

Ramifications of Permit to Demolish

by

John Samuel Graves, III

There are no values, no persons, and no “contributing historic structures” that will not be sacrificed on the alter of fear and/or greed. The true facts about the recent decision to demolish the Graves House, and the aftermath of the decision, all hinge on fear—and its corollaries, ignorance, apathy and sloth—and the greed of “developers” and “preservationists in sheep's clothing.” Once all those were in place, and the deed was done, few if any had the courage to openly admit the folly of the decision, let alone the determination to do something really substantial about reversing the decision.

Listed below as briefly as possible are the most salient facts about the Graves House that the City of Bluffton either did not know, or chose to ignore, when it allowed the petition to abolish the Graves House to be presented to the BHPC.

1. The Graves House was marketed and sold with the clear understanding that it was a contributing structure in the Bluffton Historic Preservation District.
2. The purchasers, Mr. Bryan McClure and Mr. Michael Hahn, knew that the Graves House “could not be torn down and must be restored,” and that it was protected by the codes and principles of Bluffton’s Old Town National Register Historic Preservation District.
3. The purchasers, Mr. Bryan McClure and Mr. Michael Hahn, to allow for restoration, had negotiated a radically reduced price with the Graves family, and had agreed to restore the Graves House.
4. Everyone knew, both the buyers and the sellers, that the Graves House needed serious repair, but that it was not beyond restoration.
5. By allowing the back 1/3 of the lot to be subdivided off and sold separately there would have been ample opportunity to do a cost effective restoration on the house.
6. By seeking, and being granted, the demolition of the Graves House Mr. Bryan McClure, Mr. Michael Hahn, and the Bluffton United Methodist Church have caused permanent and irreparable damage to the Graves Family, the town of Bluffton and its Historic Preservation District.
7. By seeking, and being granted, the demolition of the Graves House Mr. Bryan McClure and Mr. Michael Hahn have been permitted to purchase a protected, contributing structure from owners who were playing by all the rules, strip the home of its protected status, and flip the land beneath it for egregious profit without the slightest care about the historical or emotional values inherent in the structure itself. Such actions should be prohibited by town ordinance. This project was solely about making a lot of money, and the town of Bluffton, through the action of the BHPC, has allowed itself to be deeply complicit in accomplishing the end goals of Mr. McClure and Mr. Hahn, and to ignore the long term goals of the Bluffton Historic Preservation District.
8. Because of how the Graves House was sold the petition to demolish the Graves House should never have been allowed to come before the BHPC. On the contrary, the city should have required Mr. McClure and Mr. Hahn to stabilize the Graves House immediately upon their purchase of the property rather than let it

- deteriorate further. They should also have been given a specific time-frame to begin their restoration or place it back on the market as a protected property. The need for repair and stabilization is not a sufficient reason to destroy an historic structure! Most such structures desperately need attention.
9. The Bluffton Historic Preservation Commission completely ignored the town's own Staff Report that opposed demolition, instead preferring to take the opinions of paid "professionals" that the petitioners for the permit to demolish brought to the meeting! (See our article Katie Woodruff and the Staff Report on this website.)
 10. Absolutely unique and irreplaceable Bluffton history has been lost with the destruction of the Graves house! It is literally unimaginable that a town that professes to care about its Historic Preservation District would even consider allowing what has just taken place! (Please read A Short History of the Graves House and Why a Contributing Structure? posted on this website.)
 11. No restoration contractors were present in an official capacity to testify to the restorability of the Graves House. I have been in the construction business for over 30 years and I can unequivocally state that the Graves House is restorable, and it certainly would not cost the \$800,000 thrown out in the BHPC meeting on May 2, 2012, unless someone tried to turn it into something it never was, like a light commercial structure complete with fire retardant sheet rock and a sprinkler system, etc. Seven Oaks, the historic home across the street from the Graves House, was in much worse condition before it was restored. As to the rear addition on the Graves House, everyone, including the city in its staff report, agreed that it should be removed. It never was part of the original structure in the first place. Furthermore, the Graves House could be repositioned on the lot during its stabilization and restoration. This sort of thing is done all the time on restoration projects. (One of the stated reasons that the Bluffton United Methodist Church wanted to demolish the Graves House is that they wanted to place their new structure in a new location on the lot.)
 12. The last family owners of the Graves house, myself and my cousin Beverly Odom, were never contacted by the city about the May 2 BHPC meeting, nor asked to prepare and present, in a timely manner, their side of the Graves House story—after the Graves family owned it for over 100 years! Nor were they given the opportunity to have paid counsel at the meeting to offer opposing views to the petitioners's paid lawyer and his inflammatory rhetoric about why the Graves House needed to come down. This sad fact gives a strong indication that the town has little respect or regard for the Bluffton families that originally owned these properties—and less for the structures themselves.
 13. The president of the Bluffton Historic Preservation Society voted for demolition in direct violation of a previous vote taken by his board against demolition. This should be against the bylaws of the BHPS. The board should ask for his resignation.
 14. One of the saddest facts about the whole push to have the Graves House destroyed was that the Bluffton United Methodist Church was a prime mover in the process. Like the Graves House, the Bluffton United Methodist Church is also a contributing structure, yet for very self serving reasons they chose to be party to

the destruction on one of the most unique—and salvageable—old homes in Bluffton's Historic District! It was disgraceful behavior for a church.

It is a great sadness that so many people, including some members of the BHPC, the board of the Bluffton Historic Preservation Society, the town government, and ordinary townspeople, clearly saw the truth about what happened to the Graves House, but few were equipped to deal effectively in bringing swift justice by getting the decision to demolish overturned in a timely manner. Apparently, no “fix” for the Graves House disaster will be forthcoming from the governing body of Bluffton. The leadership of the town apparently is content with trying to fix codes, ordinances, etc. to prevent such an unhappy event from happening again, but no one seriously is considering trying to save the Graves House.

Yet, even now, there are several ways to save the Graves House. But time is certainly running out! Again: apathy and fear! All it would take would be the political will to right a wrong. Below are several suggestions:

1. A coalition of all concerned with saving the Graves House could make a concerted effort to approach the Bluffton United Methodist Church with alternatives to demolition, including help in raising the funds necessary to make a restoration possible. There are grants and private funds available. Even the town of Bluffton might be willing to participate on some level.
2. The city could simply request that the Bluffton Historic Preservation Commission reconsider its decision. The South Carolina Supreme Court has previously held in *Bennett v. City of Clemson*, 293 SC 64, 358 S.E.2d 707 (1987), that absent a provision in the local ordinance prohibiting a municipality from reviewing an administrative decision, the municipality had the right to review/reconsider its decision "where there is justification and good cause; i.e., newly discovered evidence, fraud, surprise, mistake, inadvertence or change in conditions." Certainly, some very important evidence was not presented at the fateful May 2 meeting of the BHPC, and fraud was certainly committed against the Graves family and the city of Bluffton.