

PORTSMOUTH COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY PLAN
ELEMENT X – HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES

(Note to reader: Text printed in italics indicates more work needs to be done to the particular section where it appears. Effort has been made to outline topics and discussion points for sections in italics but the full text remains incomplete.)

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

The following documents are incorporated by reference in this draft of the Portsmouth Comprehensive Community Plan:

- Comprehensive Community Plan – Town of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, Revised July, 2002
- Historic and Architectural Resources of Portsmouth, Rhode Island: A preliminary Report. Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. 1979.
- Historic Landscapes of Rhode Island. Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission. 2002.
- The Jim Garman Collection of published books on Portsmouth History.

INTRODUCTION

An understanding of how Portsmouth came to exist - its heritage - is essential to planning for what it will become in the future. The physical and cultural remnants that represent our heritage tell a story about the way we lived, the evolution of our collective values, and how the physical and built environment changed over time. This story can in turn guide us in how we manage the mixture of modern society and infrastructure with our rich historic legacy to define a character and quality of life for our community.

A General History of Portsmouth

Occupying the northern half of Aquidneck Island and seven large and small islands to its east and west, Portsmouth is a largely rural/suburban community with physical and cultural attributes

that reflect important broad patterns of Rhode Island history, including farming, the Revolutionary War, maritime activity, summer communities and country estates, the development of transportation networks, education, and religion.

Founded in 1638 by John Clarke and William Coddington, Portsmouth is the second oldest settlement in the state. Political differences among the settlers, especially after the arrival of Anne Hutchinson, provoked Clarke and Coddington in 1639 to move to the south end of Aquidneck and establish Newport, which included Middletown until 1743. Early settlement of Portsmouth occurred at the north end of town on three-acre lots near Founder's Brook and Town Pond, but nothing survives of this settlement.

Two important institutional buildings from that early period remain. Like Newport, Portsmouth attracted Friends in the seventeenth century. A meetinghouse they erected in 1700 still stands on East Main Road near Town Hall. Public education developed early in Portsmouth, and the Southernmost Schoolhouse (1716-25), now on the site of the Portsmouth Historical Society, documents that phenomenon.

The early settlement was gradually abandoned after 1740 for Newtown, a village platted overlooking the Sakonnet River from the east slope of Butts Hill. By the late eighteenth century, the village had several stores, a livery stable, a blacksmith shop, two churches, a market, and a music hall. This area has remained Portsmouth's center and retains a variety of residential, commercial, and institutional buildings over the years since settlement. Twentieth-century incursions have somewhat diminished the area's historic integrity, but a number of important buildings remain.

The livelihood of early Portsmouth residents was largely tied to agriculture, especially in supplying produce, meat, and dairy products to the rapidly growing eighteenth-century town of Newport to the south. Across the town remain several early farmhouses and complexes, such as the Lawton-Almy Hall Farm (ca. 1700 et seq.) at 559 Union Street. New farms continued to be created through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and many remain. A common

adjunct agricultural building was the wind-powered gristmill; Portsmouth had more windmills than any other Rhode Island municipality, but only one, Boyd's Windmill, survives.

Two important Revolutionary War events occurred in Portsmouth: the capture of General Richard Prescott in July 1777 and the Battle of Rhode Island in August 1778, unique in the history of the Revolution as the only engagement in which black Americans participated as a distinct racial group, in the First Rhode Island Regiment. The Battle of Rhode Island site is a National Historic Landmark.

During the nineteenth century, coal was mined in northwest Portsmouth, off Willow Lane. On the same location, copper was smelted between 1866 and 1883. Only an open field, covered with rock and coal, and a handful of modest, shingled workers' houses remain.

While Portsmouth's lack of natural harbor inhibited its links to maritime activity, its location, adjacent to shipping lanes, occasioned the construction of two lighthouses, one at Sandy Point (1823, 1852) and one on Hog Island (1901).

During the nineteenth century, Newport in particular and Aquidneck Island in general became desirable as places to pass the summer. Summer houses had first appeared here in the late eighteenth century, but both Metcalf Bowler's House and "Vaucluse" are gone. Nineteenth and twentieth-century country houses range from the picturesque informality of the medium-size John Barstow House, "Greenvale Farm"(1864-65); John Hubbard Sturgis (Boston), architect) to the monumental Moses Taylor House, "The Glen" (1923, John Russell Pope (New York), architect). These houses were usually sited near Narragansett Bay or the Sakonnet River to exploit fine views; one of the best concentrations lies east of East Main Road and retains not only houses, but also remarkable landscaping and extensive, meticulously laid stone walls. A summer colony developed at the north end of the island around Bristol Ferry. In addition to the remaining shingled summer cottages were a hotel and rail station. An amusement park, located south of Blue Bill Cove, thrived between 1898 and 1938, when a hurricane destroyed it. A group of small houses north of Park Avenue, built originally as summer cottages, survives. In the late

nineteenth-century summer cottages began to appear on the islands as well, especially Prudence and Hog Islands.

Nineteenth-century institutional growth included the construction of several churches, including St. Paul's Episcopal (1833, Russell Warren, architect), St. Mary's' Episcopal (1849, Richard Upjohn (New York), architect), and St. Anthony's Roman Catholic (ca. 1901).

The construction of the Mount Hope Bridge in 1929 and the Sakonnet River Bridge in 1957 greatly increased Portsmouth's accessibility. Consequently, the town has seen considerable growth in residential construction, first single-family houses and later apartments, condominiums, and industrial facilities. The growing population has encouraged commercial development, especially along East Main Road.

The varied and abundant historic resources of Portsmouth include a number of early farms and farmhouses; important summer houses, many designed by nationally important architects; large nineteenth- and twentieth-century recreational farms; houses of worship important both for their architecture and documentation of religious and social history; two key lighthouses; and several historic districts. Moreover, Portsmouth retains one of the State's most impressive countrysides, dramatic in its whole and with important evolved and designed landscapes. The town's strong sense of place plays an important role in its appeal and should receive strong consideration in planning for the town's future.

Themes

In consideration of the historic and cultural resources of Portsmouth and their preservation, several themes emerge as significant.

Geography - The form historic preservation takes depends very much on the geographic nature of the Town. Towns with compact historic villages or town centers can simply concentrate on the preservation of those relatively small areas. Such areas are easy to identify visually and lend themselves well to the establishment of formal Historic Districts. Portsmouth developed as a decentralized farming community with two primary arteries bisecting the Town. There is no town center. Historically significant sites and structures are spread everywhere throughout

Portsmouth. While a historic district approach may work well in some identifiable areas of town, historic preservation activities need to take a different approach. Tools of the trade for a decentralized approach include public education and promoting community awareness of the historic character of our community, land use and zoning regulations to guide infill development to ensure the old does not overwhelm the new and creating a framework where several separate entities can work in coordinated fashion to accomplish a wide variety of preservation activities all across town.

Agricultural Landscapes –For all but the past generation or two, Portsmouth was predominantly a farming community. Only with the construction of the Sakonnet River Bridge in 1957 did Portsmouth start to become a suburb. Given its beauty and now convenient location, Portsmouth’s agricultural heritage have been giving way to residential developments. As one of Portsmouth’s farmers so eloquently put it, “the last crop of a farmer in Portsmouth is a condominium development.” Carefully managing this developmental pressure is not only essential to future land use consideration but to the historic preservation of our past as well.

Political Will – Historic and Cultural resources in Portsmouth have been documented by various entities both local and at the state level over the years, but at present there is no single responsible entity in place to ensure that these important structures, landscapes and sites are maintained and preserved. If historic preservation activities are to be successful, the Town, the School Department, the Portsmouth Historical Society and the various cultural institutions in town not only need to coordinate efforts and function as group, but must be supported by sustained taxpayer funding to ensure that an enduring commitment to preserving our heritage is maintained.

PORTSMOUTH’S HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES VISION

PORTSMOUTH WILL BE A COMMUNITY WHERE CULTURAL HERITAGE, HISTORIC BUILDINGS AND TRADITIONAL LANDSCAPES ARE PRESERVED, ENRICHED AND PROTECTED AND AN ENDURING COMMITMENT HAS BEEN MADE TO CONTINUE THIS EFFORT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY

Historic & Cultural Sites, Structures & Landscapes

National Historic Register Sites

There are 13 properties in Portsmouth listed on the federal government's National Register of Historic Places:

Battle of Rhode Island Historic District, Lehigh Hill and both sides of Rhode Island Route 24, between Medley and Dexter Streets

Union Church, East Main Road and Union Street Borden Farm, 2951 and 2967 East Main Road

Hog Island Shoal Lighthouse, Hog Island

Portsmouth Friends Meeting House, Cemetery, and Parsonage, 11 Middle Road and 2232 East Main Road

Farnham Farm, 113 Mount Pleasant Avenue, Prudence Island

**Pine Hill Archaeological Site, vicinity of Pine Hill*

Mount Hope Bridge, Route 114, Bristol and Portsmouth

Prudence Island Lighthouse, Sandy Point, Prudence Island

Lawton-Almy-Hall Farm/Lakeside Farm, 559 Union Street

Oak Glen/Julia Ward Howe House, 745 Union Street

Greenvale Farm/Greenvale, 582 Wapping Road

**Wreck Sites of the H.M.S. Cerberus and H.M.S. Lark, Waters of Narragansett Bay adjacent to Aquidneck Island (4/26/73)*

Sites Deserving Consideration for National Register listing

An incomplete list of sites deserving consideration for National Register of Historic Places includes:

Melville Marine Historic District, Melville, Portsmouth

Bristol Ferry Town Common, Bristol Ferry Road.

Glen Road Historic District

Portsmouth – Newtown Historic District

Prescott Farm Historic District

Southeast Portsmouth Rural Estates Historic District

Amos D. Smith House (Hall Manor, Portsmouth Abbey School

St Mary's Episcopal Church

Historic Neighborhoods – Informal District Designation

Six historic neighborhoods (informal districts) are identified in the Historic and Architectural Resources of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission (1979):

The Battle of Rhode Island Historic District, Ft. Butts & Butts Hill and an area covering the major arena of action, Turkey Hill Barker Brook, Almy Hill, Lehigh Hill and the Hessian Hole.

Bristol Ferry Road Historic District, Along Bristol Ferry Road immediately south of the Mt. Hope Bridge.

Glen Road Historic District, Glen Road.

Portsmouth – Newtown Historic District, along East Main Road immediately north and south of Turnpike Avenue.

Prescott Farm Historic District, West Main Road straddling the Portsmouth/Middletown Town Line.

Southeast Portsmouth Rural Estate Historic District, Glen, Oakland, and Sandy Point Farms, Vaocluse, Glen Manor House.

Portsmouth Historic Homes

Town tax records, the report from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, the collection of book written by Town Historian, Jim Garman and others identify over

200 pre- 20th century historic homes in Portsmouth. A comprehensive catalog is being compiled by the Town Planning Department and the Portsmouth Historical Society and will appear as an appendix to this element of the Comprehensive Plan.

Historic Cemeteries

The Rhode Island Cemetery Commission, the Rhode Island Graves Registration Committee, Town records and various research materials all together list a total of nearly 60 cemeteries in Portsmouth. Several are large active cemeteries but most are small lots with some burials dating back to the 17th century. About half of the cemeteries are on private property with the remaining either on church or Town-owned property. The Portsmouth Historical Society is currently conducting a survey to determine the status and condition of all cemeteries and to to update current recordkeeping.

Scenic Sites, Structures Landscapes & Vistas

An incomplete list of Scenic Sites, Structures, Landscapes & Vistas not listed elsewhere include:

Camp Meeting Grove, Hedley Street.

Prudence Island School, Prudence Island

Island Park Summer Colony neighborhood

Stone Bridge, Island Park

Brown House

Patriots Park, West Main Road at split with Rt 24

Founders Brook

Portsmouth Historic Society Museum, Union Street at East Main Rd.

Notable Stone Walls

To be determined

Cultural Institutions

Short descriptions of the following institutions will appear here:

The Portsmouth Historical Society

Town Records / Archives

The Portsmouth Free Public Library

The Portsmouth Arts Guild

Common Fence Point Improvement Association

The Portsmouth Community Theatre

MAPS

Maps to accompany this Historic & Cultural Resources Element (*still works in progress*) will include:

HRC – Map 1 - A map showing all properties or districts in Portsmouth currently listed or deserving of consideration for listing on the State or National Register of Historic Places.

HRC – Map 2 – A map showing the location of informal historic districts identified in the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission’s Preliminary Report of Historic and Architectural Resources, 1979, and the location of all historic cemeteries in Portsmouth. Selected sites of historic importance, scenic vistas of historic significance and stone walls of distinction will also be displayed.

THE NEED FOR PLANNING

Threats to Historic and Cultural Resources

Lack of Formal Recognition or Protection Efforts

Further discussion is needed here talk about the fact that while recognition of the town’s heritage is widespread among Portsmouth’s citizens, preservation of historic and cultural resources in Portsmouth in not systematically included in the budget or governance of the Town.

Property Owner Activity – Renovation / Demolition

Further work is needed here to discuss guidance, programs, incentives and perhaps amending regulations to assist owners of historically significant properties in maintaining their holdings in historically appropriate condition.

Development / Redevelopment Pressure

While the need to preserve farming activity as a well understood component of Portsmouth economic well-being, more discussion is needed here to establish that development pressure on farmlands threatens historic preservation and community character as well.

Deterioration of Visual Historic Character

Discussion here will include the need to review land use and zoning regulations to better manage infill development so that as new development emerges, it does not overwhelm existing historic streetscapes.

Existing Local Programs to Protect Historic & Cultural Resources

To be cataloged and described in detail.

GOALS, POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION

As will be the practice throughout in this plan, each of the action items listed in this section are evaluated with the following guiding principles in mind. Does the action.....?

- Conserve, protect and enrich our historic landscape and cultural heritage.
- Embrace energy conservation and responsible stewardship of our natural environment.
- Provide a safe and healthy environment for current and future generations to live, work and play.
- Ensure a stable, long-term economic future by making Portsmouth a great place to live, work and conduct business.
- Improve community resilience in the face of a changing natural environment.
- Build on existing community strengths.
- Advance the wise use of technological innovation where appropriate.
- Minimize negative impacts on future generations.
- Foster civic engagement and community cohesion.

GOAL HRC - 1 - Achieve a self-sustaining level of public awareness in promoting historic and cultural heritage as a vital part of Portsmouth’s community character and quality of life.

Policy HRC - 1.1

Support the education of students, residents and visitors alike in the importance of preserving the historic and cultural heritage of Portsmouth.

Action HRC – 1.1a - Develop and encourage a local history element into the curricula of Portsmouth’s school system.

Action HRC – 1.1b - Increase funding for the Portsmouth Free Public Library specifically earmarked to expanding the local history resources section.

Action HRC – 1.1c - Continue to work with the Portsmouth Historical Society and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission to provide educational programs to the public.

Action HRC – 1.1d - Promote tourism in Portsmouth through the establishment of a Heritage Trail and/or similar efforts.

Action HRC – 1.1e - Task the Town Council with promoting historic and cultural awareness by issuing proclamations, declarations, resolutions and other public announcements of an historic nature on a regular basis.

Action HRC – 1.1f – Provide an annual stipend to the position of Town Historian.

Policy HRC - 1.2

Promote and encourage all public, private and non-profit entities engaged in historic preservation activities in Portsmouth at all levels of effort.

Action HRC – 1.2a - Establish a Historic & Cultural Oversight Committee to be chartered by the Town to coordinate with the Portsmouth Historical Society in developing a long range plan for historic preservation of our historic and cultural resources.

Action HRC – 1.2b - Support groups in areas identified as historic neighborhoods to promote historic awareness and historic preservation activities.

Policy HRC - 1.3

Foster civic participation and community engagement through enhanced access to Portsmouth’s rich historic and cultural resources.

Action HRC – 1.3a - Organize and catalog the documents, maps and other archival materials in Town Hall and make available to the public.

Action HRC – 1.3b - Establish a town-funded voluntary “historic marker” or “historic plaque” program to identify historically significant buildings, sites and landscapes.

Action HRC – 1.3c - Develop a Cultural Enrichment Plan for Portsmouth.

GOAL HRC - 2 - Produce an effective set of policies and programs that insure the protection and preservation of Portsmouth’s historic sites, structures & landscapes.

Policy HRC - 2.1

Protect and preserve historic and cultural resources through the use of design standards, zoning controls, easements, tax incentives and other tools at the Towns disposal.

Action HRC – 2.1a - Amend the Town’s Design Review Standards to include elements specific to the proper restoration of historic building in Town.

Action HRC – 2.1b - Adopt ordinances to discourage demolition or inappropriate use of important historic structures.

Action HRC – 2.1c - Seek National Register of Historic Places nomination of sites currently considered eligible for listing.

Action HRC – 2.1d - Develop and maintain a detailed inventory of historically and culturally significant sites, structures & landscapes. Annually monitor the inventory for changes in condition and status.

Action HRC – 2.1e - Review the Town’s Stone Wall and Tree Ordinances for adequate enforcement provisions and amend as necessary.

Action HRC – 2.1f - Investigate the establishment of Portsmouth’s identified historic neighborhoods as formal Historic Districts in order to promote awareness and preservation and to make them eligible for state and federal historic preservation assistance.

Action HRC – 2.1g - Enact a Demolition Delay Ordinance which requires review and delay of the proposed demolition of any historic structures in Portsmouth.

Action HRC – 2.1h - Review local regulations controlling infill development in areas of high concentrations of historic structures with emphasis on balancing the mixture of new and old structures and the protection of traditional streetscapes.

Action HRC – 2.1i - Review the Town’s development review processes and amend as needed in order to strengthen historic resource protection.

Action HRC – 2.1j - Review the Portsmouth Zoning Ordinance for elements that might inhibit historic-style or traditional architecture and consider amendment as needed.

Policy HRC - 2.2

Preserve Portsmouth’s historic landscapes, including farms and agricultural lands as essential elements of our community character, economic vitality and quality of life.

Action HRC – 2.2a - Maintain the Municipal Farm Tax exemption program.

Action HRC – 2.2b – As opportunities arise, partner with governmental and private funding sources to purchase development rights to farmlands and other properties of historic significance.

Policy HRC - 2.3

Maintain financial support for historic preservation activities, arts and cultural organizations and neighborhood associations.

Action HRC – 2.3a - Task the Portsmouth Historical Society as principle entity responsible for conducting an annual status report of all the historic & cultural sites, structures and landscapes listed above in this plan. Create a permanent line item in the annual Town Budget along with an auditing process to ensure that the Society has the financial resources necessary to carry out this task.

Action HRC – 2.3b - Establish tax abatement program for owners of historic structures who voluntarily wish to adhere to historic architectural standards in the renovation and restoration of historic homes in town.

Action HRC – 2.3c - Establish a tax abatement program for property owners who have historic cemeteries on their property and wish to take on the task of cemetery maintenance.

Action HRC – 2.3d - Dedicate public funding and resources to the preservation of historic and cultural assets on Town Property, including cemeteries, stone walls, and historic buildings.

Action HRC – 2.3e - Investigate a historic preservation easement program that ensures the historic and architectural qualities of a property will not be destroyed.

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