

THE EDWARD F. SEARLES ESTATE | METHUEN, MA

For the community. For future generations!



Edward Francis Searles was born in Methuen on July 4, 1841 — the son of a mill worker who would grow up to control one of America's greatest Gilded Age fortunes. An interior designer by trade, Searles married the widow of railroad magnate Mark Hopkins in 1887, inheriting a fortune of \$21 million upon her death in 1891.

He spent the rest of his life transforming his childhood home on Lawrence Street into an extraordinary estate — 74 rooms, a brownstone chapel, a granite chime tower, carriage houses, and more than two dozen eclectic buildings. Most were designed by Henry Vaughan, the renowned English-Gothic architect who co-designed the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

In 2024, the City of Methuen purchased the 19-acre estate for \$3.25 million — saving it from a developer who had planned to demolish Pine Lodge and replace it with 151 apartment units. Today, the estate's future must be shaped by the community it belongs to.

FRIENDS OF THE SEARLES ESTATE

The Friends of the Edward F. Searles Estate" is a community of volunteers who are committed to the preservation, restoration and innovative repurposing of one of Methuen's most iconic, remaining landmarks, The Edward F. Searles Estate.

We call on the Mayor and City Council of the City of Methuen to take the following steps to achieve these goals for our community and for future generations.

STEP ONE – Recognize the value of the Edward F. Searles Estate to the City of Methuen.

Today, the value of the Estate is most frequently measured by its municipal assessed value – *a rate that has been rejected by the marketplace* – or by its most recent purchase price – *a price artificially inflated by the inclusion of over \$1 million worth of world-class artifacts.*

We believe neither amount is an accurate measure of the value of the Estate to the long-term future of our community. In fact, absent a clear and achievable vision of what the Estate could become, we believe an accurate assessment is currently unachievable.

Having said that, the preservation of the historic legacy of the Estate is priceless and irreplaceable. From a development perspective, the opportunities are only limited by our creativity and imagination.

A Grateful Community

"Now therefore be it resolved by the citizens of Methuen in town meeting assembled that to Edward F. Searles, the donor, there is now, and ever shall be, due a debt of appreciation and gratitude not to be expressed in words, and that we commend to our children and our children's children, in the use of such riches as God and their own efforts may endow them with, a like spirit of disposal."

A 1905 statement in honor of the donation of the current City Hall (formerly the Searles High School).

Finally, we reject the notion that the Estate represents an unsustainable liability. Such short-term thinking will inevitably lead to failure and will steal this limitless opportunity from future generations.

STEP TWO – Commit to preserving the historic artifacts for the citizens of Methuen.

In November of 2020, the artifacts purchased with the Estate were valued at \$1,372,500. Today, the citizens of Methuen own the art of world-renowned artists whose work you would visit in the most recognized museums in the world.

Methuen has been blessed by Edward Searles' philanthropic generosity to our city. Continuing his legacy, we are now the benefactors of his patronage of the fine arts. A number of beautiful artworks on the estate, particularly sculptural pieces in marble, bronze, and wood, were created by leading artists from the United States, Italy, and Germany. In addition to these important sculptural masterpieces, the estate features intricately hand carved furniture by a number of top furniture makers of the late 19th-century and masterworks in stained glass. It is important to note that artists whose work is now owned by our city are represented in collections at the most prestigious art museums in the world. These museums are located in Washington DC, New York City, Boston, Paris, London, and Los Angeles. Artists whose works are part of the Searles estate collection are held in a number of private, government, and university collections throughout the US as well.

The estate includes sculptures by Boston native, Thomas Ball, whose sculptures appear in major art museum collections. His artwork is of national artistic and historic significance. One well known example of his work is his monumental equestrian statue of George Washington, featured at the entrance to the Boston Public Garden. Ball's monumental masterpieces, the Washington Monument, featuring the world's largest standing bronze of George Washington, was sculpted in Florence, Italy and cast in Munich, Germany with a base carved in the finest Carrara marble. The statue of George Washington was the focal sculpture displayed in the Fine Arts Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Despite its international stature, this generous gift to the people of Methuen by Mr. Searles, was sold in 1958 and is now located at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles. The failure of our city officials to act in a timely manner led to the loss of this artistic treasure.

We believe these treasures – the Edward F. Searles Art Collection – should be kept for future generations to appreciate. The city should work with appropriate educational institutions to develop a plan to preserve and display – on the Estate and perhaps elsewhere – this magnificent collection. Coordination with Methuen's Museum of History and Methuen's Historic Commission would enhance our ability to share our unique history with future generations.

STEP THREE – Complete a comprehensive evaluation of the property.

When the city purchased the Estate, a comprehensive assessment of its current condition, together with its prospects for development and repurposing, was envisioned. We believe such a study should be completed by a qualified organization.

Although the recent RFP process has provided some of what was envisioned at the time of purchase, we believe the city must invest the resources to produce a thorough and completely unbiased assessment of the property. In addition to documenting the conditions of each the historic buildings, the assessment should evaluate which, if any, of the additions made to the Estate since Mr. Searles' death could be eliminated to potentially enhance the value of the Estate.

STEP FOUR – Recruit and employ a team of professional planners dedicated to managing the evaluation of the property and developing a vision and long-term development plan for its future.

To date, the city's passive approach to 'managing' the property has been based on a strategy that would rely on a single buyer to preserve its history and unleash its economic potential. Today, we are calling for a different strategy.

As we call for an aggressive and proactive approach to the Estate, we recognize the city does not have the professional resources to dedicate to a project of this size and complexity. We believe the city must invest in the expertise and experience necessary to achieve these goals.

In that regard, a successful planning team could include an architect, construction engineer, landscape architect, financial analyst, project manager, legal counsel, or some other combination of professional planners. Where possible, the city should attempt to utilize any available *federal, state, and non-profit preservation and development resources*.

In addition to recruiting the appropriate talent, the city needs to establish a quasi-independent governance structure that will ensure accountability to the city's taxpayers while isolating the overall project from the politics of the moment.

While we're open to a more customized alternative, we believe the oversight and development model typically associated with a municipal redevelopment authority would deliver the expertise, oversight, and independence which this project demands.

STEP FIVE – Implement the development plan through a combination of private, public, and non-profit investment.

We believe the ultimate plan for the Estate must be the sum of many parts built on a common vision.

Armed with a realistic assessment of the Estate's infrastructure, and a clear set of development expectations, the city should issue an open-ended request for proposals. Acceptable proposals could come from a diverse range of private, public, and non-profit entities, including, but not limited to education, business, hospitality, healthcare, technology, social services, and/or municipal services.

Unlike the recently completed request, proposals could be submitted for one or more parts of the Estate, would require no minimum financial commitment, and could be proposed as a purchase, a lease, or some other form of a public-private partnership.

Each submission should endeavor to highlight how the proposal could be successfully integrated into the vision of a comprehensive development plan.

Under this option, the city could maintain ownership of all or parts of the Estate, managing its responsibilities through an appropriate quasi-public entity (i.e. Trust, Consortium, Conservancy, or other appropriate legal entity).

STEP SIX – Invest in the future of Methuen.

Sadly, we believe that for many the current focus has simply been on the recovery of the city's investment – the purchase price and the ongoing maintenance costs. As previously noted, we believe this is extremely shortsighted and inevitably invites failure. Alternatively, rather than measuring the city's return on investment over the period of a year or two, we expect to be measuring the success of this investment over many years to come.

The City of Methuen is fortunate to have a significant amount of free cash. We believe that committing a modest portion of these funds to this plan is exactly why these funds exist. The city should allocate sufficient funding to complete a comprehensive assessment, and to establish a highly qualified planning team. In addition, the city should continue to provide for the essential maintenance and security of the Estate.

Although we defer to the Mayor and CAFO regarding the details, we believe they should establish a 'Searles Development Fund' with an initial investment of \$2 to \$3 million to launch this effort and to demonstrate the city's commitment to other investors.

The plan we've articulated is designed to position the city to control its financial exposure by securing financial support from the Federal governments, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, private and public preservation grants, and private and public philanthropic

sources. For example, the knowledge gained from a comprehensive infrastructure assessment would enable the city to seek Federal support for essential high-cost upgrades such as fire suppression and handicapped accessibility. The establishment of the 'Edward F. Searles Art Collection' as a cultural resource would enable the city to seek both academic and philanthropic funding for its preservation and exhibition. It's easy to see how a well-developed plan will create multiple possibilities.

Finally, like the project itself, the city's return on investment will inevitably be the sum of many parts... the sale or lease of specific property... repayment of development loans... new jobs and the employment of local craftsmen... and the collateral benefits that will come as the Estate becomes a destination for social, educational and economic activity.

For decades, the City of Methuen silently benefitted from the stable stewardship and academic mission of the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary... they preserved our history and educated our children. Today, we have an obligation to pick up that mantle and to reveal the gem that's been hidden 'behind the walls,' to share its mystique with our community and with countless others who will come to Methuen to appreciate what we build.