

PORTSMOUTH COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY PLAN

ELEMENT 3 – HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES

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.

3.1 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.

3.2 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 at Paradise Park in Middletown.

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.

3.3 THEMES

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

3.3.1 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 new does not overwhelm the old and creating a framework where several separate entities can work in coordinated fashion to accomplish a wide variety of preservation activities all across town.

3.3.2 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.

3.3.3 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.

3.4 HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY

This section provides an inventory of historic and cultural resources in town.

3.4.1 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. See Map 1 – A for their locations.

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, Prudence Island

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

Various sites over the years have been deemed deserving consideration for National Register of Historic Places inclusion. An incomplete list from several sources include:

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

3.4.2 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, Vaucluse, Glen Manor House.

3.4.3 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.

3.4.4 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 update current recordkeeping. A comprehensive catalog of historic cemeteries 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.

3.4.5 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 (3 buildings), Union Street at East Main Rd.

Stone Barns at Glen Farm

Green Animals Topiary Gardens

3.4.6 NOTABLE STONE WALLS

A listing of the location of notable stone walls in Portsmouth 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.

3.4.7 CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Significant cultural institutions in Portsmouth include:

The Portsmouth Historical Society

The Portsmouth Historical Society is a volunteer nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of Portsmouth, Rhode Island's history. The Society's long term vision is to protect and promote Portsmouth's cultural heritage by creating a secure and sustainable facility, where, in conjunction with other local organizations, it can store, maintain and display a collection of historic artifacts, offer lectures and research assistance to the public, and stimulate the study of our town's history for future generations. In March 2013, the Portsmouth Town Council designated the current president of the Society and Portsmouth's official Town Historian.

The Society fulfills its mission by:

1. Maintaining and providing tours of the historical buildings in its possession:
 - a. The Christian Union Church (1865)
 - b. The Southernmost School (1725)
 - c. The Old Town Hall (c. 1850).
2. Collecting, conserving and interpreting historical documents and objects linked to historical sites, houses, farms, and families of Portsmouth.
3. Providing direction and resources to assist genealogical and scholarly research related to Portsmouth's history.
4. Arranging exhibitions which use historical materials to enrich the public's understanding and appreciation of Portsmouth's rich history.
5. Presenting programs on topics that build enthusiasm for preserving and supporting our local history.

The Society's museum, located on the corner of East Main Road and Union Street, has a collection of artifacts dating back to when Native Americans lived on the land. In addition to the restored church congregation room, the museum has memorabilia that belonged to Julia Ward Howe, a Portsmouth resident, whose poetic verses were used for the "Battle Hymn of the Republic". Other artifacts include a 19th century horse-drawn hearse and a mail wagon from the early 1900's.

Town Records / Archives

The vault, basement rooms and Town Clerk's office in Portsmouth Town Hall house official records of town government activity dating back to the founding of the town. Birth/death, marriage and probate records, land evidence records, old plat maps, tax and mortgage records Town Council minutes dating back to the early 18th century and a complete set of high-resolution aerial photographs taken of the entire town in 1948 are just some of the significant documents stored there. Storage conditions are a challenge and currently there are no resources dedicated to creating a more stable environment to preserve these important records documenting the history of Portsmouth.

The Portsmouth Free Public Library

See Section 7.11.1 of the Services and Facilities Element of this Comprehensive Plan for a complete description of the library and the services it has to offer.

The Portsmouth Arts Guild

The Portsmouth Arts Guild was founded in January 2003 to provide an opportunity for Portsmouth artists, and those of surrounding towns, to exhibit their work and to learn from one another. Its members are painters and printmakers, photographers and sculptors, fiber artists and wood carvers, jewelers and craftspeople.

In 2006, the Arts Guild formed a partnership with St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Portsmouth for the use of its parish hall, located at 2679 East Main Road, as a gallery, meeting place and arts classroom. Currently, the Guild offers monthly exhibitions of work from members and non-members, March through December, as well as a varying number of art classes and workshops.

The Guild's Mission is to provide a welcoming and nurturing environment for the visual and performing arts in Portsmouth and the surrounding area; to celebrate, share and promote the talents and skills of artists of all ages and abilities, and contribute to the cultural enrichment of the community through exhibitions, performances and education.

Common Fence Point Improvement Association

The Common Fence Point Center for Arts, Wellness, and Community is a community center in northern Portsmouth with a strong arts and culture focus. Run by a non-profit 501-c3 organization called the CFPIA, the Center has, for nearly a century, been a place to gather, socialize and celebrate community. The original "CFP Hall" began a remarkable transformation into the now CFP Center for Arts, Wellness, and Community in 2016. After successfully rebranding, several state and philanthropic organizations, as well as private donors, came together to fund a \$750,000 renovation to the building. The six-month construction project is nearing its end and the doors will open again in July of 2019. The renovations modernize and professionalize the space and truly emphasize the Center's mission: "To Enrich Lives Through Arts, Wellness, and the Power of Community".

More than 500 people visit the Center each week for a variety of programming: Saturday evening concerts featuring nationally-known talent, art classes, fitness and dance classes, ballroom socials, and culinary arts classes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It is also home to The Gallery at Common Fence Point, a visual arts space showcasing a different local artist each month.

Most importantly, the CFP Center for Arts, Wellness, and Community serves as a hub for collaboration among several Portsmouth non-profits. Common Fence Music has hosted Saturday concerts in the main event space for a quarter of a century. The Center is a sought after venue for the well-attended lectures by the Portsmouth Historical Society. The Portsmouth Arts Guild is working with the Center to broaden its reach. The Newport YMCA provides an innovative afterschool program that features weekly arts education and theater for children ages 6-12. The YMCA also created a summer 'Arts Camp' which is an important opportunity for young artists and budding thespians. All of these collaborations strengthen the positive reach and impact of all of our organizations, as well as create jobs in our community.

The Portsmouth Community Theatre

The Portsmouth Community Theater began in 1996. The founders had a dream of offering adults and children the opportunity to experience live theater BY and FOR their own community.

In the Community Theater's early years, with no performance space of their own, they performed at the Portsmouth's Common Fence Point Community Hall and St. Mary's Episcopal Church. The Community Theater now uses Portsmouth's old Coggleshall School building. Since 1996 they have produced numerous plays, reviews, dinner theater performances and musicals giving hundreds of adults and children the opportunity to "put on a show".

Portsmouth Abbey

Portsmouth Abbey is a community of Benedictine monks on Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island. With a focus on scholarly and artistic work, hospitality, and liturgical observance, the chief work of the monks is performing the Divine Office and the liturgy in the context of fulfilling the precepts of St. Benedict's Rule – sacred reading, prayer, routine monastic duties and manual work when able.

The former Hall estate was purchased in 1918 by Father Leonard Sargent, an American monk of Downside Abbey in England and the monastery established formally in 1919 by Pope Benedict XV. In addition to being on National Historic Register as the last remaining landscape of the Battle of Rhode Island, the Hall estate was the colonial farm for the Freeborn family dating back to 1640. In keeping with the congregation's early history, the Abbey runs a college preparatory boarding school for boys and girls, operated continuously since it was founded in 1926. The school's mission statement is based on reverence for God and the human person, respect for learning and order; and responsibility for the shared experience of community life. The community and liturgical life of the monastery overflows into the school and town as a valuable contribution to society.

3.4.8 THREATS TO HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Portsmouth's historic and cultural resources continue to be under threat by:

- Lack of formal recognition, resources and formal protection opportunities.
- Property owner activity – renovation / demolition. Regulations, incentives and guidance should be developed to address this issue.
- Development / redevelopment pressure. Development pressure is particularly apparently on agricultural lands, which are physically easy for developers to convert to residential and commercial land uses.
- Deterioration of visual historic character. A review of land use and zoning regulations should be conducted to better manage infill development so that as new development emerges, it does not overwhelm existing historic streetscapes.

3.4.9 EXISTING LOCAL PROGRAMS TO PROTECT HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES

Glen Manor House

Designed by world renowned architect, John Russel Pope, architectural plans for Glen Manor House were begun in 1921. Intending to be the proper country home of the H.A.C. Taylor family and the centerpiece of their extensive Glen Farm, the design was based on the French Petit Trianon at Versailles and was quite unique to the area. The manor house was completed in 1923, and the Taylors moved in, where they lived for part of the year. Moses Taylor, the eldest son died in 1928, and his widow, later Mrs. Edith Taylor Nicholson, lived in the house until her death in 1959. The Glen Manor House had extraordinary gardens, somewhat Italian in their design, and the landscaping was magnificent. The landscaping was designed by the Olmsted Brothers — sons of Frederick Law Olmsted.

In January 1959, Reginald Taylor, son of Moses, sold the estate and 43 acres to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, who moved their Elmhurst school here from Providence in September, 1961. The school closed in 1972 and the property was purchased by the Town of Portsmouth on a bond issue. The Portsmouth Historical Society was asked to create a plan for the use of the Glen Manor House, and from that organization was created the Glen Manor House Authority: a group of volunteers from the town. This group, along with the resident manager, maintains and operates Glen Manor House and now makes the house available for special functions including weddings, receptions, corporate meetings, events and private gatherings.

Lower Glen Farm Equestrian Center

Portsmouth's Lower Glen Farm consists of a grouping of historic buildings, on 11 acres of property that represents a unique and relatively intact example of early 20th century barns, stables and outbuildings. These handsome buildings reflect an important era in Portsmouth's recent past, where agriculture was the anchor of its base economy and the practice of maintaining a country estate by figures of the "Gilded Age" was in vogue.

As the expansive Glen Farm began to be broken up and sold for private development over the years, the portion of the farm containing the historic barns and stables remained being operated by a family member of the original country estate, Mason Phelps, as an equestrian center. Under Phelps, a member of the U.S. Olympic equestrian team, the farm hosted the International Jumping Derby each summer, one of the sporting and social highlights of the Newport summer season.

In 1988 the town learned that Mason Phelps had decided to sell his portion of Glen Farm. After vigorous debate about the possible purchase by the town of the Phelps land, in 1989 the town held a special election to decide the matter and the referendum authorizing the purchase for \$3.6 million passed by a three to one margin. Prior to

purchase of the property by the Town, the barns, stables and associated structures had suffered through years of neglect and restoration was going to be a tall order for the Town. The condition of the farm was such that not a pane of glass remained in place nor a door on its hinges. The severely derelict property needed entirely new mechanical systems including plumbing, electrical, heating and fire alarm systems.

In 1990 the town formed a commission to study potential municipal uses for the former Phelps property, once again known under town ownership as the "Glen Farm." The rebirth of the barns and stables began with leasing the property to a Boston renovator whose intention was to not only rehabilitate the barns but establish the facility as the home of international polo in America. Under the direction of the Portsmouth Town Council, the stewardship of Glen Farm has changed hands a few more times since this original tenure, with maintenance of the barns and stables themselves shared by various parties and the Town's Department of Public Works. The Equestrian Center is currently being operated under an agreement with Clemens Equine LLC with Ann and Sam Clemens as the managers. Maintenance and renovation of the structures is shared with the Town by contractual agreement.

Green Animals Topiary Garden

This small country estate in Portsmouth was purchased in 1872 by Thomas E. Brayton (1844-1939), Treasurer of the Union Cotton Manufacturing Company in Fall River, Massachusetts. It consisted of seven acres of land, a white clapboard summer residence, farm outbuildings, a pasture and a vegetable garden.

Gardener Joseph Carreiro, superintendent of the property from 1905 to 1945, and his son-in-law, George Mendonca, superintendent until 1985, were responsible for creating the topiaries. There are more than 80 pieces of topiary throughout the gardens, including animals and birds, geometric figures and ornamental designs, sculpted from California privet, yew, and English boxwood.

Green Animals is the oldest and most northern topiary garden in the United States. Mr. Brayton's daughter Alice gave the estate its name because of the profusion of "green animals." She made the estate her permanent residence in 1939. Upon her death in 1972, at the age of 94, Miss Brayton left Green Animals to The Preservation Society of Newport County. Today, Green Animals remains as a rare example of a self-sufficient estate combining formal topiaries, vegetable and herb gardens, orchards and a Victorian house overlooking Narragansett Bay.

Brown House

Extensively renovated by the Town in 2016-17, The Brown House sits on a 2-acre parcel off Linden Lane in the approximate center of Glen Farm. Dating from the mid-19th century, the structure was built and utilized as a farm house until 1902 when it was purchased by the Taylor family to be used as a support structure for the larger Glen Farm. The farm house gets its name not from its color (yellow) but from the name of the original owner, Leonard Brown. The Town of Portsmouth bought the property in 1989 as part of the purchase of a large portion of Glen Farm to be used as a sports complex. The Town of Portsmouth currently uses the building and grounds as offices for the Recreation Department and has recently started renting office space as a source of income for the Town.

Storage of the Portsmouth Compact

Signed on March 7, 1638, the Portsmouth Compact was a document establishing the settlement of Portsmouth. Certainly the most important document in Portsmouth history, its purpose was to set up a new, independent colony

that was Christian in character but non-sectarian in governance. It has been called "the first instrument for governing as a true democracy" and was the first document in American history that severed both political and religious ties with England.

The original document still exists and is carefully stored in a glass case at the State Archives in Providence. In recent years the Portsmouth Compact is annually brought to Portsmouth for a day of commemoration and public display.

Battle of Rhode Island Site

The only major action of the Revolutionary War to take place in Rhode Island, the Battle of Rhode Island was fought in Portsmouth on August 29, 1778. Continental army and militia forces, having abandoned their siege of British forces in Newport were followed northward and attacked at several locations in Portsmouth by the British. The first skirmish took place at the intersection of Union Street and East Main Road. Subsequently, the Americans established a defensive line that cut across the entire island to deny the British the high ground (Butts Hill) to the north. Battle raged through the day but ended inconclusively when American forces occupying Butts Hill withdrew to Bristol and Tiverton overnight leaving Aquidneck Island under British control. The battle was significant as the only battle of the Revolutionary war in which a unit made up entirely of African-American soldiers fought and a fine monument to the 1st Rhode Island Regiment is maintained by RIDOT alongside Route 114 on the main battlefield.

Butts Hill, which was fortified with earthworks still visible today, served as a command post and center of the fallback defensive position of the Americans during the battle. On and near the grounds of Portsmouth High School, the site is mowed and monuments maintained by the Portsmouth Department of Public Works. Hiking trails crisscross the earthworks and during the winter months, 360 degree views of the battlefield and its surroundings landscapes are impressive. Signs interpreting and commemorating the battle can be seen at two locations in the battlefield area. The Battle of Rhode Island Site was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1974 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Bristol Ferry Town Common

Located at the northern end of Bristol Ferry Road at Bayview Avenue, the Bristol Ferry Town Common was established on March 12, 1714 by the Portsmouth Town Committee. This 1.5-acre space was originally used by farmers and others to keep their livestock and other goods while waiting for the ferry to Bristol. This historic common, with superb views of Mount Hope Bay is currently maintained jointly by the Department of Public Works and the Bristol Ferry Town Common Committee as a public park.

Portsmouth Historical Society Museum

In addition to housing an extensive collection of Portsmouth artifacts and memorabilia in their museum at 870 Union Street (at Union Street), including a room dedicated to Julia Ward Howe, abolitionist and poet who wrote the words to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," The Portsmouth Historical Society maintains three significant historic buildings on site.

Southermost School (1725) – Built in 1725 and thought to be the oldest one-room school house in America, the building, with its simple post and beam structure, stands as a remembrance of Portsmouth's earliest history. The nearly three century old building has been moved several times from its original location near 102 Union Street and variously used as a school house, a residence, a school house again, a storage and harness shed, and finally a fully restored school house exhibiting original student desks along with the top

of the original teacher desk. There are also examples of the primers, copy books and textbooks students would have used in one room schools in Portsmouth.

Old Town Hall (c. 1850) – Moved to its present location in 1975, the structure was originally built in 1895 near the present location of Portsmouth Town Hall intending to be used as an office for the Town Clerk. Later to be used as the first headquarters of the permanent fire department, a storage shed and a place for meetings, today it houses the Societies vehicle and farm tool collection.

The Christian Union Church (1865) – This building, a simple 3-story Gothic structure with vertical windows featuring distinctive “eyebrow” frames, was built in 1865 for a congregation that remained active until after World War I. Donated to the Historic Society in 1940, and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, the Society currently maintains the and makes use of the first floor to house its museum collection and the second-floor congregation hall, complete with pews, an altar and pipe organ, to host occasional meetings and other functions.

Farnham Farm

Dating back to 1805, the 18-acre Farnham Farm is a classic example of southern New England farming of the period. Features of the site include a farm house, barn, milk house, fields, garden, woodland, orchards and stone walls, all restored and active due to the efforts of the Prudence Conservancy.

Purchased in 1998 by the Conservancy, the farm has been transformed into a year round community center. The facility currently offers numerous year round activities including movies, Dining Around the World, internet café, seminars, yoga, community garden plots and much more. The land surrounding the farmstead is currently producing blueberries (pick your own), blackberries, corn, potatoes, apples, and a variety of other vegetables. The area also includes a micro vineyard and an expansion of the orchard area and a strawberry patch are in the works. Farnham Farm deserves dual listing in this plan as not only an important effort by its owners to preserve an historic landscape but also as a significant cultural resource for the community of Prudence Island. In 2006, the Farnham Farm was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

3.5 GOALS, POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION

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 - Pursue 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 – Pursue providing an annual stipend for 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 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.~~

Action HRC – 1.3d - Seek grants and other sources of funding to improve the Town Hall storage environment for Portsmouth’s town records and archives.

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 buildings 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 - Pursue a private partner such as the Portsmouth Historical Society to act as the principle entity responsible for conducting an annual status report of all the historic & cultural sites, structures and landscapes listed above in this plan. Seek 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 - Pursue a 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 - Pursue 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.~~