historic districts may be added later and multiple historic districts — ranging in size from one building to the whole town — may be identified in one ordinance. The historic district commission then develops written standards and procedures that govern what principles it applies and how it applies them.

The federal government identifies general rules that should guide historic rehabilitation and historic commission evaluations

in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. These can be found online at the National Parks Service site www.nps.gov. Many local historic district commissions adopt these standards as their own. However, a historic district commission has the option of defining its own standards as long as these standards are uniformly applied in accordance with defined procedures.

How It Works

Once the historic district commission is operational, the application for a building permit puts the review process in motion. If the property is located in a historic district, the building official forwards the permit application to the local historic district commission. The commission reviews and must approve new construction and any exterior alterations to buildings within the area specified in the historic district ordinance. It doesn't have any control over interior changes. The commission also doesn't regulate the use of a building — that's determined by the zoning ordinance.

The purpose of the review is to ensure that the historic character of the buildings is maintained as best as possible when necessary changes are made.

After adjustments, if any are needed, the application is approved and returned to the building official who may then issue a building permit. Decisions of the local historic district commission are binding for the building official, but may be appealed to the local zoning board. The zoning board's decision may be appealed in the state courts. The historic district designation doesn't affect this process.

Local Historic Districts in Rhode Island

The following 15 Rhode Island communities have local historic district zoning: Bristol, Cranston, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Glocester, Hopkinton, New Shoreham, Newport, North Kingstown, North Providence, North Smithfield, Pawtucket, Providence, South Kingstown, and Warwick.



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