

THE 1863 CAPTAIN TYSON HOUSE OF ROCHELLE PARK:

PRE-PURCHASE HISTORY AND POST-PURCHASE GOALS

*By Committeeman Joseph Scarpa
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INTRODUCTION

Last year, as Rochelle Park celebrated its 145th Anniversary, it was a good time to look back at the history of the Township that we call home. Reminders of the past often help us better understand where we've been, where we are, and where we're going. Unfortunately, many interesting and important pieces of Rochelle Park history are simply no longer with us. There was, at one time, a small airport here and a trolley line. The original Municipal Building, once the Township's schoolhouse, was torn down. The old Sacred Heart Church was demolished, as were two landmark restaurants: the beautiful Swiss Chalet and The Blue Swan Inn with its Bavarian beer garden.

However, in 2014, when there was an opportunity to save one of the most unique homes not only in Rochelle Park, but in all of Bergen County, the governing body decided to do so. Not because it was necessarily the most *popular* thing to do, but because saving the Captain Tyson House was the *right* thing to do. As one resident put it, "once that house is gone, it's gone forever." I firmly believe that people, events and unique buildings are what make a community special -- and the Captain Tyson House is no exception. It is a building that is truly an architectural treasure.

As someone who has had the fortunate opportunity to travel to over 50 countries and over 40 states, I have seen historic homes and buildings saved all over the world and across our great nation. It saddens me, however, that some have a callous disregard for every old structure, for anything historic, or for preserving open space. For some, it is all about getting the wrecking ball or chain saws ready, building new developments, and getting ratables. With that philosophy, there would be no taxpayer-funded National Park System and Smithsonian Museums, and no privately-funded historic sites such as Colonial Williamsburg and Mount Vernon for anyone to enjoy.

Let me clearly state, I have no ulterior motive other than a vision to move forward with part of our township's storied past, and take action to make the Captain's House the "crown jewel" of Rochelle Park.

HISTORY OF THE CAPTAIN TYSON HOUSE

This outstanding Italianate villa was built in 1863-64 for Captain William Tyson, an owner of sailing ships in New York City. This, of course, was during the time of America's brutal Civil War. In fact, the Captain's House even predates the founding of Rochelle Park (1871).

While there are many Dutch stone homes throughout Bergen County, including one in Rochelle Park and at least two in Maywood, there is no better example of Italianate architecture anywhere in Bergen County. That is not my opinion; it is the opinion of experts from the Bergen County Division of Cultural and Historic Affairs.

Entering this beautiful house today is like taking a step back in time. The interior is amazingly unaltered. It features natural gas brass chandeliers, a grand staircase in the entrance foyer, large pier mirrors, floor-to-ceiling windows to let in natural light, and original gas sconces. Plus, there's a central cupola, "widow's walk," and an ornately detailed front porch. Even though it is close to Route 17, you can barely hear any highway noise because of the house's excellent construction. The aforementioned grand staircase is so solidly constructed, the stairs do not even creak when you walk on them.

Though the Captain died in 1884, his mansion lives on. Several owners later, after it was most recently put up for sale, the Rochelle Park Township Committee purchased the Captain's House in 2014.

THE PURCHASE

The Township Committee used capital surplus funds to purchase the Captain's House. It did not require raising any new tax dollars. The Captain's House was saved from demolition, and will be a place for the people of Rochelle Park and from around Bergen County to visit and enjoy for many more years to come.

All sitting Committee members in 2014, Frank Valenzuela, Michael Kazimir, Jayme Ouellette, Jay Kovalcik and myself, voted to purchase the Captain's House. There was a consensus that preserving the Captain's House was more beneficial to Rochelle Park, rather

than the construction of five or so townhouses or condos cramped onto a parcel of land abutting a state highway and county road.

From a property tax standpoint, two of the last three years since the purchase of the Captain's House, despite dire predictions of financial disaster, there have been no property tax increases on the municipal portion of local tax bills.

SUGGESTED USES:

Main House, General Recommendations

Utilize the Township Architect to draw up specifications for work to be done -- first on the first floor, then on the second floor. Name specific rooms after any contractor who wishes to donate his/her work. First floor work will include: refinishing brass lighting fixtures, making necessary repairs to walls and moldings, replacing damaged wallpaper with like wallpaper, painting walls/ceilings, repairing/refinishing wood flooring or retiling/re-carpeting where appropriate, improving access with ADA first floor entrance ramp and providing for an ADA restroom (utilize CD grants), purchasing appropriate window treatments and furniture, making repairs to gain access to the cupola.

First floor, right front room

Restore as a living room using period furniture

First floor, right rear room

Utilize as a small meeting room or lecture area or for presentations; can expand into living room area for any overflow

First floor, left front room

Restore as a dining room or reception room with period furniture

First floor, left rear room

Establish as a small museum on the history of Rochelle Park. Include some permanent displays and some rotating displays that can enable any residents to show off their collections or artistic abilities such as painting or photography

Kitchen

Upgrade the kitchen with modern appliances for catered events

First floor, general

The entire first floor can be opened/rented for public or private events, such as fundraisers for non-profits or civil weddings ceremonies and small receptions. It can also be decorated for various holiday activities including Christmas

Second floor, general

The entire second floor can be converted to accommodate auxiliary township offices during State of Emergencies when flooding causes the evacuation of 151 West Passaic Street. This has happened on several occasions including 1999, 2007 and 2011. These auxiliary offices will enable a continuity of services and will avoid spending money on temporary trailers or rental of office space, as has happened in the past.

Barn/garage

Repurpose to use as the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) Center. The Rochelle Park OEM currently operates from the Fire House, a structure that is threatened by flooding during annual tropical storms and hurricanes. The Captain's House location takes the OEM clearly out of the flood zone and places it in an area with easy access to Passaic Street and Route 17.

Grounds/exterior

Finish painting the exterior of the Captain's House. Install a "Welcome to Rochelle Park" on the grounds, as there is no welcome sign at that entranceway into the township. Install a wood-carved "Captain Tyson House" sign on the grounds as well. A wood ranch fence should be installed extending from the stone pillars by the driveway. Matching gates should be installed at the end of each U-turn driveway. The driveway should be paved for easy accessibility, cleaning, plowing, etc. Appropriate plantings and ground lighting should be installed in the front. A rose garden should be planted on the right side of the home, along with the installation of a gazebo for wedding photo shoots. The center rear and center right of the backyard of the house can be a butterfly or community garden, as other municipalities have done. Benches can be appropriately placed throughout. Picnic tables, for visitors including Midland School children, can be installed. Open space grants can be obtained for these items. The left rear of the property can be used as a designated parking area, using macadam or crushed stone. Haunted hayrides can be held on the grounds at night during Halloween.

FUNDING

The Captain's House is eligible for different grants as noted above. There have also been nearly \$10,000 in private donations received thus far; additional private donations can be solicited via mail or at fundraising events held on-site. User fees can be charged for weddings and groups who use the facility. Other funding would come from the operating budget of the municipal budget and bonding, just as with other township facilities.

TRUSTEES

Establish a volunteer Board of Trustees of 5-9 members -- specifically for the Captain Tyson House -- from the list of approximately 20 people who expressed interest in volunteering. They would work with the Township Committee liaison, Township Administrator and Township Architect (and anyone else who wants to successfully complete the plans set forth) to make the upgraded Captain's House and grounds something the people of Rochelle Park will be proud of.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob Schmitt", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.