

LOCAL

'It's such a shame': Demolition of historic Tiverton farmhouse sparks outrage. Here's why.



[Antonia Noori Farzan](#)

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This story was updated because an earlier version included an inaccuracy.

TIVERTON – The demolition of one of the most iconic and historic properties in town is sparking outrage and calls for stricter protections.

As the Sakonnet Times first reported, the Abraham Brown House was unceremoniously torn down on Dec. 18, shocking local residents and preservationists. Built before the American Revolution, it was also known as the Lafayette House because it housed the Marquis de Lafayette during the 1778 Battle of Rhode Island.

"Everyone I've talked to is shocked," said Susan Anderson, a member of the Tiverton Historic Preservation Advisory Board. "This is such a landmark."

Owner David M. Rose, who indicated that he planned to do the demolition work himself when he applied for a permit, did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Located at 3118 Main Road, the 18th-century farmhouse was a familiar sight for visitors passing by on their way to Tiverton Four Corners. Surrounded by open fields and a sign advertising "Hay for Sale" – sometimes amended with a smaller sign stating, "No hay" – its white clapboard façade and fieldstone foundation was reminiscent of an Andrew Wyeth painting.

"Tiverton lost a valuable piece of history and a valuable asset to our town," resident Zachary Guerette wrote in a letter to the Times. "Surely locals would stand around and cheer if Four Corners still held the town whipping post."

Demolition application was altered

Property records indicate that the Abraham Brown House, which sat on nearly 35 acres of land, was originally built in 1760.

However, a list of Tiverton's historic buildings that was compiled by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission and Tiverton Historic Preservation Advisory Board suggests that it actually dates back to 1735 and was expanded over the years with additions.

Records show that Rose applied for a demolition permit on Aug. 29, answering "no" when asked if the property was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Register or the Tiverton Register of Historic Places. That permit was granted on Oct. 21.

On Dec. 23, after the farmhouse was torn down, the Sakonnet Times reported that it had, in fact, been listed on Tiverton's list of historic properties.

The next day, the answer to the question about historic register status was belatedly changed to "yes."

Priscilla Resendes, a clerk in Tiverton's building and code enforcement department, told the Times that she'd gone back and altered Rose's online permit application. The answer was subsequently changed back to "no."

Rose was wrong, but Tiverton officials should have checked to see if the address was on the historic properties list, Anderson said. Local ordinances would then have required a mandatory 90-day waiting period before the town could issue a demolition permit.

Tiverton Police Chief Patrick Jones, who is serving as interim town administrator, did not return phone calls seeking comment.

The demolition permit was signed by building official John M. Hoyle Jr. According to the Times, Hoyle has been on leave for unspecified reasons since the first week of December, when Jones took over as interim town administrator.

Advisory board proposed tightening historic protections, but changes never took effect

Several years ago, another Colonial-era Tiverton farmhouse was lost to the wrecking ball to make room for a 15-acre solar array at historic Wingover Farm.

In response, the Tiverton Historic Preservation Advisory Board suggested increasing the demolition delay for historic buildings to six months and requiring town officials to notify them about pending applications.

But the Town Council apparently never took up the advisory board's proposal, Anderson said. As a result, board members didn't find out that Rose was seeking to demolish the Abraham Brown House until it was too late.

Anderson, who is also the outreach and education coordinator for the Tiverton Historical Society, said that she at least has photos of the interior of the Wingover farmhouse before it was destroyed.

There are no such records from the Abraham Brown House, she said. She stopped by the day after it was demolished and found hand-hewn beams and horsehair plaster reduced to piles of rubble.

"It's such a shame," she said.

The 250th anniversary of the Battle of Rhode Island is just a few years away, and the house was the last surviving piece of that history, Anderson pointed out.

"That's our only link to Lafayette, and now it's totally gone," she said.

Preservationists had plan to save historic farmhouse

Rose is no stranger to local controversy: In 2017, he allegedly hired a contractor to pour truckloads of unwashed clam shells on his family's property on Main Road, creating a crushed shell driveway that became a magnet for maggots and flies when it began to rot in the summer heat.

Neighbors complained that that the "putrid" odor was so intense that they had to hire professional cleaners to remove the smell from the upholstery inside their home. The Department of Environmental Management eventually ordered Rose to get rid of the shells.

According to the Times, the Rose family has owned the Abraham Brown House and surrounding farmland for many years. In recent years, signs posted along the roadside indicated that the property was for sale.

However, the farmhouse does not appear to have been advertised on the State-Wide Multiple Listing Service until Nov. 8, when it was listed for \$6.8 million, according to Realtor.com. That listing was removed on Dec. 20, two days after the house was demolished.

Rose hasn't publicly explained his motivation for tearing down the historic farmhouse, but residents speculate that his goal was to sell the land for development.

"It's just sheer greed, I think," Anderson said.

In a letter to the Times, a Little Compton resident identifying himself only as "B. Hagan" said that Rose was facing "stifling costs, impossible renovations and mounting safety concerns," and paying taxes on an uninhabitable building.

Hagan said that he spotted a Craigslist ad offering the farmhouse for salvage in July and began working with another, unnamed preservationist to dismantle it and reassemble it elsewhere in town.

The older portion of the building had been uninhabited and open to the elements for almost 40 years and "was rotted and beyond repair," he wrote. However, the 1810 addition could have been saved.

"Alas, it didn't happen quickly enough. ... Although the salvage process was in motion, the owner abruptly decided to demolish the house," Hagan wrote. "Perhaps that had been the intent all along?"

Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly stated that Susan Anderson said that pieces of Wingover farmhouse were saved. It has been corrected to reflect the fact that she has photos showing the interior of the farmhouse.

