

How to honor a women's rights pioneer?

Preservationists seek a focus for two Susan B. Anthony homes

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Contributing writer

When two childhood homes of Susan B. Anthony wound up on the auction block last year, some saw a chance to highlight the local roots of one of the nation's most revered women's rights activists.

Anthony's birthplace in Adams, Mass., where she lived until she was 6, and her family's home in Battenville, N.Y., where she lived from ages 12-19, both changed hands last August, in what each new owner termed a "weird" coincidence.

But nearly a year later, the plans for what to do with the two houses are still in the formative stages. When you're dealing with old houses, a nonprofit group, a government agency and the need to come up with a plan worthy of Anthony's legacy, it seems speed is not of the essence.

The house in Adams was sold at auction to Carol Crossed of Rochester, N.Y., for \$164,500, after its previous owners spent nearly a decade in an unsuccessful quest to turn it into a museum.

And when the Battenville home went into foreclosure and no one offered the minimum bid of \$202,000 at an auction in January 2006, the mortgage company Freddie Mac took over the deed and sold it for \$1 in August to the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

Last month, staff members from three of the agency's regional offices gathered to tour the Battenville house and brainstorm about what to do with it. One of the participants said the options discussed included partnering with a local organization to operate the site; using the house as a resource center and library for women's studies; renting it out as home or office space; and selling it with new deed covenants to preserve its historical integrity.

Adams: The birthplace

In Adams, Crossed aims to honor Anthony's campaign for women's rights and suffrage as well as what she and others say is Anthony's little-noted opposition to abortion.

"She was passionate and a visionary, driven in her cause for justice," Crossed said. "Too few people are like her today. We are less community oriented and individualistic. I often wonder how she would have been received today, in a world driven by narcissism and greed."



Rob Barendse photo

The house in Battenville, N.Y., where Susan B. Anthony lived from ages 12 to 19 was acquired last year by the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Now the agency is trying to figure out what to do with the building.

Crossed is a board member of Feminists Choosing Life of New York, a nonprofit, grass-roots organization based in Rochester. The group is managing and caring for the Adams home, where Anthony was born in 1820.

"Our working mission statement is to incorporate Anthony's holistic vision of equality into whichever theme will be used for her birthplace," Crossed said. "This means her pro-life views will not be excluded from the exhibits or displays. This vision represents a small part of Anthony's life, and while it will be presented, it will not be an overwhelming theme of the birthplace."

Crossed's view is hotly contested, though, by some feminists who maintain that Anthony's statements on abortion are more ambiguous than Crossed and her allies allow.

That debate aside, the practical matter of what to do with the Adams house is still unresolved. An exploratory committee is looking at three concepts for the house: a textile museum, a home for unwed young mothers, or a women's retreat center, "in that order," Crossed said.

There is also a last-resort option that involves moving the house to a college or university campus for use as a women's study center.

"Moving the house is the least preferable choice, after all other options have been explored," Crossed said. "But it would be better than having the house sitting where it is and deteriorating."

She noted that Anthony was very involved in women's labor issues, so that a textile museum would be a fitting use for the house. In addition,

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Anthony's father, Daniel, built one of the first textile mills in the Berkshires in 1822. The mill employed 22 farm girls, and 11 were boarded at the Anthony residence in Adams.

Crossed said her group is preparing an application for tax-exempt status for a Susan B. Anthony Birthplace Foundation. The group's progress can be monitored at the Web site sbabirthplace.com.

No one is living in the house currently, though there is a volunteer caretaker family that cares for the grounds and does some maintenance.

The house did suffer a major calamity in December when the roof caved in.

"Luckily, we were able to find a wonderful roofer who liked the mission of what we were doing, sold us the roofing material at cost and quickly got the new roof up by mid-January," Crossed said.

The two-story Federal Quaker-style farmhouse, built in 1817, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. Crossed described the dwelling as "modest, not at all fancy in any way."

"I've driven by the Battenville house, and it's much more stately than this one," Crossed said. "The family sort of moved up in the world there."

The Anthony family's upward mobility would come to a tragic end in Battenville, however, where they experienced financial ruin in 1837, an event that would have a lasting impression on the teenage Susan Anthony.

Lessons from Battenville

Because of Daniel Anthony's reputation as a successful textile mill owner in the Berkshires, Judge John McLean of Battenville lured him to that hamlet in 1826 to oversee and expand a tex-

Historical gem

Robert Kuhn, the assistant regional director of the state parks agency, said the Battenville home is a unique addition to the state's historic properties.

"We're thrilled to have the Anthony house," he said. "We have 35 historic sites across the state, but we don't really have any that reflect women's history and the women's suffrage movement."

The house is a jewel - high-end, soundly built and in remarkably good shape, with an interior that reflects both the original plan and finishes and late Victorian updating, according to Krattinger.

"The great loss to the house, though, is the south wing, where Susan taught school. This was removed in 1989 due to deterioration and replaced with a two-story frame wing in 1991. One of the first things to figure out is whether to keep the non-original wing or recreate the older Anthony section."

A more immediate concern may be how to deal with the house's difficult location. Entering or leaving by car can be a hair-raising experience. The short, steep driveway is next to a sharp bend on Route 29, and the one-acre property backs



The house in Adams, Mass., where Anthony was born was placed on the National Register of Historic Places soon after these photos were taken in 1984. It has passed through a succession of owners since then.

Anthony's 1954 book, "Susan B. Anthony," about the effect of Daniel Anthony's bankruptcy on his daughter:

"To Susan it brought a startling and unforgettable revelation: the house and everything in it, down to the needles and pins of the wife, belonged to the man of the family. Her mother's things, given her by her own parents, had been seized to pay her father's debts. She would not soon forget the lesson."

Anthony's time spent teaching school in Battenville would also have been recalled in her later campaign for wage justice.

"She was paid \$1.50 a week, compared to \$10 a week the male teacher earned, and that really fumed her," said Helise Flickstein of Athol, N.Y., who has researched Anthony for the past five years and gives lectures about her and other early suffragists.

It was Flickstein who made the initial contact with Freddie Mac to pitch the idea of donating the Battenville house to the state, an idea later picked up by Assemblymen Roy McDonald, R-Wilton, and Steven Englebright, a Long Island Democrat.

After the bankruptcy, the Anthony family moved a few miles down the Batten Kill to the hamlet of Hardscrabble, now known as Center Falls, where Daniel worked as postmaster and Susan continued to teach.

The family was never able to recoup their losses, and in 1845 they left Washington County and headed west, eventually ending up in Rochester, where Susan began her lifelong campaign for women's rights, workers' rights, married women's property rights, coeducation, women's suffrage and an end to slavery.

tile mill there.

Business boomed, and in 1832-33 Anthony built the late Federal-style brick house for his family that overlooks what is now Route 29 in Battenville.

The boom turned to bust, though, with the arrival of the Panic of 1837, one of the worst economic depressions in the history of the young United States. The mill closed, and by 1839 the Anthony family had lost everything: They had to sell their house, furnishings, clothing and household items, even the food in their kitchen.

"It was a sobering lesson to Susan, and her social attitudes and future path as a reformer were partially shaped by this experience," explained Bill Krattinger, a state historic preservation specialist who wrote the National Register nomination for the Battenville house. The house was placed on the National Register in April.

In his nomination narrative, Krattinger included the following passage from Katherine



Bill Krattinger of the state parks agency shows off the original moldings at the Susan B. Anthony house in Battenville.

up to a hillside, with little level space for parking more than a few cars.

"I'm not sure we're convinced it's an insurmountable hurdle, but it's certainly a major issue that has to be addressed," Kuhn said.

September events planned

The house and several of the schoolhouses where Anthony taught will be included on a driving tour planned in connection with a conference Sept. 14-15, "In Celebration of Susan B. An-

thon, the Quakers, and the Underground Railroad." The North Star Historical Project of Greenwich, a group that works to preserve the area's Underground Railroad history, is sponsoring the event.

The conference will include performances at Hubbard Hall in Cambridge by Sally Matson, an Anthony re-enactor from Massachusetts, and by Bob Warren of Greenwich, who'll present "Only the Message Mattered," the story of Anthony's life in Battenville.

Debi Craig of Greenwich, a co-founder of North Star, said southern Washington County had much Underground Railroad activity, and the Anthony house has a compartment above a doorway in the main entryway, which suggests it may have been used to hide escaping slaves.

Craig is among those who've pushed for preservation of Anthony's Battenville home as a museum. "I remember studying Susan B. Anthony in school, and I just couldn't believe she was from my own back yard," Craig said. "Since I was very young, I've always thought it should be a museum."

Flickstein, too, said she would like to see the house become a women's rights and suffrage museum, and she has sent the parks agency an eight-page proposal.

Kuhn said the planning process will involve getting some public input.

"We ask people to be patient with us," he said.

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