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RESTORATION BEGINS ON HISTORIC EMERSON-WILCOX HOUSE

York, Maine—After an almost two-year wait, an insurance settlement has been received for the historic Emerson-Wilcox House (built 1742). The building was heavily damaged in an automobile accident on May 31, 2021, when just before 11pm, a car traveling west along York Street crashed into the east side of the house. No one was seriously injured, and the York Fire Department and under the leadership of Chief Chris Balentine, was immediately on the scene. They cared for the uninjured driver and secured the house. Since then, however, a garage-door-sized patch has been a prominent scar at the heart of York Village.

The house is owned by the Elizabeth Bishop Perkins Trust, and sits on land owned by First Parish Church (2/15ths of an acre). Old York Historical Society manages the house, and owns the historic objects and furnishings on display inside. Following the accident, Old York, on behalf of the Perkins Trust, managed the process of assessing damage to the building, and moving collections items out of harm's way. Staff sifted through the wreckage to retrieve original damaged beams, window fragments, woodwork, and flooring. With help from preservation architect Deane Rykerson of Kittery Point, the original placement of damaged framing elements was meticulously recorded.

The task of finding qualified experts who could put the building back together proved difficult, in part due to the pandemic, but also because of the complicated nature of historic restoration. Once Old York had identified specialists, the driver's insurance company hired a construction estimator to determine repair costs. The total, nearly \$77,000, appeared to be adequate to put the house back together again. However, the driver's insurance company reduced the payout by 10%, and refused to cover any additional expenses (such as hidden damage or cost increases) over \$69,000. The Perkins Trust, as steward of the Emerson-Wilcox House, could not in good conscience sign a release that potentially wouldn't cover the loss.

This impasse lasted for many months, as an attorney retained by the Perkins Trust attempted to restart negotiations. But the adjusters representing the driver of the car ceased communicating. Earlier this year, with few other options, Ellis Insurance Agency, on behalf of the Perkins Trust, filed a claim with Hanover Insurance Group, the company that insures the Emerson-Wilcox House for the Trust. Within a month, Hanover settled the claim for the full amount, and work is now underway to repair the damage.

“On behalf of the Perkins Trust, Old York would like to thank all those who have helped our efforts—the York Fire Department, Ellis Insurance Agency, Hanover Insurance Group, the York community, and all those who donated to an emergency fund to repair the building,” says Joel Lefever, OYHS executive Director. “That fund was critical in covering interim costs such as hiring staff to help move collections.”

Restoration work will continue through 2023, and OYHS looks forward to welcoming the public back to Emerson-Wilcox House sometime in 2024.

HISTORY OF THE HOUSE

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) sometime around 1735. Beginning in the 1740s the house went through a series of owners until 1756, when it was purchased 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.

The house was purchased in 1817 by David Wilcox, a delegate to the 1819 Maine State Constitutional Convention. 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.

Recent research 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 Raid on York in 1692. Their 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.”

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 3 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.

CONTACT: Janet Blyberg
Membership and Marketing Coordinator
Old York Historical Society
P.O. Box 312
York, Maine 03909
207-363-4974, x. 101
membership@oldyork.org