

Historic Peters House added to Freedom Trail

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HEBRON — The Peters House has taken another step closer to being recognized as an historic icon.

The Connecticut Freedom Trail approved the house for inclusion on the trail, which was established in 1995 by the Connecticut General Assembly.

The trail was created to “recognize the importance to Connecticut of numerous sites in the state that are associated with the heritage and movement towards freedom of its African American citizens,” according to the Connecticut Freedom Trail web site. “Included on the trail are buildings reported to have been used on the Underground Railroad, sites associated with the Amistad case of 1839-1842, and gravesites, monuments, homes, and other structures that represent the concept of freedom so cherished in the American mind.”

The Peters House in Hebron, which dates back to the 1700s, was owned by Samuel

Peters, who also had two slaves, Cesar and Lowis.

They were supposed to be considered free, but according to historical documents, in 1787, they, along with their eight children — James, Doris, Salle, Iri, Susanna, Ziba, Lowis an Cesar — were abducted by slave traders and taken to the docks at Norwich.

Most of the Peters’ male neighbors were participating in military training and, although the women in town tried to stop the abduction, they were unsuccessful.

The women fetched the men home, however, and they set off on the abductors’ trail, preventing the Peters family from being shipped off just in time by staging a faux arrest of them on bogus theft charges.

They were then able to bring the family back to Hebron and the Peters lived out their lives free men and women.

It is thought to be the earliest example of abolitionism in Connecticut.

Hebron Historical Society President Don-
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na McCalla, who is also a member of the Hebron Historic Properties Commission, which is trying to get the Peters House listed as a designated property, is ecstatic at this latest development.

"It's a huge designation," said McCalla.

The house has been a controversial property since the town acquired the abandoned building as part of an open-space purchase in 2004.

At the time of the acquisition, the board of selectmen had been uncertain about what to do with the building, although discussions on making it a facility for town offices had taken place.

A subsequent board of selectmen decided to put the house up for sale to any private buyer rather than spend taxpayer money to restore the house.

Many local historians protested the action, however, and negotiations with a purchaser broke

down early last year, allegedly over the extent of the preservation of historical architectural features that were wanted.

Following that, selectmen formed a Peters House use study committee, which recommended late last year the town retain the house as a combination museum and public offices.

While the Connecticut Freedom Trail has designated the Peters House as one of its properties, local historians are still waiting to hear about another designation.

Hebron's planning and zoning commission and the historic properties commission have both approved the house for a local historical designation, but selectmen must still give its approval for it to take place.

The selectmen had a public hearing on the issue last week, at which dozens of residents and descendants of the Peters family came out to support the designation.

Selectmen are slated to make

their decision on the designation next week.

"Local historic designation is the only designation which actually provides protection for an historic property," McCalla said. "State and national designations are highly prestigious, but do not require any level of preservation protection."

Regardless of what selectmen decide, advocates plan to now seek a national historic designation and placement on the list of Underground Railroad properties, according to McCalla, on the strength of the designation from the Connecticut Freedom Trail.

Selectmen also must eventually decide what to do with the house itself.

At their last meeting, they decided they would choose one of two options: either partially follow the recommendations of the Peters House use study committee and keep the house or revisit the idea to sell the house to a private buyer.

The latter puts the property back on the town's tax rolls to generate revenue in the long term, realize income from the sale in the short term and save taxpayers the burden of future restoration and maintenance.

The decision will likely be based on whether the town receives grant funding from the state's Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP).

Jeffrey Watt, chairman of the board of selectmen, applied for the STEAP grant in January to obtain funds to restore the Peters House.

The town will hear whether it was awarded the grant later this spring.

"From here, we're off to national historic designation and it's a huge designation," Watt said. "And from here, we're off to national historic designation and Underground Railroad application."

For more information, log on to www.ctfreedomtrail.com.