

Historic Boston, Incorporated
Client of Johanna Gurland Associates, 2012-2014

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Once-decaying Roxbury mansion gets new life with \$3.8m renovation



Zack Wittman/Boston Globe

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When it was built in 1836, the Alvah Kittredge House was an elegant Greek Revival home on a sprawling estate. Through the years, other buildings crowded it, and it slipped into severe disrepair. With its recent renovations, it is once again a Roxbury gem.

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For years, Roxbury residents did their best to ignore the big white house on Linwood Street.

But as the fortunes of the surrounding neighborhood rose, the abandoned eyesore with rotting wood, peeling paint, and boarded-over windows only looked more and more out of place.

It was not always this way. At the time of its construction in 1836, the Alvah Kittredge House was a gem, an elegant Greek Revival home on a sprawling estate in the tony Roxbury Highlands, replete with a portico supported by towering Ionic columns.

Now, after \$3.8 million worth of intensive repairs, the historic mansion is set to reclaim its place as a star on Boston's architectural landscape. The rehabilitated 6,000-square-foot building on Linwood Street, which was divided into five modern two-bedroom apartments, will be rededicated by Mayor Martin J. Walsh at a ribbon-cutting ceremony Monday.

Neighbor Daniel Sherman, who has lived in a condo abutting the house for nine years, said the refurbished house is now the "crown jewel" of the blossoming neighborhood.

"When I first moved in, we had three or four abandoned cars there, and it was an effort just to get those moved," he said. "But over time, people recognized that there's something special here to save."

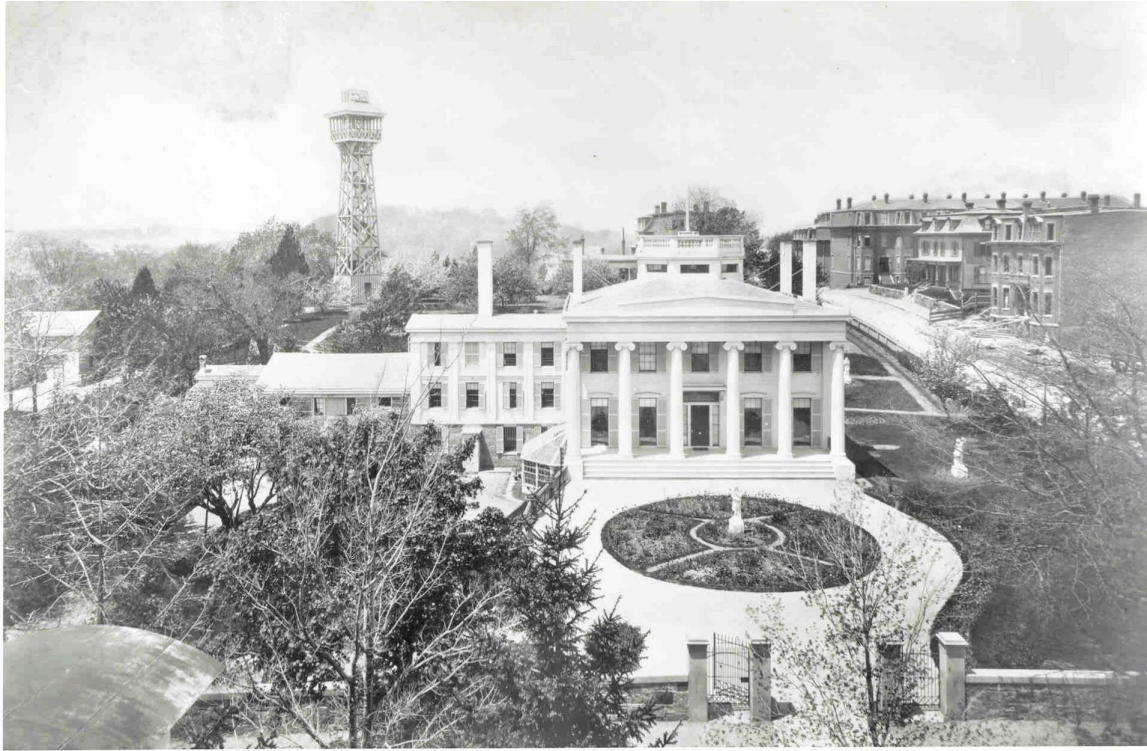
Sherman praised the public-private partnership that led to the repairs.

"It was an all-hands-on-deck approach to doing something positive for the neighborhood," he said. "We have a wonderful community here, a mix of new and old residents. A lot of people are benefiting from this."

The Kittredge House, which had been owned by the Roxbury Action Program community group since the 1970s, was lucky to be saved. Neither private developers nor public institutions were well equipped to handle its challenges.

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The Alvah Kittredge House in the 1880s.

Its designation as a historic building meant any changes had to be approved by several oversight agencies, and costly work was needed to fix extensive damage and to bring the house into compliance with modern building and safety codes — hardly incentives for developers seeking a quick flip. Additionally, the limited number of apartments meant it would take longer for a landlord to recoup money poured into renovations, and made it an unattractive investment for city planners who like to bring large blocks of affordable apartment units onto the market.

Instead, the effort to save the home was spearheaded by Historic Boston, Inc., a preservation nonprofit that took ownership in 2011 after the Boston Redevelopment Authority seized the dilapidated house through eminent domain. The group funded the project with a blend of donations, grants from two city agencies totaling \$300,000, and discounted work by contractors like Metric Construction Corporation.

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“It’s not simple for private developers to take on projects like this, which is why they often come up for demolition,” said Kathy Kottaridis, the executive director of Historic Boston. “We’re trying to prove you can make historic properties usable for current uses.”

City officials said the rehab could serve as a model for rescuing other crumbling properties, which can be anchors around the necks of aspirational neighborhoods.

“You have a competent nonprofit who’s going to preserve the building and preserve the historic elements, but it’s private funds, which helps,” said Sheila Dillon, head of the city’s Department of Neighborhood Development. “We have limited housing dollars, but we were able to provide some money to keep two of the units affordable.”

Specialists hired by Historic Boston to assess the building’s condition quickly made grim discoveries: The floor had settled and sunk unevenly by as much as 18 inches, sections of the portico and columns had rotted through, and key support beams were dangerously deteriorated. Ultimately, between 30 and 40 percent of the building’s structure needed to be replaced.

“This property was empty for the better part of 20 years, and with no investment or maintenance, anything that might have been easily fixed early on became compounded,” said Kottaridis. “The whole structure was unstable.”

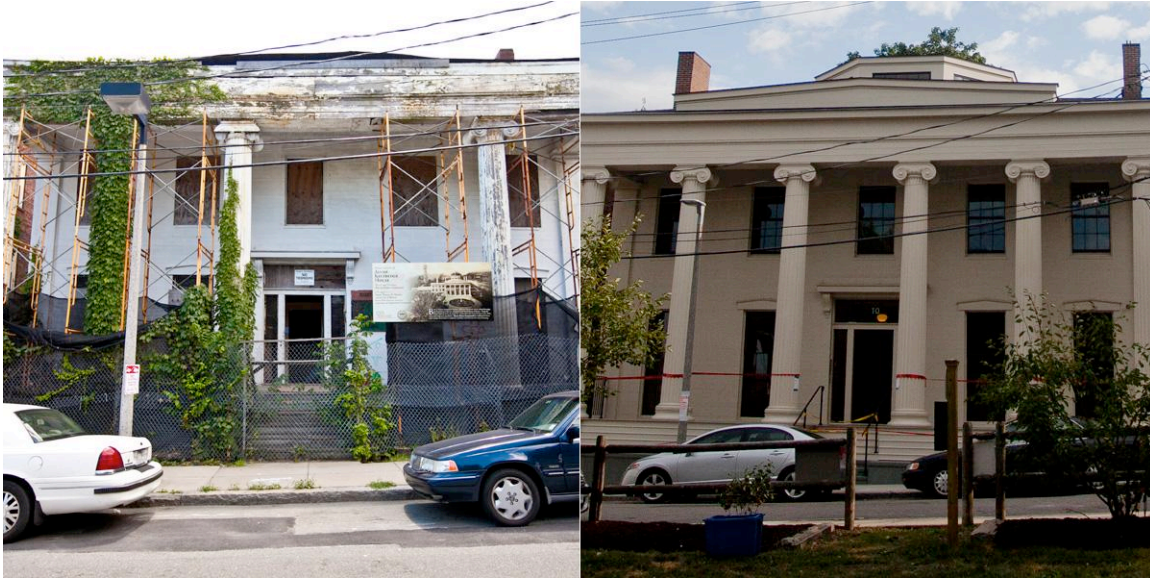
Inside, the building was trashed. Photos the group took of the building’s interior prior to renovations show trash scattered by vagrants, fireplaces stripped of valuable stone and metalwork, holes in the plaster walls, and banisters snapped off the railing of a spiral staircase.

“There were moments where we looked at one another and said, ‘Is this too far gone?’ ” Kottaridis said.

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Left: Aram Boghosian/Globe File 2011; Right: Zack Wittman/Boston Globe

Today, the building is a seamless blend of old and new. Specially made reproductions of damaged decorative items, like marbled glass in the lobby ceiling and wooden moldings around the door frames and columns, sit alongside originals that survived. Outside, a new coat of period-correct cream-colored paint covers original and new wooden siding. Three of the home's four original chimneys survived; the missing one was rebuilt with new brick.

The five apartments have a modern feel, with stainless-steel appliances and stone counters, but they retain some of the home's historic features, including the original floor-to-ceiling windows.

When Alvah Kittredge, a Roxbury alderman and a deacon at the Eliot Congregational Church, built his mansion on a large estate in Roxbury Highlands, it quickly became a symbol of Boston's post-Revolution prosperity. Later, in 1866, well-known architect Nathaniel Bradley moved into the home. Following Roxbury's annexation by Boston, the land around the house quickly filled in, and the posh suburb became a bustling section of the city.

The neighborhood had gone through a rough stretch, with a

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several arsons in the 1980s claiming nearby historic homes, and others falling into disrepair. But today it shows signs of a resurgence. A row of townhouses down the block was recently renovated, and a new park across the street from the Kittredge House was full of children playing.

“The rationale for rehabbing this is as much about making sure we preserve these places we’ll regret we didn’t later as it is about stabilizing and strengthening the neighborhood,” Kottaridis said.