

24 September 2023

To the Historic District Commission of Chestertown –

I am submitting comments on the Historic District Permit Application for the Chestertown Armory that I would like to be read at the 4 October meeting and entered into record.

Thank you –

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Mayor & Council

SEP 28 2023

Per LT

Hello. My name is Joan Elburn Farley, and I was born and raised in Chestertown/Kingstown. My father was 1SGT Edward "Ringgold" Elburn, who was the company clerk at the Chestertown Armory for many years. He landed on Omaha Beach as a medic on D-Day and served a total of 42 years in service to his country with the iconic 29<sup>th</sup> Division.

I have been following the discussions about the armory over the years with great interest. I have read the current Historic District Permit Application for the Chestertown Armory. I cannot be with you tonight, but I wish my voice to be heard.

Under "A Memorial for the Community", on page 14, it states "There is a potential to keep the armory façade intact and maintain the distinct look of the building." But on page 18 it says, "Historic resources including the stone engraving above the front entrance, the two light fixtures, and the two flag poles will be preserved." This is not quite the armory façade. Exhibit A provides documentation of the structure illustrating the site as it presently exists and any resource to be removed. The illustration on page 25 seems to indicate that the front of the armory and Elburn Hall (the drill hall) are "existing to remain." But I have been told that Washington College wants total demolition.

I defer to the comments of Thomas Kocubinski in "Fate of the Chestertown Armory Still to be Decided", Kent News, 13 Sep 2023. He is an award-winning expert in the field, and he insists it is both relevant and beneficial to weigh the hazmat costs of demolition versus repurposing. Either will have to be done very carefully with the armory's location next to extensive wetlands and the river. Where are the Chester River Keepers on this proposal?

In "Town Approves Sale of Armory to Washington College", 19 Jul 2011, "Washington College President Mitchell Reiss stated the college would be investing over \$3.5 million in the property and shouldering the environmental and legal liabilities in development." Invest and develop? They could not even flip a switch to turn on the electricity! They claim electricity running the sump pumps and ventilation would not have helped the further demise of the building. Of course, it would have helped! Any effort is better than no effort. WC also states "The (sump) pump was reported to never have operated properly" – was it ever tested to see if it would work or did the college just rely on third-party reporting? Like the electricity – it was said it had been disconnected, yet when someone flipped the switch, it came on. If the pump didn't work, why was it not repaired or replaced? You do not need to be a college graduate to understand that doing nothing would lead to further destruction.

Of particular note is the statement "Running power to the building would have done nothing to mitigate the state of contamination of the building. Maximum contamination had already happened at the time of the sale." Huh? The building did not deteriorate further between 2012 and 2023? Of course it did! Maximum contamination means the greatest contamination. The contamination has been allowed to proliferate for 11 years under the watch of the college. If the building showed maximum contamination in 2012, why did the college use it for storage?

The application says that "Federal grants would not have covered the full cost of rehabilitation of the building." Was an effort made to investigate the amount of grants available? Add the \$3.5 million slated for the property in 2012 and there would be a significant amount of funds.

Of course, the building had been in decline since well before the acquisition by Washington College. Any structure that sits unused and uncared for is expected to decline. But doing nothing to prevent additional decline is purposeful neglect.

“Conclusions reached in the environmental report have rendered any adaptive reuse of the armory unfinanceable” claims the application. Mr. Kocubinski reports that he saw challenges, but “nothing that would make me turn and run knowing the capabilities of the construction industry to rehab historic structures safely and effectively for continued use.”

As for plans for the building/site, a boutique hotel may be of use to the parents who can afford to send their children to WC but may not be affordable for average local residents. The cost of renting a conference center in the building will most likely be the same. BUT! The college has magnanimously offered the town five whole days a year to use the facility for community purposes. I guess those five days are considered the benefit to the community.

The architecture of the Chestertown armory is of noteworthy design according to the National Register. Post World War I architects welcomed the resurgence in national pride as an opportunity to visually create an Americana-style of architecture mixing gothic and art deco features to reflect a fortress for defense.

The application speaks to the intent to “capture opportunities in the interior program of the hotel to honor the military service that the Armory represents” with ideas that include a gallery of historic photographs in a prominent public location, a museum to display military artifacts from those who served, and a named or themed bar or lounge. Now that is really paying respect. Meet me at Ye Olde Armory Pub for a Military Martini.

It is hard to determine if this is a demolition permit request or a glitzy sales pitch. I for one do not like what they are selling. It just seems there are too many gaps in the plans and conflicting statements. To say up front that there is potential to keep the armory façade is very misleading, when later all they want to keep are a few parts and pieces.

I realize that parts of the existing structure must go. The original 1931 structure should be preserved to the fullest extent. If WC can pay to have people come in to evaluate the mold, they can afford to have an expert come in to evaluate what can be done to save as much as the building as possible. At the very least, the total façade of the building should be preserved and whatever space WC wants built onto the back and/or sides of the façade.

I hope the Historic Commission considers the demolition application very carefully. There is a lot of information and disinformation contained in that application and even more if you read between the lines. The old adage applies here: “If it looks like a duck.... And it walks like a duck....” I am not against progress but when it comes at the cost of history, it is not truly progress.

Respectfully,

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