

# Residents, preservationists battle home builder over fate of Houston House

By LARRY NAGENGAST • JUN 14, 2019



*Bayberry home builder Blenheim Homes wants to tear down the Houston House and barn to add five houses and a park*

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While New Castle County's new Historic Preservation Working Group is finding its footing, a familiar situation that troubles preservationists is now playing out in southern New Castle County.

Blenheim Homes, the builder of the Bayberry community north of Middletown, is asking the county's Historic Review Board for permission to raze a farmhouse and barn, known as the J. Houston House, because of its deteriorated condition.

If it gets permission to tear down the structures, built between the 1840s and 1880s, Blenheim would then build five more homes and a small park on the roughly 3-acre site.

The board is scheduled to meet Tuesday to hear Blenheim's request. According to its rules, it will reach a decision at a subsequent business meeting.

The record plan for the community, an official document on file with the county, states that the farmhouse and barn are "to remain" and that the lot on which they stand is not to be further subdivided, according to an email dated June 3 from Elizabeth Caufield, a preservation planner in the county's Land Use Department, to Councilman David Carter (D-Middletown), who requested an update on the situation.

Caufield's email to Carter also states that "the house has not been repaired or worked on in the past two years" and that "there is a fair amount of offensive graffiti in and around the house from vandals."



*The Houston House is riddled with graffiti and damage.*  
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Other than to put a fence around the house, Blenheim “never spent a dime” on it, says Bayberry resident Kevin Caneco, who lives nearby. “Now they say it’s too far gone, it can’t be saved, and they have to tear it down.”

Caneco says Blenheim is trying to convince his neighbors that demolition would be good because further deterioration of the structures would have a negative impact on the community. “They’ve got us in a pickle,” he says.

He would like to see the Historic Review Board pressure Blenheim to restore the farmhouse or find investors willing to do so, but he realizes that the board’s strongest weapon is probably to delay demolition temporarily.

If demolition does occur, the county should not reward Blenheim by permitting construction of five more homes, he says. “If it can’t be saved, they should be fined and held to stricter scrutiny, and the land should be kept open.”



*Residents say Blenheim Homes has done little to maintain Houston House other than put a fence around it*

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Some Bayberry residents do support Blenheim's bid to tear down the old house. Jay Zionkowski, who lives on Audubon Drive near the structure, believes that demolition may curb vandalism and prevent a lowering of the value of nearby homes while giving children a better place to play when parkland is created in its place.

In a Facebook post, New Castle County Councilwoman Dee Durham (D - Brandywine Hundred), who launched the Historic Preservation Working Group, says the Historic Review Board should not even have to consider Blenheim's request because Bayberry's record plan states that the buildings will not be torn down.

Michael Emmons, an architectural historian at the University of Delaware, says that "to remain," as used in the record plan, implies that the building and landscape of the property would be kept. He suggests that, in cases like this, developers look for ways to keep structures in good condition. "That's better than losing the property completely," he says. "Even if it's not museum level, it still looks the part."

Although the Houston House is not in his district, Carter became interested in the controversy because he has known about the property for about 10 years. He said he visited the house in 2009 or 2010 and said it was "in pretty good shape" then. "Two weeks ago, I was stunned to see holes in the room. The problem could only be demolition by neglect."

The problem, Carter says, is that the county's preservation laws have no teeth. Blenheim's preservation pledge may have been part of Bayberry's record plan "but the county code is not stringent enough," he says. "It doesn't require a maintenance plan [from the developer] and [code enforcement officials] don't inspect on a regular basis."