

Pump House Vision Plan

August 31, 2024



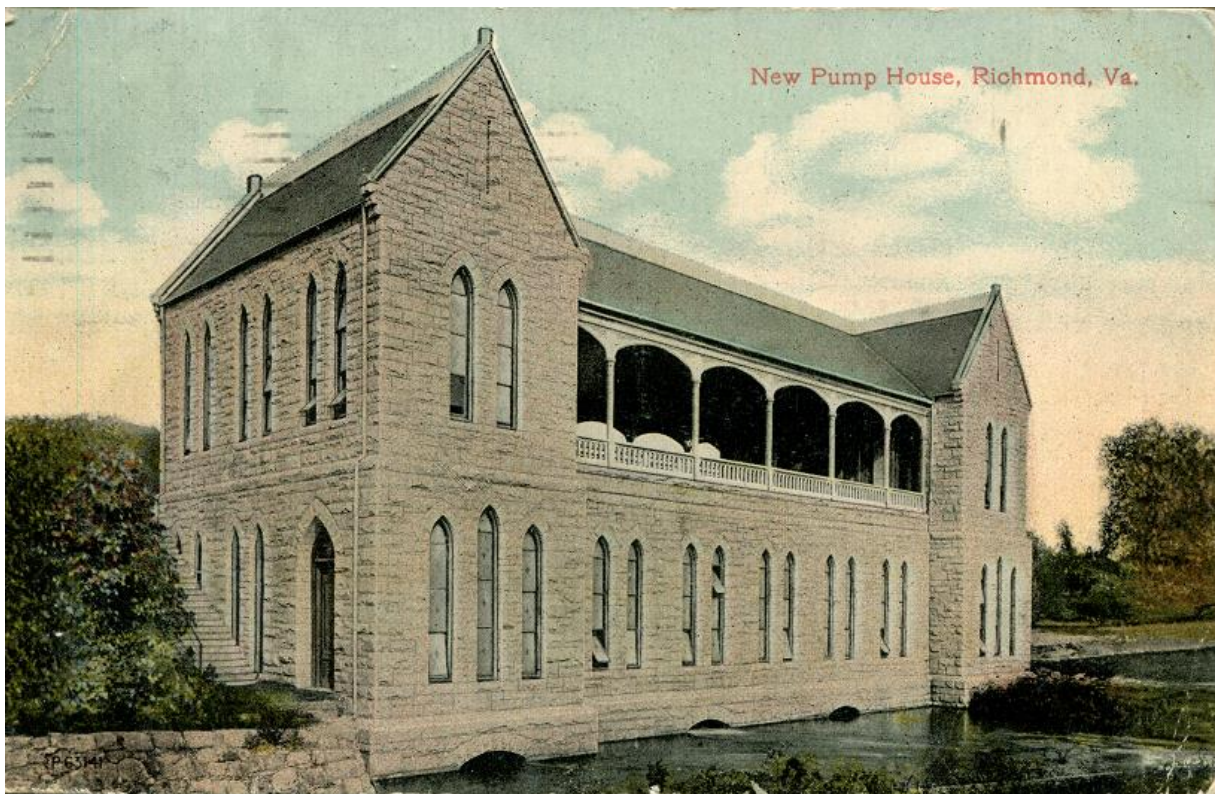
The New Pump House

History

The New Pump House was built between 1881-1883 and served as the primary water pumping facility for the City of Richmond until 1924. Located at the Three-Mile Locks of the James River & Kanawha Canal, the building once contained a series of water-driven pumps that propelled 12 million gallons of drinking water each day to the nearby reservoir in what is now Byrd Park.

Constructed from local granite in the Gothic Revival style, the building was unique in that in addition to pumping water, it also contained an open-air ballroom on its second floor that frames a gorgeous view of the adjacent canals and James River. At the turn of the 20th century, it hosted various dances and other social gatherings for the city's social elite.

After being decommissioned in 1924, the building fell into disrepair and changed hands, at one point being sold for \$1 to a local church. In 2002, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Pump House Park is now part of the James River Parks System (JRPS), making it the largest building in our city's sprawling and iconic public parks.



Vintage postcard featuring the New Pump House

Current State

Very little maintenance to the building's envelope has been performed since its abandonment in 1924, aside from some minor repairs to the roof that were made in the 1980s and early 2020s. This has led to significant deterioration in the building's finishes and underlying structure.

Prior to the founding of Friends of Pump House in 2017, there were sporadic volunteer efforts over the years to make critical repairs to the interior. Our volunteers and contractors have completed many important projects aimed at improving safety and preventing further deterioration. These include vegetation removal, replacement of rotted flooring and structural elements, construction of enclosures and railings around potential fall hazards, repair of a collapsing brick archway, and restoration of all windows and transoms in the boiler room. Other projects have included the removal of tens of thousands of pounds of ash and other debris.

Although much work has been done in recent years, the building does not comply with modern safety standards and accessibility requirements, and lacks basic utilities like water, sewer, and gas. Certain portions of the building remain off-limits due to damaged flooring and other issues. For these reasons, the city has placed various restrictions on accessing the building, including limiting occupancy to 25 people at a time and requiring hard hats to be worn by all visitors. Despite these limitations, Friends of Pump House has been able to open the building for limited cultural events, field trips, and educational tours.

Long Term Vision

Ultimately, we wish to see this historic treasure restored to its former glory, making it once again a gathering place for the people of Richmond. The Pump House's unique location and ambiance make it perfect for a variety of uses that will serve and benefit our community while maintaining its historic character. We envision that the building will serve educational and recreational purposes, which are described below.

Education

The Pump House is a living artifact that can be interpreted on multiple levels. As a waterworks, it represents the state of water treatment technology at the turn of the 20th century. The building's evolution from one that used falling water to provide mechanical power and gas for lighting, to one that burned coal for generating electricity illustrates the progression of technology that took place during the Gilded Age. From an architectural perspective, it serves as an impressive example of the late Gothic Revival period and is one of the relatively few extant buildings of this design. Its use as an event venue speaks to the changing tastes in public recreation during its heyday, as well as the historical divisions of race and class experienced by Richmonders in the past.

For these reasons, we believe that the Pump House should serve at least in part as an educational resource. This could be in the form of a small museum or interpretive center

with exhibits that explore the building's rich history. As an added benefit, the museum could also interpret the history of the James River & Kanawha Canal, which played an important role in the development of Richmond during the 19th century but is only sparingly commemorated elsewhere in the city.

In addition, the building routinely hosts groups of schoolchildren who complete science and technology-related educational activities during their visit. The continued use of the Pump House as an outdoor classroom aligns well with the city's desire to host every public school student in the parks system during the year.

Recreation

The JRPS Reedy Creek headquarters building serves as a welcome center for park visitors on the south side of the river, yet no equivalent facility exists on the north bank. Because the Pump House is a natural focal point for park visitors, we envision that in addition to providing historical interpretation, the building could also fulfill this important need. Such a welcome center could host many of the nature exhibits currently on display at the JRPS Reedy Creek facility, provide trail maps and information, serve as a "home base" for urban rangers, and perhaps even rent out canoes/kayaks/stand-up paddleboards for use in the canal. Using the Pump House in this way will further JRPS's mission to engage visitors with the natural world and welcome as many people as possible to the park.

Of course, the most well-known feature of the Pump House is its 2nd floor ballroom, which was a destination for the upper crust of Richmond society in the late 19th century. Contemporary news reports describe visitors arriving via the canal dressed in their finest suits and dresses to dance the night away. It also served as a venue for other types of events like banquets and reunions. Even today in its current condition, members of the public are constantly asking to hold weddings and other formal events in the ballroom. A restored Pump House with modern amenities would undoubtedly be one of the most highly sought-after event venues in Richmond. The income derived from facility rentals would then be used to sustain the building's continued operation and preservation.

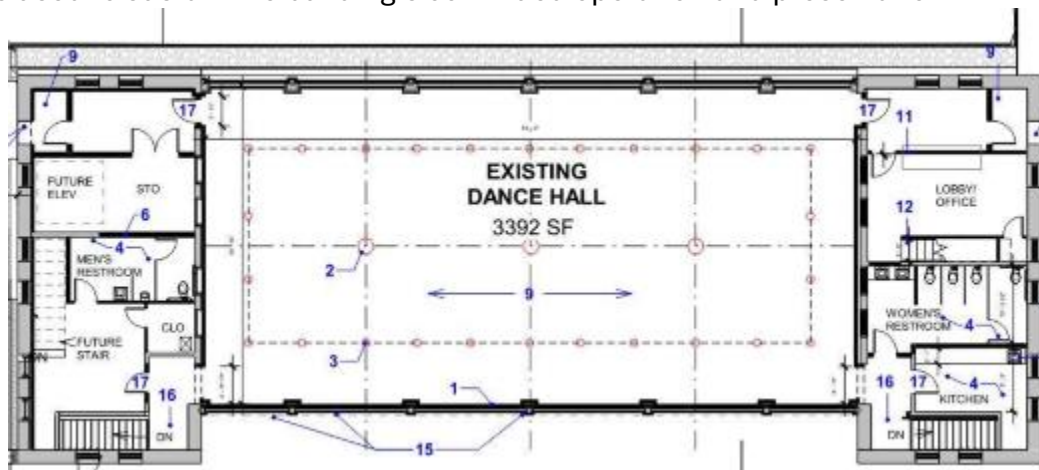


Figure 1 - Proposed 2nd floor plan. Courtesy of Quinn Evans.

Repair and Restoration – Short Term Mission

In the short term, there are several projects that need to be completed before existing access restrictions on the Pump House can be lifted. These improvements would also prevent further deterioration and make it easier to seek funding for a more expansive renovation later. In the meantime, they would permit the JRPS to host larger groups in the building safely, allowing the space to be used as a gateway to the park even before it is fully restored.

Roof Repair

While the Pump House's 141-year-old slate roof remains mostly intact, multiple leaks have resulted in significant water damage to the building. Repair of the roof is critical to prevent further deterioration, which will only increase the cost of rehabilitating the building. A secure envelope will buy the building more time and make it easier to seek funding for larger projects in the future. Fortunately, it appears that a roof replacement and building stabilization project will soon be possible thanks to a combination of both private and public funding. This project would likely begin in early 2025, contingent upon approval of a federal grant application.

Windows

The first phase of restoration is the repair of the pointed lancet windows that once provided natural light in the era before electric lighting was widely available. This stage is our proof of concept for restoring the Pump House: grassroots fundraising by volunteers buttressed by historic preservation grants that have yielded real results. Not only have we restored all of the windows and transoms in the boiler room, but we have also received a \$100,000 grant from the Roller-Bottimore Foundation to restore the remaining windows on the first floor, which is scheduled to begin in August 2024. This is our greatest achievement thus far and makes a strong case that along with the help of the City of Richmond and James River Parks System, the Friends of Pump House can make the vision of restoration a reality.

ADA Compliance

Like many historic buildings, the Pump House was not designed with the needs of disabled people in mind. The grade of the existing driveway from the main road makes it difficult for someone with mobility issues to visit, and even then, only the first floor is accessible. Thankfully, the construction of an ADA-compliant walkway is currently underway, which will make access to the 1st floor much safer and easier for everyone.

The lack of an elevator also limits access to the 2nd floor, which is the building's primary attraction. One solution that has been proposed is the construction of a bridge from Pump House Drive to the eastern side of the building. This bridge would be built on top of the existing walkway that crosses the canal. Plans for this walkway have been developed (Figure 2), but funding remains a challenge.



Figure 2- Proposed pedestrian bridge to 2nd floor. Courtesy of Rob Comet.

Utilities

The lack of water, sewer, and gas connections are among the biggest challenges that need to be overcome. While it should be relatively easy to obtain water from the Department of Public Utilities (DPU) pumping station next door, no sanitary sewer line exists along Pump House Drive. It is likely that some sort of alternative means of removing and treating wastewater from the building would need to be used. Natural gas may also be available nearby for the existing DPU facilities. A fully renovated building would likely require a larger electrical service, which may be difficult to obtain given the location of existing utility lines.

Conclusion

The Pump House is a Richmond landmark unlike any other, stunning in its design, and filled with history. The building has endured even a century after its abandonment, largely due to the efforts of dedicated volunteers who remain committed to its renewal. While there are significant obstacles that make this task more difficult, none of them are insurmountable and real progress is being made every day. By breathing new life into the Pump House, we will preserve its rich heritage and transform it back into a vibrant gathering place for the people of Richmond, ensuring that this iconic landmark continues to inspire generations to come.

About Friends of Pump House

Founded in 2017, Friends of Pump House is a volunteer-led non-profit organization dedicated to preserving, protecting, and restoring the historic Byrd Park Pump House. Members devote their time and energy to this cause in various ways, including participation in monthly workdays, hosting tours and educational events, advocacy, historic research, and fundraising. Friends of Pump House operates under a fiscal sponsorship agreement with the Friends of the James River Park.