

Salute to Ocean County: Celebration of the Arts & Heritage



Photo Credit: Jennifer Sandton

Barbara Steele receives first John C. Bartlett Jr. Government Leadership Award from Lori Pepenella and Tim Hart.

A special event called “Salute to Ocean County: A Celebration of Arts and Heritage,” to be held at Ocean County College on April 10, two Southern Ocean County landmarks will be formally recognized as exemplary achievements in historic preservation. Stafford Township’s 1922 passenger rail car/1872 railroad station and Beach Haven’s 1885 Williams Cottage Inn have been selected to receive 2012 Ocean County Historic Preservation Awards.

Stafford acquired the rail car in the summer of 2006, from Naval Weapons Station Earle in Colts Neck, according to Frank Kowalczyk, vice president of the Historical Society and an active member of Stafford’s Historic Preservation Commission.

The car, selected from a group of old train cars, had originally been part of the Jersey Central rail line; it weighs 130,000 pounds and measures 73 feet long, 10 ½ feet wide and 14 feet tall.

When it arrived at Heritage Park, both

the interior and exterior were in dire need of restoration. The outside was green with oxidization, the inside torn up, asbestos exposed, nothing in operating condition.

“We placed it on the tracks, and then the fun began,” Kowalczyk said. The car was shrink-wrapped and fenced off to protect it from the elements. Sponsors’ contributions funded 16 reupholstered seats; new carpeting was installed. At different points during the repair work, vandals broke in and caused a fire, and some paint cans under pressure exploded. But, despite some initial setbacks, the end result is the gloriously refurbished rail car painted Tuscan red and gray to recall the heyday of the Tuckerton Railroad.

The Jersey Central car is “similar enough” to an actual Tuckerton Railroad car, Kowalczyk explained – it’s contemporary to the cars that existed during that time. One minor difference is the enclosed end, which would have been open on a Tuckerton car, with a deck, like those used in whistle stop campaigns.

Five years after its relocation to Heritage Park, the train car was formally dedicated by Mayor John Spodofora in August 2011. The car has electricity and heat and is used as a meeting place and office space for the community. Inside, Kowalczyk pointed out where the toilet would have been, over a hole in the floor, an open drop to the track below. Durable material was chosen for the upholstery to be visitor-friendly – “we want kids to come in here,” he said. Additional seats are stored in the archives building for possible installation at a later date.

The rail station itself is authentic, having originally stood on Old Bay Avenue and operated from 1871 to 1935, ushering passengers across the bay to Surf City,

then called Barnegat City Junction, until a hurricane wiped out the train trestle bridge.

In 1990, the station was moved to its present location in Stafford. "This is the only existing remnant of the Tuckerton Railroad, right here," Kowalczyk said. Efforts are currently under way to get the station on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 2003 and 2004, NJ Transit provided the materials necessary for the Stafford Public Works Department, with help from a class of fifth graders, to rebuild a length of double train tracks, to show how a main track and shunt track would have looked in front of the station. Inside the station, vintage luggage and train memorabilia and photographs evoke a bygone era of locomotive transportation.

The Williams Cottage Inn, a bed and breakfast on the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Ocean Road in Beach Haven, underwent complete restoration to its original 19th-century splendor over the course of five years, beginning in 2002 when the Blahut family purchased it in a severely deteriorated state and saved it from demolition.

The cottage is a three-story, 6,000-square-foot Queen Anne-style house with a gabled roof, an onion-domed turret, a wraparound porch and many other ornate architectural elements, originally built as an oceanfront vacation home for Dr. Edward Williams, a partner in the Baldwin Locomotive Works. (Williams



Photo Credit: Ocean County C&H Staff

Williams Cottage Inn as restored by the Blahut Family.

also owned the Portia Cottage on Coral Street.) Historians believe the Williams Cottage to have been designed by the Wilson Brothers architectural firm.

Great pains were taken to create an exact replica of the exterior as the house originally looked, as best as could be determined; the cottage is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Every effort was made to either retain or duplicate the majority of the original elements that define the character of this house," according to the eligibility justification for the state and national registers, provided by the Historic Preservation Office of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

During the interior remodeling process, walls were moved and stairways reconfigured to make it function more suitably as a bed and breakfast, but the original fireplace and main staircase remain intact.

By 2007, the restoration was finished and the cottage was open for business.



Photo Credit: Stafford Township Historical Commission

1922 Jersey Central Passenger Car and Manahawkin Railroad Station as restored by Stafford Township.