

Meeting of the Board of Mathews County Historical Society with Dr. Randolph Turner, director, and Ms. Pam Schenian, architectural historian, of the Tidewater Regional Office of the Virginia Commonwealth Department of Historic Resources, Wednesday January 14 at the Mathews Regional Library.

Present from Mathews were Stuart Allen, Dee Lawson, Jack Caldwell, Terry Pletcher, Graham Hood, Amanda Taylor and Rebecca Grow of MCVIC, and Steve Whiteway, County Administrator. Frank Lansinger joined the meeting later.

Since Randy and Pam were familiar with the Thomas James Old Store only from the exterior and from photographs, they inspected the building briefly first. When they joined the group, they were unstinting in their praise for the building - "a real gem" - as well as for the progress MCHS had made with the project to date. Randy said, "What you've done here could be a role model for organizations like yours with similar projects in the future."

He cited the successful applications for listing the store on the State and the National Historic Registers, the professional reports on the structure, the documentary report, and the forthcoming conservation survey. He went on to say that the recent change in property ownership, which had removed from MCHS the obligation to move the building to another site, was a welcome development and a happy conclusion to all the society's efforts to date.

Proposing some next steps, Randy continued that MCHS should focus on the stabilization of the structure, which does seem to be in reasonably good condition; how the building might be shown in the future; what part it might play in future plans for developing tourism in the county; clarifying the questions of public access to the building; and how to shape interpretation of the history it embodied - social, commercial, technological.

In other words, MCHS needs to set goals - "Decide what you want to do and then put your plan together with discreet steps. This will then provide a road map for what grants to go after and when."

The State Commission on Tourism will provide some help for future marketing. And as far as access is concerned there will surely be opportunities to work out easements with adjacent property owners - the major ones of which are the County/VDOT and MCVIC.

In response to questions about moving the store at some point in the future, Randy stated that unless there was a compelling reason for its move, there would be a risk of losing the State and National listings. This would weaken the society's case in its application to funding agencies. It was the DHR's position that moving the store was acceptable only if it would otherwise be destroyed.

Among future funding sources, we should put at or near the top of our list the Virginia General Assembly's Grants for Historic Properties. In normal economic times, these generally ranged from \$10k - \$250k. MCHS applications would greatly benefit from the vigorous support of Mathews' state delegate and senator.

It will probably be a couple of years before General Assembly funds become available again, but MCHS might elect to submit an application in the meantime, so that it is in line when money does flow again.

These grants could apply to a wide range of projects - dendrochronology, for example, to determine the exact date of the building and, hopefully, the wings (dendrochronology would also help determine the date of the adjacent Sibley's "store room"); work to stabilize the structure; work to improve the site for public access; help for interpretive planning; and so on.

Pam circulated a multi-page listing of other, appropriate funding sources for the future. Dee Lawson offered to make a Xerox copy for central reference.

Other likely sources would include FTEA-LU (sp?), which are Federal Transportation-based projects; NPS Chesapeake Gateways program for matching-funds prospects; American Express for a project like purchasing the property on which the building stands, among others.

To increase our prospects of successful funding in the future, it might be helpful to link, or somehow partner, the old store with future developments in the "Courthouse Green" project; and with the MCVIC project. This is something the Board would have to explore and decide.

Pam stated that ordinances relative to the historic district will become necessary, and referenced Cape Charles as a successful example recently, both in terms of ordinance and outside funding.

Discussions then focused on how MCHS might show and interpret the store in the future. Randy and Pam assured the group that computerized “virtual” tours of the building and site would be more in tune with modern audiences and greatly more cost-effective than actual physical changes to the building and site.

Randy suggested such visual devices as overlapping layers corresponding to the development over time of the site and the structure, all linked to the succession of owners; the range of the store’s functions and operations; and a variety of lively drawings showing the building inside and out, top and bottom, detail and overall.

Randy also introduced the topic of tax credits as a future source of revenue. This needs to be explored further.

It is clear that in order to maximize future funding opportunities MCHS will have to develop an overall plan for the next 2-5 years for the store. This will take time and necessitate Board involvement and ultimately decision-making. Initial steps to plan for the launching of this planning process should be taken soon.

Randy stressed again how wise MCHS was to get the store listed on both State and National Registers. Once accomplished, these listings are a major plus for the institution, both locally and nationally.

On the subject of marketing the historic resources of this area, MCHS might also wish to partner with Gloucester County. Randy and Pam had heard, for example, of an old store on Ware Neck that is being restored.

Finally, the name of author and scholar Carolyn Keen, who is engaged in a study of colonial stores south of the James River, was introduced as a future source of information.

Graham Hood, Terry Pletcher, and Dee Lawson 1.18.09