



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
60 PLEASANT STREET • P.O. BOX 550
NEWBURYPORT, MA 01950
(978) 465-4400
WWW.CITYOFNEWBURYPORT.COM

DCOD Historical Report

Meeting Date 10 September, 2020
Property Address 21-23 Walnut St.
Applicant: Geoff & Nora Dodge c/o Lisa Mead, Mead, Talerman & Costa, LLC

Executive Summary:

Although the NHC does not object to the demolition of the rear addition of this structure nor the plans for that rear portion, we have listed several important conditions to which we believe the SPGA should require the applicant be held. These are detailed in the body of this report, and include avoiding removal of historic features and avoiding an uncharacteristic dormer.

Project description:

Demolish over 25% of an existing rear addition to a “contributing” primary structure, and rebuild it somewhat larger. The proposed plans also include modifications to the historic structure requiring removal of some historic features and the addition of an uncharacteristic dormer.

Plan(s) of Record:

Request for Historical Report (10 August 2020); A Supplementary Filing of 2 September 2020, Engineering Report of Fix Engineering (10 August 2020). Previously reviewed plans were dated 24 July, 2020; revised plans dated 31 August..

Significance of the historic building/structure proposed for (partial) demolition:

This property is listed on the Newburyport District Data Sheet as contributing to the National Historic District but lacks a “Form B.” It is described as “Sidehall Greek Revival” in design, a good example of the many similar houses built in Newburyport around the middle of the 19th century.

In its more recent history, the structure suffered poorly executed alterations, many in order to create two dwelling units, transforming it from its original single-family use. However, most of the destruction was to the interior, so the main part of the house remains an important historic presence on this quiet street populated with a mix of houses, but many of this same era. The rear addition, while somewhat later, is still quite old (over 75 years), but is more modest in design and execution than the main body of the house. It was also not built to as high a standard, and has suffered damage from intentional alterations and structural degradation from age and exposure.

The relative importance of such historic building/structure to its setting within the District:

This structure makes a strong contribution to the overall impression on a visitor to neighborhood, largely due to its topographical placement and proximity to the street, which give it somewhat

more prominence than many of its neighboring structures. While these homes are not as architecturally elaborate as Newburyport's grandest houses, the commission believes that it is important to include vernacular small and medium-sized houses like this one, in similar neighborhoods, like this to maintain the overall historic nature of Newburyport, which includes historic structures of varying sizes and level of 'elaboration.'

Recommendation to SPGA:

The Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA), in deciding whether or not to grant a Special Permit, will need to consider both the structural conditions that may (or may not) justify demolition, and the proposed plans for the new addition and the existing historic structure as to their impact on the historical character and values on the neighborhood.

The NHC does not take issue with the applicant's claim that structural deficiencies justify the demolition, rather than restoration, of the rear addition, nor do we consider ourselves sufficiently expert in such matters to make a definitive determination. The ZBA may accept the report of the applicant's engineer, or have the applicant consult with another engineer of the board's choosing; the city ordinances provide the board with the authority to require this. The Commission does not object to the plans **for the new addition** as revised in the latest plans (set in from the side of the front of the house, etc.).

The commission has serious concerns about proposed changes to the original part of the structure, specifically

- **the proposed inclusion of a shed dormer on the historic house,**
- **The removal of an original door and window on the SE side.**

Dormers are very rare on Greek Revival houses as originally built, and when they occur they are of a gabled, pedimented design which mirrors the design of the main house and reflects the Greek Revival design aesthetic. A shed dormer would clash with the historic design and spoil the roofline. If a dormer must be built, its style should be compatible with Greek Revival architecture. The Commission provided suggestions to the architect on this matter.

The plans also call for removal of an original door on the East facade which is highly characteristic of the Greek Revival style, and the original window opening above it on the second floor. Nearly every member felt that these are important elements – “character-defining features” – that contribute significantly to the overall impression of the house, and they should be preserved. If the door location is not compatible with interior plans, it could be made non-functional, and present as a wall on the inside.

The wood trim such as the door and window surrounds, the corner boards or pilasters, etc. must be restored, not replaced with new material. Replacement of clapboards in poor condition is acceptable, and we urge the applicant to consider pre-primed and pre-painted cedar clapboards rather than “Hardie Plank” clapboards. The Commission also recommends that the chimney be preserved if reasonably possible.

Glenn Richards, Chair
Newburyport Historical Commission