



THE RENOVATED FOWLER HOUSE, TOP, AND DETAILS FROM THE HOUSE SHOWING THE OLD AND THE NEW, ABOVE.

MICHAEL HELLER PHOTOS

OVERLOOKED, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Symbol of Montaukett history is preserved through public and private partnership

BY FRANK S. COSTANZA

Much has changed since Ray Harden and his late associate and friend, the well-known builder, Ben Krupinski, met with East Hampton Town officials and community members last summer to determine if the Fowler House — thought by many to be the last surviving dwelling of a Montaukett tribe member — could be saved.

Larry Cantwell is no longer supervisor, replaced on the Town Board in January by former Town Councilman Peter Van Scoyoc; workers for Krupinski, who was killed in a June plane crash that also took the lives of his wife, Bonnie, one of their grandchildren, William Maerov, and the pilot, Jon Dollard, were able to stabilize the building that sits along Springs-Fireplace Road after it was in danger of collapsing, and Mr. Harden and Stratton Schellinger, longtime associates of Krupinski's, have taken over his contractor business, albeit with heavy hearts.

What has remained steadfast in spite of recent events, including a tragedy that the greater East Hampton community is still reeling from, is the unifying goal of restoring and preserving a historically significant structure that, for myriad reasons, was largely forgotten for decades and allowed to fall into extreme disrepair.

"I passed by it all my life and didn't realize it was there," said East Hampton Town Councilman David Lys, who was appointed in January to fill Van Scoyoc's vacated seat on the town dais following his election as supervisor last fall.

"The structure itself is no bigger than 500 square feet, but the property was so overgrown you wouldn't even have noticed it if you weren't looking for it," continued Lys, who was instrumental in leading the effort to restore the Amagansett Life-Saving Station on Atlantic Avenue, a \$1.6 million project that Mr. Krupinski also dedicated resources to over the years.

May Be the Last of Its Kind

Unlike many of his neighbors, Krupinski was aware of the presence of the Fowler House, which once belonged to George Lewis Fowler and his wife, Sarah Melissa Horton, and is now owned by the town, as well as its historical significance to his hometown.

The house could very well be the last of its kind, an artifact

that dates to the 19th century and is believed by many to have been moved around 1885 from Indian Field in Montauk, which is now a state park, to Freetown after the developer Arthur Benson convinced the Montauketts to leave their traditional tribal lands. Freetown is so named because the former slaves of wealthy East End families settled there.

"Maybe," said Robert Hefner, who was hired by the town to serve as a historic preservation consultant for the Fowler House restoration, when asked whether the structure is the last surviving one formerly owned by a Montaukett in East Hampton. "No one is really investigating or researching Freetown to the extent to really know for sure if it is the last of its kind."

Still, he said the house and the 1.7-acre property it stands on are significant because both are forever linked to George Fowler, who in addition to agreeing to move his family off traditional tribal lands, also worked as caretaker and gardener to Thomas Moran, the famous artist and conservationist whose paintings of the American landscape inspired the creation of the National Parks Service. Moran's home in East Hampton, which was also recently restored and opened to the public earlier this summer, doubled as his East End studio.

Aware of the saltbox-style house's rich history, as well as Fowler's ties to the Montauketts, Krupinski had agreed to cover all the costs of the Fowler House restoration, with the town picking up the estimated \$50,000 in fees for required materials, following last summer's emergency meeting.

An Ambitious Endeavor

Harden recalls Krupinski dismissing all suggestions that the house could not be saved during that gathering.

"My first time, just driving by the building, I realized it was in horrible shape," Harden said. "When Ben said, 'We're going to fix this,' I was like, 'I don't know if this is doable' — it was in such bad shape."

But Krupinski, who grew up two houses down from the house, never expressed any such doubts, explaining to his associate that it was an important piece of East Hampton's history and that he wanted it saved. The house's restoration remained a priority following Krupinski's sudden and tragic death, with those now entrusted to oversee his family business continuing his work.

And those individuals now say that, barring any unexpected setbacks, the renovation of the building should be finished by the second week of August, less than a year after many shared their



RAY HARDEN OF BEN KRUPINSKI BUILDERS UPSTAIRS
IN THE FOWLER HOUSE IN EAST HAMPTON.
MICHAEL HELLER PHOTO

RESTORING MONTAUKETT HISTORY

belief that it most likely would not survive another harsh winter.

“The exterior is complete,” said Harden, explaining that his workers tried to preserve as much of the original wood as possible, even if they had to run support beams alongside the original, partially rotted studs. “With the interior, the only thing left to do is stain the floors and stain the paneling that’s on the walls. That’s all that’s left.”

He said his workers were able to save all of the original windows and sashes, even though most of the panes had to be replaced, and that all of the wiring and drywall — both of which were believed to be installed in the 1930s — were removed as part of the restoration.

Looking back, Mr. Harden says that the most difficult part of the project, a job requiring the investment of “hundreds of hours” of work, was shoring up the house, which was leaning to one side and threatening to topple over. There was almost nothing left of the house’s rear wall, where a roughly 15-foot-tall tree had exited the building after growing through the floorboards.

“The first thing we did is we tried to clean

up the property the best we could, and then we went in and built some temporary walls to shore the structure up so it wouldn’t fall down,” Mr. Harden said. “We cut out the stump ... there was almost nothing left of the back of the building.”

Prudence Carabine, a 12th generation Bonacker who sits on the Friends of the Fowler House restoration committee, which is still seeking nonprofit status from Albany, recalls the massive cleanup required just to take back the overgrown property. She explained that it had become a feral cat and feral raccoon colony, as well as an illegal dumping ground.

Though she describes herself as a “cheerleader,” and stresses that all decisions made moving forward with the Fowler House will require the blessing of the Montauketts’ leadership, Carabine personally searched for a year for a contractor who would be willing to stabilize the structure, and that Krupinski was the only one to step up.

Carabine, who is 70 and runs the East Hampton Historical Farm Museum, attended last summer’s emergency meeting during which she stressed the importance of saving

what was left. She recalls telling the attendees that the house is either going to be saved or soon fall in on itself, and if the latter occurred the proposed restoration would end up being a reproduction, undermining all of their efforts to save a piece of local history.

“I told them, ‘You can reproduce me if you want to, but it’s not going to be me when you’re done,’ she said. “We cannot clone this house. This house has to be saved.”

Carabine also vividly recalls Krupinski’s response to her request: “Benny looked at me and said, ‘Great, we’ll do it.’”

An Important Battle Won

Chief Robert Pharaoh, the Montaukett leader who has been focusing his efforts on the nonprofit incorporation of the Friends of the Fowler House committee, as well as stalled efforts to convince Governor Andrew Cuomo to award his tribe recognition, is pleased that the Fowler House was ultimately saved.

He pointed out that he and James Devine, a descendant of the Montauketts, went before the Suffolk County Legislature in 2015, when

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the house and property were still owned by the county, to explain the importance of both to the history of their tribe. Chief Pharaoh said that Devine, who mostly keeps to himself these days, was reared in the house. Three years earlier he told county officials that Leonard Horton — the grandson of George Lewis Fowler and Sarah Melissa Horton — was the last of the family line to reside in the house. Horton died in the early 1980s.

Chief Pharaoh says the county, who acquired ownership of the land through the non-payment of taxes, passed on the opportunity to restore the house. The land was eventually acquired by East Hampton Town and officials later agreed to restore it thanks, in large part, to the interest and influence of Krupinski.

“God bless him,” Chief Pharaoh said, referring to Krupinski. “Ben Krupinski put a lot of his workers and time into that project. He was instrumental in the stabilization of the house because it was in utter shambles. Thanks to him, we’ve gotten to the point where we are now.

“What we’re doing is preserving the structure and bringing a part of that history back,” he continued.

Though things still need to be done, Chief Pharaoh said he is hopeful that the Fowler House can reopen to the public, at least temporarily, by next spring. He stressed that those plans will remain in limbo for the time being, saying the past year has been stressful, pointing to both the restoration and to the governor’s repeated refusal to recognize his tribe.

Even though the nearly finished house and tribal recognition efforts are unrelated, Chief Pharaoh said he is viewing the former as a victory for the Montaukett. “If you’re not going to win the war, you got to pick your battles and do the best that you can,” he said. “So long as you can keep the name of the Montaukett out there, that’s a win.”

Others are also pleased, knowing the restored house marks the end of a long and, at times, arduous journey.

“Ben was extremely successful and made a lot of money, but I think he wanted to give back to the history of his hometown and, I don’t think I’m talking out of place here, had the financial wherewithal to get it done,” Lys said. “It made him feel good.”

Harden thinks that Krupinski would be pleased with the final product as well.

“Absolutely,” Harden said. “I just know that it was a priority of Ben’s to get the project done.” ■



INSIDE THE FOWLER HOUSE.

MICHAEL HELLER PHOTO

MYSTERY OF THE FOWLER HOUSE

BY FRANK S. COSTANZA

After examining records and the structure itself, historians agree that the Fowler House, most likely the last surviving dwelling that was once owned by and housed a Montaukett family, was constructed on its present location off Springs-Fireplace Road in East Hampton in 1885.

They’re also on the same page in thinking that the original owners, George Lewis Fowler and his wife, Sarah Melissa Horton, lived in the house with their children until the 1930s, around the same time that drywall and electrical wiring were installed inside, and a small porch and addition were added to the exterior.

What remains up for debate is whether the recently restored George Fowler House was the same structure that once sat on traditional Montaukett lands to the east in Montauk, or a brand new building when it was constructed in Freetown, a community founded by freed slaves, using pieces of older tribal houses that were previously dismantled and their pieces recycled.

Robert Hefner, the historic preservation consultant hired by East Hampton Town to oversee the restoration of the Fowler House, insists that the evidence supports his theory that the newly restored town-owned building was never moved from Indian Field to Freetown. Rather, it was constructed in Freetown, most likely using pieces of older structures dating to the early 1800s, he said.

For example, he says that one of the timbers used on the Fowler House features the initials D.L.P, referring to David Lewis Pharaoh, the last king of the Montaukett at Indian Field. He was married to Maria Pharaoh, George Fowler’s sister, who was the tribe’s queen.

Hefner points to court records from 1906, when the Montaukett attempted to regain control of their traditional tribal lands in Montauk, which say only one house was ever moved from Indian Field to Freetown, and that it belonged to Maria Pharaoh and her husband.

“We know they did move one house from Montauk, that was the David Pharaoh House that was moved from Montauk to Freetown, so they probably had some timbers lying around,” Hefner said, explaining why older wood was used in the construction of the George Fowler House.

Additionally, Hefner said the materials used in the house’s construction, as well as its balloon-type frame, are identical to the newly restored Thomas and Mary Nimmo Moran Studio on East Hampton Village’s Main Street. That building was constructed in 1884. “The frame was identical to that, and it was not something that would have been built many years earlier,” Hefner adds. “Maybe the early 1880s or possibly the 1870s.”

Asked why everyone seems to enjoy retelling the relocation story, Mr. Hefner offered that it is a more romanticized version of events, but they do not jibe with court records or the information provided by the house’s framing and timbers.

“The physical evidence of the house itself, and the documentary evidence of the trial, prove that it was built in Freetown,” Hefner said. “As a historian, I go with the evidence. The evidence speaks.”