

SOCIETY OF
ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS

27 October 2019

Mr. John Quirk, Head of School
Tabor Academy
66 Spring Street
Marion, MA 02738
jquirk@taboracademy.org

Mr. Will Tifft, Chair
Marion Historical Commission
Town of Marion
2 Spring Street
Marion, MA 02738
willtift@gmail.com

Re: Opposition to the Demolition of the Rev. Percy Browne House, Marion, MA

Dear Mr. Quirk and Mr. Tifft:

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) expresses strong opposition to the proposed demolition of the H.H. Richardson-designed Rev. Percy Browne House, located in Marion, MA.

H.H. Richardson, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright are recognized as the three American architects whose works have most significantly shaped the direction of 19th and 20th century American architecture. Richardson's works, such as the Marshall Field Wholesale Store (Chicago, 1885-87), had a transformative impact upon the careers of Sullivan and Wright. His public buildings, including Trinity Church (Boston, 1872-22), the Winn Memorial Library (Woburn, MA, 1876-79), and the Thomas Crane Public Library (Quincy, MA, 1878-82), were remarkable architectural essays in the adaptation of the Romanesque to an American vernacular.

While best known for his public buildings and monuments, Richardson designed a small number of influential residences, such as the William Watts Sherman House (Newport, RI, 1874-76), the F.L. Ames Gate Lodge (North Easton, MA, 1880-81), and the John J. Glessner House (Chicago, 1885-87). Commissioned by the Rev. Percy Browne in 1881, Richardson was presented with a modest budget with which to design and build. The Browne House was completed in 1882, while H.H. Richardson was at the height of his monumental architectural career. The residence utilized a low-slung, wood-shingle-clad form to meld into the landscape, at once creating a dwelling that was modest and distinctive, of the local vernacular, and emblematic of Richardson's broad knowledge of architecture.

The Browne House was immediately recognized for its success in adapting the colonial vernacular into a new, distinctly American expression. Richardson's first biographer, Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, in her Henry Hobson Richardson and His works (1888), singled out the Browne House for praise as the best of Richardson's domestic work. In a 1936 exhibition of H.H. Richardson's architecture at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Henry-Russell Hitchcock – who would in that same year publish the second biography of Richardson – described the Browne House as “perhaps the most successful house ever inspired by the colonial vernacular.”

Tabor Academy purchased the Rev. Percy Browne House a decade ago and, in the intervening years, has encroached upon it with new construction, including dormitories to the rear and an adjacent headmaster's residence. The school's claim that the building is in poor condition is suspect, given the fact that Tabor Academy utilized the house as a faculty residence as recently as a year ago. The Browne House is a landmark of American architecture, and such a landmark deserves careful restoration and creative reuse, not consignment to the landfill in the name of additional square footage. Tabor Academy should embrace the Rev. Percy Browne House as one of America's most significant residences, and actively investigate how the building might be restored and brought fully into the life of the school. As an educational institution, Tabor Academy could use the Browne House as an example of the intellectual and artistic achievements of the past informing the present, instead of simply dismissing them as obsolete and removing them. This situation is certainly challenging, but it represents an opportunity for Tabor Academy to illustrate, through its own works, how the value of the American intellectual and artistic past can speak eloquently to the present.

The Society of Architectural Historians strongly opposes the demolition of this landmark of American architecture and, in the strongest possible terms, encourages Tabor Academy to retain and preserve the Rev. Percy Browne House. The preservation of the Rev. Percy Browne House is essential so that future generations may appreciate this landmark.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. C. G.' followed by a horizontal line.

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D., LEED AP BD+C
Chair, Society of Architectural Historians Heritage Conservation Committee

cc: Mr. John Quirk, Head of School, Mr. Christopher Boucher, Director of Facilities, Tabor Academy; Mr. Carmine Martignetti, Chair, Tabor Academy Trustees; Mr. Will Tifft, Chair, Mr. Peter Douglas, Ms. Meg Steinberg, Marion Historical Commission; Mr. Frank McNamee, President, Mr. David Pierce, Vice President, Mr. Will Tifft, Treasurer, Mr. Jeffrey Miller, PhD, Executive Director, Mr. Pete Smith, Curator, Sippican Historical Society; Mr. Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.; Mr. Jeffrey Cody, Ph.D.; Mr. Anthony Cohn, AIA; Ms. Phyllis Ellin; Mr. David Fixler, FAIA; Mr. Sandy Isenstadt, Ph.D.; Mr. Theodore H. Prudon, Ph.D., FAIA, Ms. Pauline Saliga; Ms. Deborah Slaton; Members SAH Heritage Conservation Committee.