

Letter Supporting the Varnum House Museum from Chris Feisthamel

Former Varnum Continentals President (Nine Years of Service)

To: Trustees and Members of the Varnum Continentals
From: Chris Feisthamel, former President, Varnum Continentals
Date: October 12, 2023
Re: Preserving the Varnum Continentals

I am writing to introduce myself to those members who have recently joined the organization, as well as offer my opinion to the members I am familiar with, on its recently published communication, which is a plan to potentially sell the Varnum House Museum, a significant part of the organization since 1939.

I was initially a member and trustee of the Varnum Continentals before being elected as its President in 2015. I served for nine years before resigning in October 2022. During those nine years, I tried to be an inclusive, resourceful, equity-minded steward and leader of all the elements of the organization. I felt (and feel) that the purpose of the membership was to follow the mission of the by-laws and be good stewards.

What is good stewardship?

It is leaving the organization in a better place when exiting than when entering. Websters defines stewardship as: “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.”

At every meeting, I reminded the organization of the great strides and improvements in each area. The collection was growing and was focusing, the Armory was being taken care of, the House had never been in better shape with an active docent program, the Militia grew by many multiples and most importantly the membership roster was large and growing at a healthy rate. We had an active Armory rental program that contributed to the coffers, as well as the community’s awareness of who the Varnum Continentals were. We held fund raisers where members volunteered and funded small projects. The leaders of the town actively attended our events and encouraged our collaboration.

How did this happen?

It happened with awareness through social media and word of mouth, equitable leadership, prudent financial management, and a broad range of offerings and interest areas. The operations of maintaining the membership, holding meetings, and paying the bills was a break-even business, and we were able to fund the bigger capital

improvement projects with grants. In fact, the Champlin Foundation provided over \$800,000 in grants to improve just the House. They have also provided numerous other grants for the expansion of the Armory Museum. They have been very good to the Varnum Continentals.

The recent communication and proposed plan are contrary to all that previous work and spirit. It was hastily construed by a secretive minority and wasn't hatched until the drivers had confidence that they had broken the organization enough so that their ill-conceived plan might work. The bylaws are being re-drafted to support a single-minded individual that has a single goal in mind. The goal is to dismantle the Varnum Continentals and focus on one portion of the original bylaws: a museum. The nominating committee and, therefore the Trustees, have been stacked to create a team of followers. The plan was created and the proforma financials manipulated to fit the agenda and on paper, appear to prove that the organization can't possibly continue as is. I am a CPA and a hospital CFO. I know my numbers, and those aren't them.

It is doubtful the Varnum Continentals would have seen one cent from the Champlin Foundation if they had known the House would have re-appeared as unrestricted spending money for an overbuilt museum. The House has received excellent stewardship for the last 84 years, some better than others, but at this moment it is in much better condition than nine years ago.

Two items of note, the bylaws (before any changes) limited the amount of assets that can be sold by the Varnum Continentals. It was the founder's intent to accumulate meaningful assets, not sell them. Secondly, the House carries several deed restrictions; be prepared to spend money on lawyers. Also be prepared to defend to the local officials and the Champlin Foundation the sale of a long-time community minded asset.

Today the Varnum Continentals website describes the house as: "The house has been restored as a national shrine and museum, so that future generations may benefit from the example of this great citizen, scholar, soldier, jurist, and statesman who gave outstanding service to the country in the early days of the American Revolution."

In just over 11 short months, the current leader and a small group of followers have undone the work of hundreds of members over the course of nine years.

As the former President, I trust and urge you to vote against the sale of the Varnum House Museum, it will lead to the demise of the organization, run against nearly every intent of the founding members in 1907, and demonstrate incredibly poor stewardship.

END