

Storytellers Series for Preservation Massachusetts
A Personal Journey of Preservation—A Story of Passion, Commitment, and Continuity

In 2001, I fell in love with an abandoned old house. I knew nothing about it, its age or its history. I just knew it needed to be saved and preserved. Fairly new to Dartmouth, I had a lot of learning to do about my adopted community. Thus began my personal journey into historic preservation. I soon found others who shared my interest in this house. **Gratitude!**



Akin House, 762 Dartmouth Street, Dartmouth, MA.
Left: Photo by Fred Palmer, 1905. Right: Photo by Diane Gilbert, 2001

Here's what I learned along the way:

“The Little House with a Big Story to Tell”, a phrase coined by the late Anne W. “Pete” Baker, the region’s legendary savior of lost causes (read: really old houses), perfectly describes this pre-Georgian 1762 Cape Cod style post-and-beam house in Dartmouth. The best thing it had going for it? It was still there, uninhabited and neglected, an out of place throwback from the 18th C. It graced the bustling intersection of Dartmouth and Rockland Streets, completely surrounded by 20th C. neighborhoods. But, it could not be ignored.

Photos made by the late Tim Sylvia in 2004 to document WHALE’s interior inspection of the Akin House. Seen for the first time following the purchase of the property, Tony Souza’s instincts & vision found disciples in Pete Baker & Peggi Medeiros. From left to right: the great room, the formal parlor, and original door leading to the sitting room surrounded by modern wallpaper.



Pete Baker was hired in 2004 by Tony Souza, then Executive Director of the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE), to prepare a historic structures report working with Tony's intrepid staff research historian, Peggi Medeiros, to save what became known as the Akin House. A bit far afield from Tony's New Bedford, he was determined to save it. Akin descendants sold the property to WHALE using funds from Dartmouth's Community Preservation Act (CPA). And so began the Akin House Saga and the long journey of historic preservation for this historic house.



A still from the Elmer Clifton 1921 silent film, **Down to the Sea in Ships**, about New Bedford whaling of the mid-19th C. The main character is about to enter "the old homestead", a ghost-like presence reflecting on the past and one imagines seeing the future. It premiered in New Bedford in 1922.

Pete Baker with Peggi Medeiros taking a well-deserved break during a WHALE-sponsored cleanup at the Akin House site, planning phases of conservation & preservation. Photo by Diane Gilbert, June 2005.

There are times when another organization has to take over a preservation project. It happens! Even with an Akin House sub-committee to oversee the preservation work, WHALE went as far as it could. The Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust, Inc. (DHPT) founded in 2007 by former members of WHALE's sub-committee took over the reins. I am proud to say, I was involved from the beginning. (DHPT in a leasehold arrangement with Dartmouth has operated as its stewards directing preservation and restoration efforts after the deed was transferred to the Town in 2008. The house has a Preservation Restriction and is listed on the State Register.)

The handoff from WHALE to DHPT.



Left: The Akin House after the first restoration phase completed by WHALE. Photo by Diane Gilbert, 2006. Right: The Akin family descendants touring the Akin House during Dartmouth's 350th anniversary. Photo by Diane Gilbert, June 2014. Another restoration phase directed by DHPT took place in 2009. Note the photo on the right shows evidence of window repairs, foundation repointing, trim paint color changed to white. Interior stabilization work along with a variety of other restoration work also performed in 2009. Mission by no means accomplished.

DHPT represents an important tenet of historic preservation, **continuity**. Continued engagement translates to the transfer of knowledge from one organization to another. DHPT was required to build on that knowledge and it has. In a long drawn out preservation effort, even the most dedicated can fall off the band-wagon. Life happens! A few of us stayed the course. Others joined in. **Continuity**.

Preservationists are by nature optimists. Preservation leaders must have the **vision** to see the possible in the impossible, to see potential and opportunities in lost causes. **Commitment and passion** are key to successful preservation projects. Is that enough?

How to prevail when the fate of a historic house hangs in the balance between a casualty of historic proportions and its future as a cultural heritage and learning center? **Saving is not the end of historic preservation, it's the beginning**. Appearances can be deceiving if a house is judged by its exterior as saved, as in the 2006 photo above. DHPT's mission "Preserving our heritage from the foundation up" is no accident. A finished house to many, the Akin House required a lot more work. DHPT witnessed crumbling foundations causing the house to shift. Try explaining to town officials that more CPA funding was needed. Naively, I thought that DHPT would be welcomed as a savior, **offering continuity**. We prevailed after a fight to make our case, Town Meeting approved, and DHPT embarked on the second phase of restoration in 2009.



Second phase of restoration included windows, foundations, new pine flooring, endless stabilization, temporary steel posts like this one, and much more. Photos by Diane Gilbert, September 2009.

Once goals are in the public domain, especially when a project is underwritten by public funds, **there's no turning back**. When a community has invested CPA funding and private donations to **meet stated goals** to preserve and protect a cultural asset, an organization's integrity and reputation is on the line.

Be inspired by and partner with like-minded organizations—Preservation Massachusetts, Massachusetts Historical Commission, Historic New England, local groups and colleagues who share your values and preservation philosophy. Embrace these groups! Help each other!

Engage your community, especially when support is tentative. A town-owned property like the Akin House needs Town buy-in.

Show the willingness and perseverance to carry on difficult challenges. Back in 2003, Tony Souza's well-worn phrase "Preservation is not for the faint of heart" grabbed me by the throat and never let go. I can be tough-minded, outspoken, persistent—not faint of heart. Hence was born my passion and commitment to preservation through my labor of love—the Akin House. Along the way, I learned **patience** to stay the course, and the value of **collaboration**. Even if a work in progress, **celebrate & communicate your successes** because it keeps you motivated and shows others you're doing something of value for the community.

Fast forward to the present.



Left: The original in no condition to save, a new summer beam and new joists in the formal parlor with temporary steel post removed. Middle: The original exterior wall boards in the sitting room/small parlor revealed 18th C. English wallpaper. Right: Behind a Greek Revival style fireplace and hearth, we found the original wider fireplace with a wall oven located in the rear, completely restored to functionality. Photos by Diane Gilbert, 2017-2018.

The Akin House, "The Little House with a Big Story to Tell" is not done talking. DHPT is now engaged in its current phase of preservation (2017-2018), thanks to CPA funds (again) and more private donors.

Preservation and protection, fifteen years in the making. For this significant cultural resource now 256 years old, the ending hasn't been written.

Final lesson: Preservation never ends and this house will keep on talking for generations to come! Be there to listen!

Visit our website at www.dhpt.org to learn about us and our organization.

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