Founders Hall Spire Options
27 April 2021

Founders Hall 2019

For close to a decade there has been discussion of what to do with the spire (the pointed bit above the belfry) on Founders Hall. The spire is now in poor condition, badly in need of major repairs and repainting. We do not know the condition of the structure hidden within the spire (Phil Norris believes the 4 x 4s are in good condition) but this, too, may require repairs. The Village Improvement Association urgently needs to decide whether it is willing to commit to the immediate costs of repairing and painting the spire to return it to its original condition as well as the long-term costs required to maintain the spire in good condition.

The VIA is considering three options for how to handle the spire at Founders Hall. This memo attempts to provide some background and cost estimates for each of the three options in preparation for the VIA Membership discussions of these options.

Two Special on-line VIA Membership Meetings to discuss the spire have been set for Tuesday, the 18th of May and Tuesday, 15th of June,

both at 7:30 pm. These meetings are the time to ask questions and voice opinions regarding the spire. The Meetings will be recorded and published on the VIA website so every VIA Member has the chance to have their opinions heard by all the Membership. The vote to decide which spire option the VIA Membership prefers will be held at the Annual Meeting at 7:30 pm on Tuesday, the 13th of July without any additional discussion to avoid the meeting extending late into the night.

Under the VIA Bylaws and State law concerning 501(c)3 organizations, the final decision concerning the spire is the VIA Board's responsibility.

The East Blue Hill Baptist Church c 1880

History of Founders Hall

Founders Hall was built in 1880 as the East Blue Hill Baptist Church. The original building included the entry hall, the double height worship space and the bell tower on the southwest corner of the building. The belfry at the top of the bell tower was open (not enclosed as it is currently) to expose the single bell, with Italianate decorative railings and arched corner bracing around the four sides of the tower. Similar Italianate churches built at this time in Maine (Route 3 in Trenton for

example) did not include spires as they were not considered to be appropriate elements of Italianate churches.

In the 1950s there was a trend to add spires to churches. In 1956, a timber spire was added to the top of the bell tower. To provide the required structure to support the new spire, the belfry was altered significantly. Details (the railings, bracing, etc.) were removed, new structural steel members were installed inside the belfry and the open belfry was enclosed with new louvers to hide the new steel structure. The new louvers resulted in the original bell being hidden from view.

The Social Hall at the back of the original building was put up sometime in the last quarter of the 20th Century.

The Baptist Church disbanded in the early 2000s and the ownership of the building was transferred to the VIA for use as a village hall.

Option 1 Retain the Existing Timber Spire

Over the past years the VIA has had various reports and cost estimates prepared concerning the building as a whole and the spire in particular.

In December 2018, Pat Ball prepared a cost estimate of $7,200 for repairing and painting the Spire. This included a snorkel lift rental (c $5000 for two weeks) and materials but did not include the cost of two men working for two weeks on the project.

In October 2019, Mid Maine Restoration, professional steeplejacks of Waterville, prepared a cost estimate for repairing and painting the tower from the main roof level to the top point of the spire (including the belfry). Their quote, including labor, came to $17,100.

In 2020, Phil Norris inspected the spire exterior and reported that the tongue and groove exterior cladding of the spire is rotted and must be replaced. The cost of this work was not included in either of the above quotes. Hammond Lumber quoted a cost of $3,354 to supply tongue and groove 8 x 1 softwood timber cladding at $1.72/linear foot. This estimate does not include any costs for the labor to replace the cladding.

To be cautious, we should allow additional funds for repairs to the spire structure if, after removing the existing cladding, structural damage is uncovered. We recommend allowing $5000 for this possible work.

The immediate costs of retaining the existing steeple would range from an estimated $10,600 without labor to $20,700 with labor (exclusive of the labor and scaffolding costs of replacing the cladding) plus the cost of any required structural repairs (as mentioned above, a reserve cost of $5000). There may be grants available to help with these costs but there is no guarantee the VIA might receive these.

In addition, the spire will require repairs and painting at least every ten years, if not more often, at a cost estimated between $7,200 without labor to $17,100 with labor. We should assume this cost will only rise over time.

If the spire is retained, it may not be possible to restore the belfry to its original appearance.

Option 2 Replace the Spire with a Fiberglass Replica

Removing the existing timber spire and replacing it with a fiberglass look-alike would save on long term maintenance and painting costs. The fiberglass material would not require any attention for many years. A fiberglass spire would be significantly lighter (600 to 700 lbs total) than the existing timber spire and might allow the steel structure supporting the timber spire to be replaced to allow for the belfry to be restored to its original appearance.

In 2020 Lyman Morse Fabricators of Thomaston estimated a supply cost for a new fiberglass spire in the range of $25,000 to $30,000. Delivery and installation were not included in the cost estimate. Pat Bal estimated $700 to rent a crane to remove the existing timber spire not including labor or disposal costs.

The immediate cost of replacing the existing spire with a fiberglass spire would be around $26,000 to $31,000 excluding delivery and installation.

If a fiberglass spire were installed, the VIA would no longer be eligible for steeple restoration funding from the Maine Steeple Fund and perhaps other grant options for the rest of the building.

Option 3 Remove the Spire
For the cost of renting a crane (c. $700) and disposal costs, the existing spire could be removed, broken down and disposed of, assuming the use of VIA volunteers to supply the required labor.

Phil Norris's inspected the bell tower in November 2018. He found that the spire can be easily removed (unbolted from the steel structure and lifted off the belfry).

This option is by far the least expensive initially and avoids the long-term costs of maintaining the spire above the belfry.

If the spire is removed, the belfry could be restored to its original appearance.

Final Considerations
Many of us have strong opinions concerning the Founders Hall spire and bell tower. However, both the immediate and the long-term financial impact on the VIA and the volunteer time required to fundraise and coordinate the repairs and maintenance of the spire must be carefully considered when making a final decision of what to do with the spire.

Choosing to repair or replace the spire would be the most significant financial commitment made by the VIA in recent history. If the VIA Membership votes to invest in the spire, the Membership will also need to quickly come up with reasonable fundraising plans to cover these costs.

Over the past three years, the VIA has annually raised between $16,000 and $25,000 from dues, fees and fundraisers. These funds cover existing VIA expenses that have ranged from $16,000 to $22,000 per year to maintain VIA properties and services. Our total bank balances are around $26,000 at this time, which we need to maintain to be fiscally responsible in case of emergency costs or poor fundraising years.

Given these tight budgets, choosing to repair or replace the spire would have to rely exclusively on new fundraising efforts, which would need to double or more our average fundraising capacities.

A final important consideration for the VIA Membership is the opportunity costs of this decision. Given the costs, we need to consider if replacing or repairing the spire is our highest priority, or whether there are other projects and activities on which the VIA would prefer to spend our limited funds.

We very much appreciate the Membership's thoughtful consideration of this issue and look forward to hearing your perspectives on this important question.