



HBI *nsights*

News From Historic Boston Incorporated • Winter 2002



The Spooner-Lambert House, built in 1782, occupies a central location in the historic John Eliot Square in Roxbury.

History, money, and mission: The Spooner-Lambert Story

Historic Boston's mission—bringing people and resources together to preserve endangered historic sites in Boston—is best served when we find ways to help communities protect their own historic resources. Sometimes, though, we have to move quickly, and unilaterally, to secure the future of an endangered landmark.

One such case is the Spooner-Lambert House, a distinctive 1782 structure located in Boston's Highland Park/Roxbury neighborhood. This neighborhood, rich in historic resources, has perhaps lost more significant historical buildings than any comparable historical area *in the country*. Demographic changes, urban sprawl, arson, disinvestment, and dysfunctional governmental approaches to development over the last 40 years have dealt devastating blows to the neighborhood, including the Spooner-Lambert House. By the 1980s, this once-elegant home had become a sad picture of neglect

and decay. The third-oldest building in Roxbury, constructed in the waning years of the American Revolution, was in grave danger.

The structure is of inestimable historical value. Built in 1782 for Major John Jones Spooner, first commander of the Roxbury Artillery, the house occupies a pivotal location in the John Eliot Square National Register District. Over the past three centuries, it has functioned variously as a residence, a home for elderly women run by the Ladies Unity Club, and an apartment building. On the interior, it retains an extraordinary amount of 18th-century woodwork.

Two decades ago, Spooner-Lambert got another new owner, with whom Historic Boston executed a preservation restriction agreement in 1983. This new owner began some important restoration work on the façade, including removal of the asphalt brick front, painting of the exterior, and reconstruc-

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The results are in!

Since 1992, HBI has been making grants to help Boston's religious-property owners care wisely for what is often their largest fiscal asset: their historic buildings. As of July 2000 we had awarded more than \$800,000 to 40 churches. In the fall of 2001, working with Boston-based ontheFRONTIER, we conducted a survey of these grant recipients to gain a better understanding of how we're meeting the needs of Steeples participants – and how we can do better.

The results are in, and they are quite gratifying. Of 31 respondents, all reported that they have been very satisfied with HBI's assistance in the areas that are most important to them: *leveraging resources, long-range planning, and comprehensive planning*. Although the percentage of total project costs covered by the Steeples grants varies widely, all of the recipients stated that they were proud to have received a Steeples grant, and over half of those surveyed were eager to apply for new grants immediately.

Opinion was divided on the appropriate scale of HBI grants. While many of those responding said that larger grants would help them, many also asserted that HBI should "share the wealth," giving smaller grants to more recipients. Perhaps most satisfying to us was the fact that Steeples grants seem to provide a benefit beyond that of monetary aid. In many cases, respondents noted that Steeples grants helped to legitimize historical restoration in the neighborhood and mobilize interest and resources in further work.

Suggestions for the future? Continuing involvement with past recipients and, yes, *more grant money*.

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tion of the roof balustrade. In 1990, however, a bank foreclosed on the property, and Spooner-Lambert once again was in serious jeopardy, with vandalism and decay driving off all but one tenant. At this point, HBI decided to step in and purchase the property. By 1993, we had completed the rehabilitation of the building into four moderate-income apartments.

Then we began looking for a way to recoup our investment and free up resources for other equally deserving projects in this neighborhood. After renting the restored units for several years, a period in which properties in the neighborhood appreciated significantly, we converted the building to condominiums in 1999. All four units were offered to the existing tenants at below-market prices, and one tenant took advantage of this offer. We sold a second unit in 2001 and are currently looking for purchasers for the remaining two units.

HBI's capital investment to date in the Spooner-Lambert House is close to \$600,000, including some recent emergency sill repairs (*see below*). The cash flow from the units has averaged



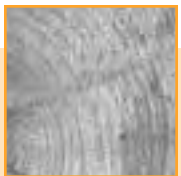
Old Corner Building Photo by Kevin Burke

approximately \$11,000 per year, which translates into about a 2.4 percent annual return on our investment. If we are able to sell the two remaining units at current market rates, we will more or less break even on our decade of involvement with Spooner-Lambert.

This is a somewhat risky model for a philanthropic revolving fund, which is essentially what HBI is. The time frames are uncertain, capital is illiquid during the investment period, and gains could just as easily be losses.

But is this *important* work?

We believe that it is, because without our intervention the building would likely have been lost. Today, the Spooner-Lambert House stands as a beacon of hope in a neighborhood that is experiencing a revival after decades of despair, and historic housing has been preserved in one of the most difficult residential real estate markets in the country. Here at Historic Boston, we're proud of our contribution.



Old growth, new growth

While repainting the Spooner-Lambert House this fall, HBI was dismayed to discover significant structural decay in the sill and cornerposts, the unwelcome work of powder-post beetles, termites, and carpenter ants over more than two centuries. We wound up paying more than \$67,000 to fix the damage, and we considered ourselves lucky. Shawmut Design and Construction and Carl Jay, Shawmut's Director of Historic Preservation, made their own contribution to the community by performing the repairs *at cost*. They did a wonderful job, and they completed it in record time.

One of the great challenges of historic preservation is that once an original component decays beyond repair, it may be impossible to replace. Original fabrication techniques may be too costly; equivalent materials may not be available. For example: Old-growth timber, such as the 220-year-old oak used in the Spooner-Lambert House, is almost entirely free of knots and other defects, with very closely-spaced, uniform rings of annual growth (*see photo1*). Today's commercially available wood can't begin to approach this quality. Smaller diameter, more rapidly-grown trees—such as the plantation-grown southern yellow pine used in the Spooner-Lambert reconstruction (*see photo2*)—have considerably fewer rings per inch, and a much higher incidence of knots and other natural inconsistencies.

Products made from such wood, even when treated with chemical preservatives, are more prone to decay and have a much shorter useful life.

Keeping this in mind, we chose naturally rot-resistant mahogany—a much higher density wood than pine—on exposed woodwork, including the house's splendid roof balustrade. For structural members, we used the pressure-treated yellow pine pictured, although we also invested in a metal flashing system around the perimeter of the house to shed moisture and keep this more vulnerable wood as dry as possible. The prognosis? With regular maintenance—and some luck—this replacement wood will last at least half as long as the original.

Stealth repairs: the Old Corner Bookstore restoration

Don't see any changes? That's the point.

Preservation doesn't always result in stunning before and after photos. Very often, responsible stewardship for historic buildings involves mundane maintenance work, work that—done right—ought to be invisible.

During the most recent round of investment in our flagship building, for example, we repointed the street-side façades. In the process the masons extracted several hundred small pieces of metal brackets, signage, and other debris. (While barely visible, over time these metal fragments expand as they oxidize, damaging the surrounding brick and mortar.) And, of course, we continued the repointing around the back of the building, despite the fact that only a few dozen people are likely ever to lay eyes on these particular bricks!

The Old Corner Bookstore, built in 1718, initially served as a residence and pharmacy. During the mid-nineteenth century, when the Ticknor and Fields publishing company occupied the building, the Old Corner became a favorite gathering place for American and English writers and was known as the literary hub of the United States. Civic leaders founded HBI in 1960 to acquire and restore the Old Corner Bookstore Buildings. The project demonstrated long before the preservation movement had become mainstream that historic buildings can contribute economically and culturally to the life of a city.

Letter from the Executive Director

As we prepare the Winter 2002 *HBI Insights*, the U.S. economy has been in recession for months, and the terrible legacy of September 11th is still felt every day. So it is discouraging to report that the cause of historic preservation in Massachusetts has recently suffered several major setbacks.

Despite the efforts of an unprecedented coalition of affordable housing activists, open space proponents, and historic preservation advocates, the Community Preservation Act (CPA) initiative in Boston lost by 9,609 votes in November. This initiative would have provided a minimum of \$2.8 million for historic preservation in Boston during its first year. While the pro-CPA "Committee for a Better Boston" raised \$567,300 for the campaign, the "Vote No on Higher Taxes Committee" spent \$978,041 to defeat the measure.

Meanwhile, the State House dealt the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund (MPPF) a severe blow. Despite the marked successes of the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) in managing this program—aimed at catalyzing and subsidizing repairs to historic sites owned by non-profits and municipalities—legislators have cut off the MPPF's funding. And finally, the legislature slashed \$326,000 from the MHC's own budget – a 27 percent reduction from the previous year. Because this cut coincides with a 17 percent decrease of the MHC's federal allocation, the MHC's \$2.2 million budget has been reduced by \$484,000.

Stanley M. Smith
Photo by Christopher Fitzgerald



What does this mean for Massachusetts and its communities? Municipalities and non-profits will lose funding that they have used to identify and document historic resources and to perform the pre-development studies needed to attract preservation funds from multiple sources. Staff reductions will also impede the process of reviewing applications for federal Historic Preservation Investment Tax Credits, which in the past have stimulated \$49 million in private investments in historic buildings.

During this difficult time, we must work all the harder to conserve our architectural patrimony for future generations. Historic Boston's work and your continued support have never been more critical.

There are bright notes. This month, for example, Historic Boston is proud to invite historic religious property owners in Boston to apply for \$170,000 in grants as part of our continuing Steeples Project. Since 1993, 14 foundations and corporations have donated more than \$1 million for this initiative, leveraging an additional \$8 million to repair landmarks serving their communities in multiple ways. Our latest grant comes from the Herman and Frieda Miller Foundation.

Another bright note: In January 2002, James M. Igoe, formerly the Executive Director of Preservation Worcester, became the Executive Director of Historic Massachusetts. Mr. Igoe acquired a statewide perspective as a former Deputy Secretary of State, and represented the Secretary of State as the chair of the Massachusetts Historical Commission. In his new role, Mr. Igoe will reinforce Historic Massachusetts' traditional role as a unifying force supporting the efforts of the 375 public and private preservation organizations in Massachusetts. Historic Boston congratulates him, and welcomes him to "the neighborhood."

*Stanley M. Smith
Executive Director,
Historic Boston Incorporated*

About Historic Boston...

Historic Boston Incorporated is a private, non-profit organization that puts people and resources together to preserve endangered historic sites in the city of Boston. It gives priority to projects which will leverage additional public and private commitments, embody thoughtful restoration standards, catalyze neighborhood renewal, and protect cultural resources.

To accomplish these objectives, Historic Boston engages in a variety of entrepreneurial activities which include buying property, making grants, providing technical assistance, lending money, building the capacity of other organizations with similar goals, and seeking new funds. Over the past 15 years, Historic Boston's revolving fund has invested \$4.6 million for 14 preservation projects, which has leveraged more than \$25 million of additional investments in Boston neighborhoods.

Historic Boston provides leadership, leverage, and focus for people and organizations throughout the region who share the ideals and objectives of safeguarding America's heritage.

HBI is a charitable, non-profit organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and a private operating foundation under code Section 4942(j)(3). Tax-deductible gifts or bequests may be sent to Historic Boston Incorporated at 3 School Street, Boston MA 02108.

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