



**RELEASE DATE: June 2, 2021**

## **CAR CRASH DAMAGES HISTORIC EMERSON-WILCOX HOUSE**

York, Maine—Just before 11pm on Saturday, May 29, a car traveling west along York Street crashed into the east side of historic Emerson-Wilcox House (built about 1735). No one was seriously injured, and alcohol and drugs were not a factor in the accident. The incident, however, resulted in significant structural damage to the house.

Museum staff are working this week to assess the damage, secure the house from pests and the elements, move collections objects, and clean up debris. An initial assessment of the house indicates that the Long Parlor, where the car entered the building, is significantly compromised. Much of the woodwork, which dates to an 1840s remodeling of the building, is damaged or destroyed, and a portion of the original 18th-century post-and-beam construction on the east side (Lindsay Road entrance) has been demolished. Splinters of wood, plaster, paint, nails, and other debris are scattered throughout the adjacent rooms and hallways. "It looks like a bomb went off inside the house," says executive director Joel Lefever.

Old York will retain preservation architect Deane Rykerson of Rykerson Architecture in Kittery Point to determine the structural damage caused by the accident, and give an estimate for the costs of repair. Old York's Board of Trustees, recognizing the need for an extensive restoration of the whole structure, has been discussing plans for a potential reinterpretation of the building for more than a year. The house has not had a heat system in almost 40 years, and the damp conditions have taken their toll. The timetable for a more comprehensive restoration of the house is uncertain at this time.

Any insurance settlement will subsidize the cost of restoring the exterior and interior damage caused by the accident. But as is often the case, that money likely will not meet the full needs of the undertaking. "Raising the funds and restoring the entire building is a long-term project," says Lefever, "and it will be a multi-year endeavor."

A complicating factor in any restoration of the building, is the ownership of the house, collections, and land. The house is owned by the Elizabeth Bishop Perkins Trust, of which Old York is the sole beneficiary. The income from the trust is modest, and is designated for operating costs for Old York Historical Society. This equals the salary and health benefits for one staff member. The Trust has no cash reserve for restoration. The collections in the

house, including many items that belonged to Wilcox family descendant, Dorothy Hungerford, are owned by Old York Historical Society. And finally, the land under the house (about 2/25ths of an acre) was recently deeded to First Parish Church through a vote by the Town of York. “This complex—and indeed confusing—arrangement,” says Lefever, “makes Old York’s efforts to maintain and restore the house extremely challenging.”

## **HISTORY OF THE HOUSE**

Around 1735 George Ingram, the son of a local tavern owner built the earliest part of the current house (the section of the structure partially destroyed in the accident). Beginning in the 1740s the house had a series of owners until it was purchased in 1756 by ship owner and importer, Edward Emerson. The west end of the Long Parlor is thought to be the location of Edward Emerson’s store from which he sold sugar, molasses, rum, and spices.

David Wilcox, a delegate to the Maine State Constitutional Convention in 1819, purchased the house in 1817. His daughter Louisa and her husband, ship’s captain, William Putnam, inherited the house in 1856. It then descended through the family until Dorothy Hungerford sold it to the Elizabeth Bishop Perkins Trust in 1953.

Exciting new research by Joel Lefever has uncovered evidence of an earlier house on the site. In 1686, the selectmen of York gave a ¼ acre of land to John Cook, who had requested a lot near the meetinghouse to build his home. Cook and his wife were likely killed in the Candlemas Raid on York in 1692. The Cook’s son Thomas returned the lot to the Town of York in 1727 in exchange for land in the Scotland District. The stone cellar from the Cook’s 1686 house still exists under the west end of the Emerson-Wilcox House.

“This house is hugely significant, as it touches on four centuries of Maine history,” says Lefever, “Few places in the state can claim such a distinction.”

## **HOW TO HELP**

A fund dedicated to the restoration of the house has been established. Those wishing to make donations can give online at [oldyork.org](http://oldyork.org) (please make a note that the gift is for the Emerson-Wilcox House), or mail a check payable to “Old York Historical Society” to Emerson-Wilcox Restoration Fund, Old York Historical Society, P.O. Box 312, York, ME 03909.

## **ABOUT OLD YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

OYHS is a vital part of the York, Maine, community. The organization maintains 16 buildings and 20 properties including the 17-acre Steedman Woods; employs 5 full-time and 25 part-time employees; houses more than 20,000 artifacts and 50,000 archival materials; and serves thousands of people year round through tours, educational programs, and special events. OYHS receives no Federal, State, or Municipal support, and relies on funding

provided through private donations, a modest endowment, and a trust established by Elizabeth Perkins, as well as earned income from ticket sales, programs, memberships.

OYHS is open for the 2021 season, Tuesday through Saturday, July 4 to October 30. Tickets to the Old Gaol and Museum Center must be reserved in advance online at [oldyork.org](http://oldyork.org).

**Admission is free to all visitors for the 2021 season**, thanks to the generosity of several local businesses: Bangor Savings Bank, Coldwell Banker Yorke Realty, Eldredge Lumber and Hardware, and Kennebunk Savings.

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