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Storied police station holds out hope as a home for Hull Artists

By John J. Galluzzo

It's hard to believe it's been three decades since there's been life of any kind in the old Metropolitan District Commission police station at the corner of Nantasket and Wharf Avenues, but it's true. That's the way that Irwin Nesoff, treasurer of Hull Artists, feels when he looks at the building.

"I've been in Hull for 12 years," he says, "and have been amazed that it could sit vacant for three decades." But, rather than point fingers, he's suggesting that Hull should do something good with the building. Taking advantage of a recent Massachusetts Cultural Council call for proposals for feasibility studies that could create new spaces for the arts in the state, Hull Artists applied for and received a \$22,000 matching grant. Now, the organization is raising the needed matching funds to complete the study.

"The project would be to establish a Nantasket Center for the Arts, a permanent home for Hull artists and artisan crafters," Nesoff explains. "We would establish a retail gallery, workspaces for artists, and space for arts, cultural and educational programming for the community." This latter component could be a game-changer for Hull, where – even in non-pandemic times – it's difficult to find

space for out-of-school programming for youngsters after school and adult education programs at night. "There is just very little space available," Nesoff notes.

Hull Artists currently operates a rental gallery in the street level of Ocean Place, at 121 Nantasket Ave. The old MDC police station would offer more space and other perks. "The location of the building, the size of the building, the exterior architecture, they're all factors in why we're pursuing this opportunity," Nesoff says.



AN ARTFUL FUTURE. The former MDC police station, vacant for decades, may soon be home to a thriving arts center if the vision of the Hull Artists group becomes a reality. [Richard Green photo]

Next to the Paragon Carousel, across the street from the bathhouse, the site is more on the beaten path of the average Hull beachgoer, although Nesoff foresees the building being used throughout the year. "In addition to looking at it as a cultural facility," he

says, "it could be an economic generator. It will draw people in the shoulder and off-seasons and be a regional arts center as well."

There would be juried art shows and a few yet-to-be-determined programs that would take some creativity to design, but, then, that's what artists are all about. The plan would also breathe life into a prominent historic building otherwise slowly deteriorating in the heart of the beach district.

The first few years of the 20th century were important for Nantasket Beach, a period that would set the tone for the future of the fiercely proud tourism destination. The Portland Gale of 1898 had forever altered the landscape, tearing down beachfront amusements and other tourism industry facilities the locals had believed would stand forever. In 1899, the state took control of the first "Golden Mile" of Nantasket Beach as part of its young but ever-growing state reservation system. In Hull, it had a gem, where one could find "one of the most delightful spots on the South shore," according to The Boston Globe on June 22, 1902, "and the coolest resort on a hot day, as the southwest breeze has an uninterrupted sweep across the harbor."

Streetcars would leave for the reservation from Neponset every 30 minutes in 1902. "This year there has been a reduction in the car fares and now 20 cents gives a passenger a 20-mile ride," according to a report in the Globe that same day. The new Nantasket had joined the fleet of Rowes Wharf steamers headed for the beach, with a capacity of 2,000 passengers by itself.

Steamboats left Boston for Pemberton and Nantasket hourly from 9:20 a.m. to 6:20 p.m. Landing at Pemberton, passengers could hop on "electric cars" for a quick journey down the peninsula to the beach. A new steamboat line, the Hull & Boston Steamboat Co., would operate from Winthrop Wharf, 400 Atlantic Ave. in Boston, and drop patrons at Whitehead, and "the coming summer resort known as Nantasket point."

In other words, the crowds were coming, and while many of the would-be beachgoers meant no harm, a few certainly did; Hull became a legendary landing spot for pickpockets. Expecting to have to police the land acquired to create the reservation, the Metropolitan Park Commission took steps in 1900 and 1901 to make its presence felt. "The greater part of the

Nantasket Beach Reservation was acquired in March," stated a January 1901 "Report of the Board of the Metropolitan Park Commissioners." "Between that time and the middle of June all the old buildings between Atlantic Hill and Hotel Nantasket, including the unsightly chutes, were torn down and removed." The chutes, massive multi-story slides, were mostly destroyed during the 1898 gale. The police took up a position in an old piece of the Hotel Tivoli. Eleven police officers, selected from other reservations around the state, reported for duty, moving into their new "barracks," the old servants' quarters of the Ocean View Hotel.

In the 1902 report, the commissioners noted that “[a] police station, which also includes the Superintendent’s office, emergency room and men’s sanitary, has been built at this point, and is in use.” And so it remained for the next nine decades, through name changes – from Metropolitan Park Commission to Metropolitan District Commission (later Department of Conservation and Recreation) – the laying out of George Washington Boulevard and the cutting through of Wharf Avenue as part of the Paragon Carousel move from the park in the 1980s.

The state merged four police forces, including the MDC police, into the current Department of State Police, under Chapter 412 of the Massachusetts Acts of 1991. Soon thereafter the station was abandoned, in all but name. The state still owns it and has given Hull Artists the go-ahead to undertake the feasibility study, with no guarantees the nonprofit

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will ultimately end up with control of the site.

There are multiple steps to the process. First, the feasibility study (which will include a public survey about potential community programs) will show whether or not the building is a good fit for Hull Artists’ needs. The group would also have to negotiate with the state on a long-term lease of the building before committing to a capital campaign to raise the funds needed to put its plan into action. And, of course, it needs to raise the \$22,000 match for the Mass. Cultural Council grant right now.

Nesoff is excited about the potential. “The old jail cells are still in the building,” he says, smiling. “They could be used as artist’s work stations, where visitors could watch the artists at work.” And they could bring back to life a high-profile old building and simultaneously raise the profile of Hull’s vibrant arts community.