

# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES INC.



Assessment of Project Data and Historic Resources  
Underhill Farm Site  
370 Underhill Road  
Yorktown Heights, New York

April 12, 2023

## **Introduction**

Historical Perspectives, Inc. (HPI) specializes in Cultural Resource Evaluations in the Lower Hudson Valley and Western Connecticut areas. The firm has been in business for 40 years with numerous on-call and renewed contracts that testify to repeated successful performances. In 2022 HPI was selected to provide the Town of Yorktown with Historic Resource consulting services that includes the assessment of projects that are undergoing application review. The team assembled to review the current Underhill Farm project included a historian/historical archaeologist, an architectural historian, and a cultural heritage/historic preservation professional with years of experience reviewing National Register nominations, visual impacts, structural assessments, and cultural resources assessments.

In 2020, prior to the bankruptcy by the former owner/occupant, Soundview Academy, the Underhill Farm complex did not have a local protective covenant on any part of its 13+ acres; such local ordinances often have more restrictive powers and preservation controls. An application for State/National Register Eligibility (S/NRE) determination was not filed until April of 2021, after the Hudson Valley Cultural Resource Consultants (HVCRC) was in correspondence with OPRHP about the project development plans (February 2021). However, such NRE status does not necessarily convey automatic protections, only consideration of potential “effects” under Section 106 if federal monies, permits, and/or licenses are involved. Similarly, SNR considerations under SEQR Section 14.09 require state agencies to define project “impacts” when state agencies, such as the DEC, are involved. The DEC will consult with and follow the Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation’s (OPRHP) lead on proposed development plans if historic or precontact resources of significance are identified. As has often happened in communities and cities across America, the loss of a historic home, a precontact sacred site, or a mill complex, occurred because the property was not protected through a local ordinance. The current Underhill Farm property, although well-known to the community, was not specifically identified as S/N Register eligible in the 2006 Historic Resource Survey.

Following the closure of the Soundview Academy, a developer has stepped forward to work within the new Planned Design District Overlay Zone (overlay zone) to preserve and restore the main domestic structure and service tunnels, the major egress, the fencing and gates, the ice pond, and a sizeable portion of street frontage, which many consider a positive outcome for the main resource and the community.

John Tegeder and Robyn Steinberg (both of the Town of Yorktown Planning Department) have maintained an extensive compilation of the numerous public interactions and copious development

team submissions, including Planning Board Meeting Minutes, copies of presentations by both the development team and the public, email chains, correspondence, and technical reports. The voluminous files collected contain a wealth of data, including on the many public meetings held and the individuals who attended. Also, among the compiled information is the *Phase 1A Literature Search and Sensitivity Assessment & Phase 1B Archaeological Field Reconnaissance Survey* (HVCRC January 2021), the *Historic Buildings Assessment* (HVCRC February 2021), and the *Alternatives Analysis* (HVCRC July 2021). HPI reviewed these files and completed a site visit in March 2023.

## Comments

### 1) Archaeology

The Phase 1 Report, which included both the initial Phase IA cultural resources assessment and the Phase IB field testing, was submitted to OPRHP for review. This was accepted on April 27, 2021. Subsequent to that submission, there have been some concerns raised by the public as to the completeness of the research and Hudson Valley Cultural Resource Consultants, Ltd. (HVCRC) (later Hudson Cultural Services [HCS]) has responded to many of them. These responses are found in multiple letters and in the EAF and in the Expanded EAF. It is our recommendation that all the responses prepared by HVCRC be compiled into one document and submitted as an addendum to the Phase IA/IB report that will become part of the permanent public record.

During archaeological testing, it is a fairly routine occurrence to have refusals due to roots and rock obstructions, and off-sets due to standing water, steep slopes, pavement or disturbed soils. We recommend that the field map be amended to include these simple notations and the field-testing graphic should generally be populated with notations such as “bedrock”, “standing water”, “boulder field”, “disturbed”, etc., which would help the reader understand the field conditions and final total number of viable test locations. We recommend that the amended field-testing map be included with the addendum.

One area of archaeological concern that we recommend be included in the LOR is the examination of the site for domestic shaft features. Historic residences of the Underhill Farm period would naturally have shaft features within the domestic yard area (privies, cisterns, and wells). Historical archaeological reports are often dependent on the wealth of artifacts that can be collected from the base of these abandoned shaft features, often referred to as “time capsules.” This is a well-known fact and HVCRC did acknowledge this recovery pattern by placing the STs around the main house at a reduced interval. Tests were also conducted around the perimeter of the foundations of some of the buildings to “identify a builder’s trench or historic midden.”

However, one step further is to undertake the investigation of additional judgmental STs and/or to recommend archaeological monitoring for the shaft features that may have been missed in the initial ST testing, as the landscaping/construction activities are initiated in the immediate vicinity of the main house. As noted, the entire 13 acres does not need further fieldwork; but there are general guidelines that would dictate the wisest choice of possible shaft feature locations. Recoveries from a shaft feature might provide more information on the past

occupants as well as artifacts for the “historic exhibit” noted in the LOR. Such a collection would also provide an excellent educational tool for the local school system.

## 2) Historical Research

The Underhill Farm site is well-known in Yorktown and Westchester County, both by the public and local historians. We recommend that a more detailed history of the site and the occupants of the site be prepared and included in the public addendum to the Phase IA/IB report. It is possible that HVCRC/ HCS has already accumulated this data, as some of this information was included in the varied responses to public comments. It is our recommendation that all the historical background material and the responses to local history questions be combined in the addendum report for submission to OPRHP.

Because this site is important to the overall history of the community, we recommend that local historians and organizations, the YHPC, or the Yorktown Historical Society be contacted for any pertinent information that they might have regarding the site, the occupants of the site, or the age/function of any of the buildings. This will help with planning during next phases of development.

Yorktown was an early colonial community that experienced much activity during the Revolutionary War. Concern was expressed by the public that the HVCRC study did not acknowledge this history and that possible battles and/or Rochambeau Trail encampments were in the immediate Underhill Farm area. HVCRC responded with comments in letters and the expanded EAF, and that information should be incorporated in the addendum to the Phase I report on CRIS.

Another topic of interest to local history is the relationship between the Underhill and Kear Families. It is known that Henry Kear served as foreman of the estate when Edward Underhill was owner and that Henry’s son, Edward Kear, was a significant person in Yorktown, serving as Town Clerk, Justice of the Peace, and Town Supervisor. This information should be included in the recommended addendum report.

## 3) Building(s) Assessment

In the OPRHP eligibility determination (5/26/21), the totality of the complex was noted as important and contributing to the overall significance of a 13-acre farm, with the period of significance identified as 1828-1888. The proposed development, which fits within a new invigorating overlay zone, has attempted to balance the housing and retail needs of the community and parking facilities for the new senior center, as well as maintain major features of the Farm: the public intersection gates, the entrance drive, the mansion house and underground cellars, and the pond. However, the proposed development scenario also includes the demolition or removal of the remainder of the buildings that are currently within the Underhill Farm complex.

The main Underhill house, also known as *Floral Villa*, will be preserved and rehabilitated as part of the project. To alleviate public concerns, it is recommended that the project sponsor retain and work with a preservation architect to ensure a sensitive and appropriate rehabilitation, which is a goal of the overlay district. Though the original section of the building, constructed by

Abraham Underhill, dates from the Federal period, OPRHP's Eligibility Determination referred to the building as an "intact example of a Federal style building adapted to the Italianate style." When the building was expanded by his son, Edward Underhill (date unknown, but between 1841 and 1881), it was executed in the Italianate style, and the exterior elements of the Federal section were modified and updated in the Italianate style to match architectural elements of the new section. The exterior should be restored to maintain the Italianate-era construction and updating of the home as Floral Villa. The interior of the section constructed by Abraham Underhill, appears little modified by Edward, save for openings (likely at existing windows or exterior doors) to the new section. Consequently, a recommendation is to preserve the interior finishes, which would retain the existing historic elements that reflect the different building periods.

The dominance of the Mansion House will be compromised by the development plans as currently planned and drafted. S/NR eligibility is dependent on a number of characteristics, including setting and associations, which will be diminished by the development plan.

The ancillary buildings will be removed or demolished to make way for the new housing and retail space, resulting in the loss of historic setting of the farm complex. Not all of these buildings date to the time of significance (1828-1888) as identified by OPRHP. Further, two ancillary buildings were demolished in the last few years. The extant buildings, as per HVCRC alphabetical designations, and their various functions over time include:

- Summer Kitchen/Root Cellar/Storage/Soundview Design Studio (Building B)
- Residential Cottage/ Soundview Middle School Building (Building C)
- Carriage house/Horse Barn/Soundview Science building (Building E)
- Carpenters Workshop/storage barn/Soundview Storage (Building G)
- Chapel/Soundview Music Conservatory (Building H)
- Residential Cottage/Soundview Playhouse (Building I)
- Residential Cottage (Building J)

HVCRC recommended in the Historic Buildings Assessment (2/2021) and/or the Alternatives Analysis Report (7/2021) that additional documentation of the buildings to be demolished be completed; it is assumed that an architectural historian will assist with this documentation. This recommendation, along with several others, were included in a January 2022 Draft Letter of Resolution (LOR) for the project. The Draft LOR specifically includes the preparation of a comprehensive Documentation Report following OPRHP's Standards. HPI strongly agrees with this recommendation.

Most of the above buildings have been significantly altered in the past and that information should be included in the Documentation Report. HPI also recommends that as part of the assessment, the structural integrity of the buildings be determined by a qualified engineer or architect. This will help to determine and/or confirm if any of the buildings are viable for relocation. While all the buildings should be documented, particular attention should be given to the three buildings (Buildings B, E, and G) that were identified as dating to period of significance (1828-1888) for S/N Register eligibility.

### *Loss of Setting and Ancillary Buildings*

To mitigate the loss of the setting and the ancillary buildings, OPRHP has stipulated that the developer provide “interpretive signage conveying the history of the property and its buildings.” To assist in creating that signage and establishing a permanent record of the Underhill Farm complex prior to demolition, the following documentation is recommended.

Photographic documentation of each elevation of the ancillary buildings, per Rhodes letter from OPRHP dated December 9, 2021 (LOR dated January 22, 2022---also referenced as Exhibit A).

Baseline measurement (not measured drawings), documenting dimensions of the buildings.

Basic historical documentation to augment the information provided in the HVCRC Historic Buildings Assessment:

- Review of Census records from 1820 through 1900 to get a sense of how many residents lived at the farm over time.
- Review of available archives (Yorktown Historical Society and Westchester County Historical Society) of historic photographs and/or images of the property.
- Review of available local histories and family histories for information on the farm.

HPI also recommends the following for consideration:

- The planned parking in front (south) of the main house should be moved to another location. This would maintain the appearance and setting of the front façade and yard along Underhill Road. The possible change to the parking location in front of the main house was also noted in a letter from HVCRC to OPRHP on 10/1/2021, but if this change was made, it is not reflected in the plans that were shared with HPI.
- The extension of the eastern wing of the large residential structure, with retail at grade, that runs parallel to Saw Mill River Road should be reduced or set back, if at all possible. This residential building appears to intrude into the visual and contextual space of the main house.

#### 4) The Letter of Resolution (LOR)

The Underhill Farm sequence of local and state submissions, hearings, and public comments on the Phase I cultural resource reports, the Alternatives Analysis (AA), and the Draft LOR, appear to be somewhat out of the normal cycle. Additional information and revisions have been filed with both the town and state and presented at public meetings, creating a plethora of designs and schematics that are not necessarily duplicative as the plans have evolved. It must be recognized that each development project is organic and agencies, lawyers, owners, and consultants attempt to fulfill various obligations in a fairly fluid schedule.

In a letter dated 10/29/21 D. Rohde at OPRHP recommended a series of stipulations be included in the future LOR for the project. Subsequently, the Draft LOR between the New York State Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), the New York State Department of Conservation (DEC), and the Developer was prepared on January 24, 2022. The LOR included many of the stipulations recommended by Rohde.

The current Draft LOR includes several stipulations about the documentation and potential salvage of the ancillary buildings. This might be an area where the public could be involved with the final dispersal or donation of salvageable buildings or specific architectural elements.

It is recommended that a meeting with the Planning Department and the OPRHP should be conducted to ensure that an updated DRAFT LOR correctly reflects the most current development plans, the considerations of each agency, and represents input on file from the public. This will help establish a clear understanding of the historic resources that can be preserved and/or appropriately documented during the overall project as it moves forward.

In this memorandum, HPI has recommended some additional steps be conducted including:

- The investigation of additional judgmental STs and/or archaeological monitoring for historical shaft features, as the landscaping/construction activities are initiated in the immediate vicinity of the main house.
- Updating the field map for the site to include notations on the locations where testing could not be completed.
- Combining all of the responses made by HVCRC to questions from the public on historic research, along with any additional data potentially collected during the above recommended testing/monitoring, into an addendum to the HVCRC Phase IA/IB Study report on the site.
- Specific information to include when the documentation of the ancillary buildings is completed, including basic historical data collection and the documentation of the structures as recommended by OPRHP.
- The relocation of the parking from the front of the Main House to help maintain the appearance and setting of the historic building.
- The reduction of the eastern wing of the proposed residential/commercial structure to also help maintain the appearance and setting of the historic building.
- Input from the public on the final dispersal/donation of any salvageable buildings or architectural elements.
- Confirming that the final LOR represents what OPRHP and all parties have agreed to as the project moves forward.

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