

TO : Historical Commission Members
FROM : Wellfleet Historical Society and Museum Board of Directors
DATE : March 30, 2020
RE : Proposed Demolition of 20 Briar Lane

If the proposed demolition of 20 Briar Lane is successful Wellfleet will lose both an historic house and a part of its unique townscape.

In the middle decades of the 20th century this structure was referred to as the "Kemp House", a rooming house run by Mrs. Margaret Souther. Its history is much deeper and richer.

The style of this structure, a greek revival, became popular just as Wellfleet was reaching its zenith as a fishing port. The influx of money surrounding primarily the mackerel industry built much of the townscape seen today. Greek revivals on Main Street, West Main Street, Briar Lane and Commercial Street are most representative of a time when Wellfleet was famous for fishermen, sea captains and merchants. Greek revivals were substantial without being ostentatious, projecting both pride and humility. These characteristics are still a foundation of Wellfleet's citizenry.

The Kemp House was built on Old King's Highway around 1840. It was moved to County Road (also known at various times as Truro Road, Winter Street, Briar Lane) prior to the 1843 survey that created the 1858 Wellfleet map. Moving houses nearer to the village was an important part of the centralization of Wellfleet. The 1858 map shows its owner as T. Holbrook, most likely Thomas Holbrook.

In the early years of the 20th century it was occupied by Captain Edward J. Tobin, Keeper of the Life Saving Station at Cahoon's Hollow (1905-1924). Captain Tobin was injured when his lifeboat overturned while attempting to rescue the crew of the Italian barque Castanga on Feb. 17, 1914. He never fully recovered.

The Wellfleet Historical Society and Museum has been taking a closer look at Briar Lane in advance of a speaker series presentation, "Briar Lane, Then and Now" currently scheduled for May. Briar Lane is perhaps the most under appreciated historical street in town. Its western end is emblematic of Wellfleet's mid 19th century centralization and growth while its eastern end holds outstanding examples of 18th century full capes. Those buildings are what creates Wellfleet's unique character, one of charm that gives residents a sense of place and one that captures the attention of visitors.

Losing a building of this character will leave a scar in that historical section of town. Allowing a postponement of the demolition will give time to reevaluate the physical integrity of the structure and affirm its value to the town.