

# The Ward-Whidden House

## Residential Conversion

411 The Hill,  
Portsmouth, NH



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### **Introduction**

The Ward Whidden House was built circa 1730 by Michael Whidden Jr. a local “joiner” who is accredited for much of its Georgian woodwork. Whidden used this house as an example to showcase his fine carpentry. The property was first recognized for its historic significance in the 1930s when the Historic American Buildings Survey made drawings and took photographs of its architectural features. The building was later moved from Deer Street to its current location of 411 The Hill on High Street in the 70s to preserve its history. This property has been preserved significantly over its 300-year lifetime by its owners and the town of Portsmouth. Today documentation of the historic building from the 1930’s is archived at the New Hampshire State Historic Preservation Office in Concord.

Currently the property is vacant and is zoned for commercial use with residential usage on the second floor only. According to city ordinance, requirements to add residential use to the property such as a second-floor apartment will require a sprinkler system and fire alarm system. This creates a **Hardship**, as a sprinkler system will likely ruin the historic integrity of the building. The building codes for sprinkler systems require installation of steel piping and orange CPVC piping which will interfere with the original crown molding and other Historical trim work which is the hallmark of this property. Additionally, all interior doors will have to be replaced with fire-rated doors, further taking away the historical charm of the building. On top of this we will have to add a fire alarm panel, horns, strobes and exit signs in the building. We have added appendices to show existing trim work and examples of sprinkler systems installed in similar buildings.

Our proposed solution is a variance to allow for residential use on the first floor and therefore give us the ability to convert the house to a single-family home as it originally was built. As a single-family home, we can preserve the Historical character of the house. It is important to note that the properties across the street are mostly all residential, making it an appropriate location for more housing in downtown Portsmouth.

### **Historic Significance**

The building has many significant historical features many of which were documented by the University of New Hampshire and the Historical American Buildings Society in the 1930's. Many of these drawings are shown below and appendix 1. Figures 1 and 2 show the staircase where majority of historic trim remains today. The trim depicted by the HABS drawings are still present in the building and are likely original. This includes handcrafted rosettes which surround the stairwell window. Much of this woodwork is often accredited to Micheal Whidden Jr. and may be up to 300 years old. The interior of the building has a deep history in its architecture and appearance which should be preserved.



Figure 1. Stairwell facing South

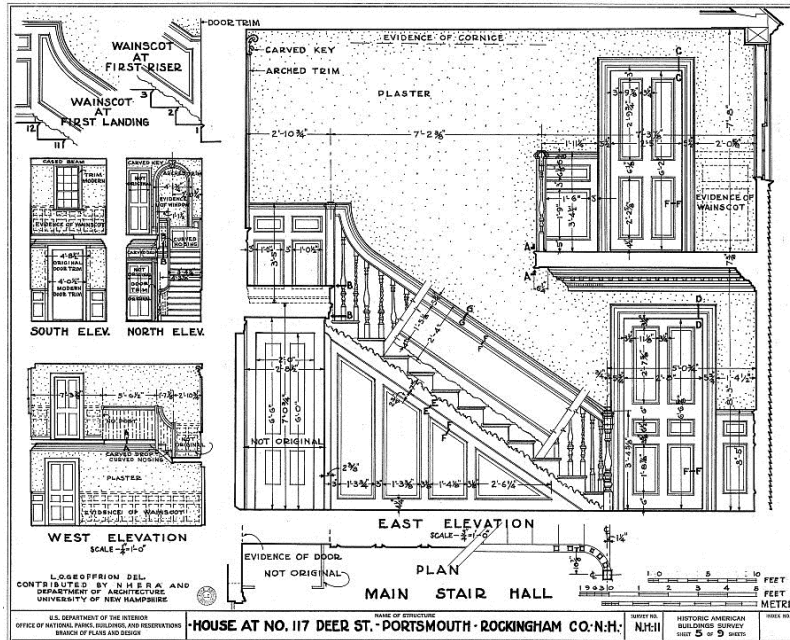


Figure 2. HABS Stair Elevation

Original wainscoting and crown molding is present throughout the hallway and stairwell of the house.



Figure 3. Downstairs Woodwork



## The Impact of Sprinkler Systems

The following figures 6 and 7 demonstrate the substantial visual impact of fire sprinkler system installation on an existing building. These sprinkler systems were installed in a converted multifamily building which involved using bright orange CPVC piping. Installation of these pipes to an old building will involve removal of historic trim and or blocking this trim with the piping. This would have significant impact on the historical aesthetic of the house.



Figure 6. Orange CPVC Piping





Figure 7. Fire Alarm Panel



**Variance Points:**

10.233.21 The variance will not be contrary to the public interest;

**Residential usage on the first floor of this building will not be contrary to the public interest as all of the buildings directly across the street have residential use on the first floor and actually most are completely residential.**

10.233.22 The spirit of the Ordinance will be observed;

**Residential usage on the first floor observes the Ordinance as building directly abuts other residential buildings and can be seen as an extension of the usage on the other side of the street.**

10.233.23 Substantial justice will be done;

**Residential usage on the first floor will help with the shortage of housing in the area vs the glut of office space which is not in demand.**

**Residential use on the first floor would allow for a single family dwelling which does not trigger the requirement for a sprinkler system thus maintaining the character of this 300 year old gem.**

10.233.24 The values of surrounding properties will not be diminished;

**Residential usage in Portsmouth has significantly more value than office space based on demand**

10.233.25 Literal enforcement of the provisions of the Ordinance would result in an unnecessary hardship.

**Enforcement would result in a hardship because without the variance, the ordinance only allows for an apartment upstairs which triggers the Building codes for change of use with the fire department. This would require us to install a Sprinkler system in the building which would result in a significant change to the historical nature of the interior of the building. Residential use on the first floor would allow for a single family dwelling which does not trigger the requirement for a sprinkler system**

## References

NH-11 Michael Whidden House, 117 Deer Street, Portsmouth, WPA Historic American Buildings Survey of New Hampshire Papers, 1935-1941, MC 33, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

NH-11 Michael Whidden House at 117 Deer Street, Portsmouth, Rockingham County, WPA Historic American Buildings Survey of New Hampshire Papers, 1935-1941, MC 33, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

WPA Historic American Buildings Survey of New Hampshire Papers, 1935-1941. University of New Hampshire Library. <https://library.unh.edu/find/archives/collections/wpa-historic-american-buildings-survey-new-hampshire-papers-1935-1941#series-2>.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. HABS Document 1971