

Our house: Building on the past with eye toward future; Worcester developer on a mission to revitalize city's architectural gems

By Laura Porter





If you pay attention, there are remnants of Worcester's past on every block: a cornerstone from a different century; distinctive arches above a set of windows; a building's original name preserved in stone.

Although much has been lost to time and new construction, there are also a surprising number of historic homes across the city that survive. Built by Worcester's most prominent citizens, their wealth often rooted in industry, houses impressive in style and materials continue to dominate quite a few neighborhoods.

Many are in good shape, occupied by families or adapted for business or nonprofit use. But mistreatment and neglect have nearly destroyed others, leaving them ramshackle and broken, both inside and out.

Take 37 Fruit St., for example.

The Queen Anne home was constructed in 1884 by Frances Merrick Lincoln. The daughter of Worcester lawyer Daniel Waldo Lincoln and granddaughter of Massachusetts Governor Levi Lincoln, she inherited much of her grandfather's enormous estate in the Elm Park area. Prominent in Worcester civic life, Frances Lincoln built, sold and rented several houses, primarily on Fruit and William streets but extending to Sever and Cedar streets as well.

Massachusetts Historical Commission records from the late 1970s indicate that 37 Fruit Street was designed by Springfield architect Eugene Clarence Gardner, who also designed

three other houses for Frances Lincoln. Built as a single-family home in wood clapboard and shingle, by the time of the MHC report the slate-roofed property was not a residence but rather used for “school offices.”

The home and its accompanying carriage house gradually succumbed to wear and tear, exacerbated by the long-term neglect of a single landlord who bucked the zoning laws by renting the rooms as apartments and failing to take care of them.

By 2016, when Worcester developer Russell Haims purchased the property in order to restore it, the house — and its tenants — had effectively been forgotten. He recalls finding advancing mold, fallen ceilings, holes everywhere. Ivy had crawled over the outside walls, working its way into windows and rotting wood.

“The landlord looked the other way,” he says. “The people who lived there didn't have a lot of better options. They were living in terrible conditions.”

Since 1985, Mr. Haims has been dedicated to peeling back years of damage to restore historic homes and, in the process, both create housing and beautify neighborhoods. His business, Hampton Properties, has bought and renovated over 400 houses in Worcester alone. They are all over the city, but many are in neighborhoods in the vicinity of WPI, Clark University and Becker College, where they are in use as either independent apartment buildings or lodging houses. (A lodging house features shared common areas such as kitchens and bathrooms.) In many cases, Hampton manages the rental properties themselves.

In recent years, Mr. Haims has been purchasing houses from nonprofits. After renovation, the properties are then listed on the city tax rolls and so contribute to municipal income.

“The philosophy is about improving quality of life by restoring difficult properties,” he says. “We seek out the most distressed, and then we renovate and transform them.”

The impact goes well beyond the individual property line: “I found that taking the worst property in the neighborhood and making it the most beautiful had the largest impact,” Mr. Haims says. “Something magical happens.”

He also believes deeply in the power of the concept of home, and Hampton's motto is "peace, love and shelter."

"If people have the right place to live, it encourages their wellbeing and happiness," he says. "Happiness is home, security, family. That's integral."

In his 20s, Mr. Haims began this work by buying and renovating multi-family homes in Fitchburg. After moving to Worcester in the early 1990s, he continued to buy properties in tougher neighborhoods that were in wretched physical condition, badly maintained inside and out.



In recent years, he has become especially interested in neighborhoods around Worcester's colleges, where he notes that students often "lived in substandard conditions just because of proximity to the schools."

"I found that offensive," he says. "Why does a student have to live in a dump because it's nearby? I decided I was going to fulfill that need, and then it got bigger than that."

Hampton's meticulous approach to renovation has, from the outset, involved restoring buildings to their original beauty by using high quality materials and craftsmanship. Wherever possible, the business retains original details or incorporates appropriate reproductions.