



A Farewell to Seamans House

In mid- to late-January, Seamans House—one of Colby-Sawyer College’s buildings located on Main Street in New London—will be burned in a training operation by the New London Fire Department. The building formerly housed the college’s Advancement Office and its staff in alumni relations, development and research.

“This building has reached the end of its useful life,” said Vice President of Administration Doug Atkins, citing both health concerns for staff members and the prohibitive costs of the building’s restoration.

Seamans House was vacated in 2004, and the Advancement Office moved to the Colby Homestead, when it was determined to be an unhealthy working environment for staff by the college’s administration. Several staff members who worked in Seamans House had experienced respiratory ailments, which caused them to seek medical treatment and to miss work for extended periods of time. The college hired a series of environmental firms to conduct tests in the building, but they were unsuccessful in pinpointing the environmental causes that may have caused the illnesses, according to Vice President Atkins.

The college then conducted engineering and architectural studies of the building, which concluded that it no longer contained historically significant or salvageable features and would require an enormous investment to rehabilitate and bring up to current building standards.

“We were not able to precisely identify the health issues, and there is no handicapped access in the building,” Vice President Atkins said. “When we weighed the gigantic costs of bringing this building up to code and its potential future uses for the college against its history and current condition, we decided against it.”

In 2005, the college’s Board of Trustees authorized the removal of Seamans House. Since then the building has continued to deteriorate, Vice President Atkins explained. While the college considered how to dispose of the building, both the New London Police and Fire Departments expressed interest in using it as a site for training operations. In recent weeks, the police department, along with Campus Safety officers, have conducted training exercises in the building.

“It’s difficult to find sites for training due to the damage it can cause to buildings, so we appreciate the college allowing us to use this site,” said New London Police Chief Dave Seastrand. “Our department has been able to use the building to train for some real live dangerous scenarios. This kind of training helps us to be better and safer officers, which is beneficial for us and for the community.”

The New London Fire Department offered to dispose of the building through burning, which would



Seamans House, which stands on Main Street in New London between the college’s main and Hogan Sports Center entrances, as it appeared in December 2007.

provide its officers, and those of surrounding towns, with opportunities to train for managing a burning building. “It’s important because fire departments don’t go to a lot of fires these days. Most of our calls are for motor vehicle accidents and medical issues,” said Fire Chief Jay Lyon, who explained that better



The Cranehurst Inn, which was opened in 1902 as a summer hotel by Elizabeth and Allen Crane, became a year-round hotel in 1942 and served visitors until 1973. (Cleveland, Colby, Colgate Archives)

construction today has led to fewer building fires. “For us it’s a great opportunity to learn from a live fire in a fairly safe, controlled environment.”

The New London Police Department will also be involved in managing nearby traffic and ensuring against potential injuries to community residents, according to Chief Seastrand.

Colby-Sawyer accepted the New London Fire Department’s offer as a way to both dispose of the building and provide a training ground for fire fighters and police officers, according to Vice President Atkins. He recently authorized an environmental firm to

identify and abate the building’s hazardous materials prior to the burn. The college’s Facilities Department has removed all the features that can be used elsewhere on campus.

“The building had been modified so many times over the years that there wasn’t anything of true historical value left,” said Vice President Atkins, “and we couldn’t find a market for a comprehensive collection of the building’s materials.” He added that Colby-Sawyer has no immediate plans to develop the site and will quickly clear the debris after the burn.

Seamans House was built in 1809-1810 by Manning Seamans, the son of Job Seamans. It was originally built as a Cape Cod-style house and served as a residence until 1902, when it was purchased by Elizabeth and Allen Crane and turned into a summer hotel. The Cranehurst Inn accommodated summer visitors until 1942, when it became a year-round hotel, which served visitors to the area until 1973. The inn was then used briefly as a restaurant, until it was acquired by Colby-Sawyer College in 1975, with assistance from some 60 local donors who contributed nearly 50 percent of the purchase price.

The college named Seamans House in honor of its builder and original resident. A large annex that had been added to the building in 1928 was demolished. For more than a decade, the main building was occupied by the college’s Business Office, along with Development and Alumni Relations. In 1987, the Business Office moved to Colgate Hall, while the offices now called Advancement remained in Seamans House until 2004.

Seamans House served the college well for nearly 30 years, but like some of the older structures once on Main Street, it has now reached the end of its life, not only in serving the campus, but as a building.

“Some older buildings, such as the Academy Building, are able to be renovated and go on to serve other purposes,” said Vice President Atkins, referring to the college’s original building, which now serves as New London Town Offices. “Unfortunately, it’s not the answer for every building.”