

History and Hyannis

By Debi Boucher Stetson / dstetson@barnstablepatriot.com

In the golden age of sail, no fewer than 11 sea captains lived on Pleasant Street in Hyannis. That grand history is all but lost today on a street that has fallen into disrepair and may be threatened by development.

Town Councilor Paul Hebert is putting out a call to citizens who would like to see the history of that area and elsewhere in Hyannis preserved via a new Hyannis Historical Society.

Noting that Barnstable's other villages have their own historical societies, Hebert said Hyannis once had one but it has long been defunct. "Hyannis is the largest of our villages, and it's the most complicated of our villages," he said. "We have a lot of historical buildings in town, and we have an awful lot of history."

Hebert wants the newly-revived Hyannis Historical Society to look at old buildings in town and the potential for preserving them. "It's imperative that we retain our culture," he said.

One Hyannis resident who is trying to do that is Dominic Alessandra, who lives on Pleasant Street in the 1852 Captain Allen Crowell House. The Greek Revival house, which has five fireplaces, features original floors and doors, and behind it is the original stable, which Alessandra has turned into a museum of sorts. He welcomes visitors, and loves to tell them about the sea captains who once lived in the neighborhood.

"He was a hub of this street," Alessandra said of Captain Crowell, noting that Crowell sailed to Ireland during that country's potato famine in the mid-1800s to bring grain to the Irish people. Grandson of a South Yarmouth farmer, Crowell began his seafaring career at the tender age of 10, and by 21 was commanding clipper ships. In a career that spanned 47 years, Crowell

never had a shipwreck, Alessandra said.

Pleasant Street, he said, was once known as Sea Captain's Row because of the number of ship captains who lived there. The street leads down to Hyannis Harbor, and 11 of the 14 properties in an 800-foot stretch were sea captains' homes.

"It's a time capsule," Alessandra said. "Where in 800 feet are you going to find 11 sea captains' homes? This should be a destination."

Five of the remaining old houses on Pleasant Street are abandoned. For years, the properties were used for ferry parking. Hebert said those properties were owned by Maurice McEvoy, who died in July of 2014. Speculating that McEvoy's heirs may be thinking about what to do with the properties, Hebert said there is potential there for development that could capitalize on the historic nature of the street. Conversely, there is also potential for a different sort of development that would erase that historical legacy.

Alessandra worries about that. "Diminish one building, and you're really taking away from history," he said. He hopes the old houses on the street can be preserved, and that the area can be "brought back to be a neighborhood."

Hebert also hopes the old houses can be preserved, both on Pleasant Street and in other areas of town, and said the new historical society can help that cause.

"I'm not doing this as a roadblock to development, I'm doing this as an aid to proper development," he said of his efforts to organize the historical society.

Hebert is hoping people who care about history will come to the first meeting of the new Hyannis Historical Society on Thursday, Nov. 19 at Chauncy's Bar and Grill in the Heritage House Hotel on Main Street. He's also hoping people with knowledge of local history will come and share that knowledge. "There are people out there with much more knowledge than I have," he said.

“There’s just a ton of information out there.”