

TO: Board of Selectmen
Appropriations Committee
Financial Planning Committee
Community Preservation Committee

FROM: Kathleen Polanowicz
Chair, White Cliffs Committee
Member, Community Preservation Committee

RE: Meeting of White Cliffs Committee on February 22, 2019

PURPOSE:

In an effort to keep all relevant Town committees briefed on the White Cliffs project, it is my intention to provide you with periodic updates on our meetings and on the project. Of course our meeting minutes will be available to you but this seemed like a more personal way to communicate.

BACKGROUND:

Town Meeting voted to purchase White Cliffs at the April 2016 Town Meeting utilizing Community Preservation Funds. Included in that warrant article was funding not only for the purchase of the property, but also initial funding to retain the services of consultants to begin the process of assessing the White Cliffs structure and surrounding property, to develop plans to secure the building and to embark on the process of re-envisioning the feasible re-use of White Cliffs.

Prior to the Town closing on the property, the Seller was required to do extensive remediation to the parcel, including the removal of large underground oil tanks and the cleanup of oil leaks. Once that work was completed to the satisfaction of the Town and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the Town closed on White Cliffs in October of 2017.

Once ownership of the property was secured, the Board of Selectmen voted to create the White Cliffs Committee. The opportunity to serve was posted and interviews were held to identify Committee members. The White Cliffs Committee members were appointed by the Board of Selectmen and the Committee held its first meeting on January 18, 2018.

The first order of business for the White Cliffs Committee was to advertise for and retain the necessary consultants to move the project forward. Town staff drafted a comprehensive Request for Proposals and the document was published on July 18, 2018.

The Town received numerous responses to the RFP, and the White Cliffs Committee conducted extensive interviews of potential firms. After narrowing the pool, exhaustive reference checks were conducted by the Town Administrator and on October 23, 2018 the White Cliffs Committee voted unanimously to award the contract to DBVW, an architectural firm based in Providence Rhode Island. See: <http://dbvw.com/>

On January 7, 2019, The Town executed a contract with DBVW Architects for the provision of architectural and engineering services at the White Cliffs property.

FEBRUARY 22, 2019 MEETING:

The team at DBVW enthusiastically embraced their new project and at its February 22, 2018 meeting the White Cliffs Committee received its first update on the project from Martha Werenfels, Principal of DBVW and

Nealia E. Morrison, DBVW Project Manager for White Cliffs.

DBVW and its consultants have been on site at White Cliffs conducting laser and visual surveys of the interior and exterior of the property. Martha and Nealia both expressed that the building is in “much better condition than anticipated”. While Martha and Nealia stressed that they are in the beginning stages of assessing the conditions at White Cliffs, it was heartening to learn that at first blush the historic portion of the building is holding up “with relatively few problems” after what was described as “many years of deferred maintenance” by prior owners.

The Town Administrator shared with the Committee the work that is being done to address the security of the White Cliffs property and building. To allow for enforcement of no trespassing provisions, the property has been posted and the Northborough Police Department is currently conducting regular, around the clock visits to the property to assure that there are not unauthorized individuals on the property. Not only are these efforts directed to preserving the integrity of the property and the building, but also to assuring that the Town is in compliance with its insurance carrier’s requirements regarding access to the property. The Committee was most appreciative of the commitment of the Northborough Police Department in this regard.

POSSIBLE IDENTIFICATION OF ARCHITECT:

Beyond the discussion of the practical matters associated with the assessment of White Cliffs, the Committee was very excited to learn that DBVW believes that they have identified the architect of the building. Numerous Town volunteers associated with White Cliffs have been working for some time to identify the architect, so the fact that DBVW believes they have found him is an important development.

The identity of an architect can be an important component in accessing historic designations and possible funding. In addition, knowing who the architect was may lead to the discovery of original blueprints or floorplans for White Cliffs, none of which are currently in the Town’s possession.

DBVW will continue to research this issue and will report back to the Committee when more information is known.

Below is a transcription of the article from the June 3, 1893 Springfield Republican discovered by DBVW staff which points to Benjamin Hammett Seabury as the architect of the building.

*White Cliffs Article
“The Costly Northboro Residence”
Springfield Republican
June 3, 1893
Transcription*

The Costly Northboro Residence

Built by D. B. Wesson – Some features of “The Cliffs”

Outside of the Lenox district, there is probably no costlier or handsomer summer residence in inland Massachusetts than D. B. Wesson's mansion at Northboro. It was built five years ago, at a cost of over \$100,000, and has been christened “The Cliffs,” as it occupies an eminence. The structure was planned by Architect Seabury, and occupies a space 60 by 80 feet. It is 2½ stories high, the first story walls being of brick and stone. The towers are of the same material, but the rest of the house has shingled sides. The general style*

is of an English country residence. The main entrance is through the portecochere, which forms the center treatment, flanked by ornamental towers. A marble piazza 13 feet wide surrounds the front and two sides. On passing through the vestibule one enters a beautiful hall, the interior feature of the building. It extends up to the roof and is lighted by a skylight, while a balcony gives access to the chambers. The hall is finished in polished and carved oak, the stairs in the rear passing over the fireplace. There is also an elevator in the rear. On the right is the library, finished in black walnut, and from it opens a bay window 11 feet in diameter. Behind the library is the parlor, finished in satin-wood, while the dining room is across the hall and opens out into another bay window formed by the tower. Over the main entrance is a large octagonal bay window, and the rest of the door is given up to six chambers.

** Benjamin Hammett Seabury*

NEXT MEETING/PUBLIC INPUT:

The White Cliffs Committee is currently scheduled to meet again on April 2, 2019 at 10:00 am. Our meetings are legally posted and open to the public. Although our meetings are not Public Hearings, we welcome public comment at the conclusion of our meetings as a way to engage the residents of Northborough in this important project.

It is anticipated that as we proceed through this process there will be other, more broad reaching opportunities for the residents to provide input and receive updates that will be planned in conjunction with our consultants.

Please note that in an effort to keep the public up to date on our efforts; our Committee is working closely with Town staff to update the White Cliffs Committee link on the Town website to include as much information about White Cliffs as possible. The updated link should be live by next week. A big thank you to Norm Corbin and David Kane for their efforts on the website.

If any members of your Board or Committees ever have any questions or concerns regarding White Cliffs, please feel free to reach me at kpolanowicz@gmail.com.