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**Historic significance of York County's threatened Mifflin House confirmed by
Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office**

The Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office in Harrisburg has accepted the conclusions of extensive research establishing that the endangered 215-year-old Mifflin House in Hellam Township, York County, was a site where some of the nation's earliest anti-slavery efforts took place that helped to lay the groundwork for the civil rights movement that by the late 1830s became known as the Underground Railroad.

The site's history was documented in a 65-page research report submitted by Preservation Pennsylvania, the only statewide, private, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the protection of historically and architecturally significant properties.

On May 26, staff at the State Historic Preservation Office determined that the property is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places based on the property's use as a safe house where formerly enslaved people of African descent were given shelter and support in the free state of Pennsylvania as part of the Underground Railroad Movement, from about 1815 well into the 1850s.

The Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office further determined that the Mifflin House meets the National Park Service's research and documentation requirements to be considered "a 'station' on the Underground Railroad."

Preservation Pennsylvania's Historic Resource Survey Form states:

"The Mifflin House property, also known as Hybla,* is significant under the theme of African American quest for civil and political rights through its association with the Mifflins and their role in the Underground Railroad, and for its association with the Gettysburg Campaign of the Civil War in June 1863."

"The house, including its surrounding landscape, has integrity of location, setting, feeling and association, and retains essential physical features that make up its character as needed to convey its role as a stop or station on the Underground Railroad. Material changes have not detracted from its character or feeling of an early Federal period house of locally-prominent Quakers, and rooms identified in the historical narrative are extant today."

Background

The farm was settled about 1800 by Jonathan and Susannah Mifflin. Jonathan Mifflin (1753-1840) was an officer in the Revolutionary War and a merchant and international trader from Philadelphia. He moved to the Lancaster and York County area in the late 1790s and married Susannah Wright (1764-1821) of Columbia, Lancaster County. The Mifflin's son Samuel (1805-1885) witnessed many episodes of his parents' involvement in providing safety and support to freedom-seeking African Americans, according to the Survey Form. Samuel took over the property after his father's death in 1840 and continued to operate the home as an Underground Railroad station. He often hired the noted African American boatman, Robert Loney, to secretly ferry formerly enslaved Africans across the Susquehanna River into the support network of William Wright and others in Columbia. Historical accounts document that the intense anti-slavery activity in this region was often driven by strong religious convictions and progressive politics. Most freedom seekers moving through the stations of the Underground Railroad in this region were attempting to reach Philadelphia and then various points north, and ultimately to Canada where slavery was outlawed.

* According to June Lloyd, *Librarian Emerita* of the York County History Center, "Hybla was almost certainly named for a mountain and ancient town in Sicily, known for flowers, bees and superior honey. Shakespeare refers to the site in his play, *Julius Caesar*."

On February 6, 2017, Preservation Pennsylvania announced the annual *Pennsylvania At Risk* list of threatened historic resources, which included the Mifflin House. The existing farmstead is on a 9.8-acre parcel located within a business & industrial park just off U.S. Route 30, overlooking the Susquehanna River. The Mifflin farmhouse and its related agricultural buildings continue to be threatened from potential demolition by the current owners and their development partners for proposed expansion of the business park.

According to Scott L. Mingus, Sr., author of 18 books on the Civil War and the Underground Railroad: "This property, dating to the earliest days of the United States, figured prominently in the Underground Railroad movement and may, in fact, have been one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest property in all of York County to have been a station on the Underground Railroad."

In April 1998, the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office issued a statement that archaeological remains "may yet be present in portions of the Hellam Industrial Park project" that could provide evidence of the defense of the Borough of Wrightsville, PA, and the burning of the Columbia-Wrightsville Bridge in June 1863 during the Civil War.

This opinion prompted local historians to conclude that the Mifflin House may be one of the only sites outside of historic Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, that can claim authentic associations with both the Underground Railroad and the Civil War.

A 1997 letter from the Chief of BHP's Division of Archaeology and Protection to Hellam Township-based Kreutz Creek Valley Preservation Society (KCVPS), stated: "If such resources exist, we would consider them to be extremely significant for their association with the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania and worthy of preservation and public interpretation." Tests were recommended to determine if Civil War artifacts exist at the site, but those haven't yet been conducted by the property owners or their development partners.

The Historic Resource Survey Form was compiled for Preservation Pennsylvania by historian and preservation consultant Elizabeth L. Roman, M.A., of York, Pennsylvania. The report includes Roman's original research and field documentation, as well as material prepared by community-based and national historians, supported by 19th century accounts.

What the SHPO determination does and does not provide

The determination by the State Historic Preservation Office does not provide complete protection from the current demolition threat, explained Melinda Gulden Crawford, Executive Director of Preservation Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, "But this formal Determination of Eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places elevates the status of this important property. It now requires any state or federal agencies that might review development plans or applications for permits of any kind that would affect the property to consult with interested parties and the public about ways to avoid or minimize adverse effects on this historic site."

However, as Katina Snyder, director of the non-profit Kreutz Creek Valley Preservation Society and advisor to the Township on matters affecting historic properties, points out: "This designation does not require the staff or supervisors of Hellam Township to change or alter their existing procedures based on their current zoning ordinance. Unfortunately, there are no ultimate protections for this historic site in local land use laws. The Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office's action and the extensive research in the Historic Resource Survey Form does provide us with a strong component for preservation of the site that will be included in the advisory report that KCVPS is preparing to submit to the Township."

The Hellam Township Zoning Hearing Board is examining the validity of the owners' application for a municipal demolition permit to demolish the historic farmhouse as well as some of the ancillary buildings on the site. The development site is known as Wright's Crossing, a business/industrial park of large warehousing operations being developed by Kinsley Equities II L.P. of York, Pennsylvania.

Even though Mifflin House is recognized as an historic site in the Township's Comprehensive Plan, and in the Township Zoning Ordinance, this local listing only requires the Township to request an advisory review and opinion by KCVPS about the effects of any applications to the Township that might affect the property. KCVPS is permitted under the ordinance to seek a meeting with owners and their agents to raise awareness of the significance of the property and to attempt to negotiate alternatives to demolition. However, the owners are not required to follow the advice of the preservation organization since the Township zoning ordinance does not provide for a process to approve, deny or place conditions on any application based on the historic significance of the property.

On February 21, 2017, KCVPS wrote to the developer, Kinsley Equities II L.P., requesting a meeting to discuss the significance of the property and to examine options to retain the historic farm house and create a plan for its re-use. The developer has not responded to this request.

The developer, acting on behalf of the current owners, the Blessing Family of Hellam Township, applied for a permit to demolish the historic property on March 28, 2017. Hellam Township denied the application on April 6, based on the land development plan for the business park, recorded in 1998, which includes the notion: "Existing Farm Complex to Remain."

The owners and Kinsley Equities II L.P. have appealed that ruling to the Township's Zoning Hearing Board. A Hearing is scheduled for June 27, 2017 at 7 PM at the Township office, 44 Walnut Spring Road, York, PA 17406. Citizens who believe that they will be affected if the Township's denial is reversed are expected to request standing in this proceeding will submit written and oral statements to the Hearing Board.

The Zoning Hearing Board can render a decision at the conclusion of testimony at the hearing, or it can take up to 30 days to do so. Any decision can be appealed within 30 days to York County Court of Common Pleas.

About Preservation Pennsylvania

Preservation Pennsylvania is the commonwealth's only statewide, private, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the protection of historically and architecturally significant properties.

The organization was created in 1982 as the Preservation Fund of Pennsylvania to operate a revolving fund that would assist in the acquisition and rehabilitation of historic properties. Since its incorporation, the organization has evolved and now organizes the annual Statewide Conference on Heritage (Carlisle, June 14-16, 2017), hosts the Pennsylvania Historic Preservation Awards, and publishes an annual list of endangered properties in *Pennsylvania At Risk*.

Preservation Pennsylvania also participates in educational programs and advocacy initiatives, conducts special projects, and offers on-site assistance to people throughout the commonwealth with its field service program.

Images available at preservationpa.org