

JMU To Tear Down Historic South Main Street House

By IAN MUNRO Daily News-Record Mar 14, 2022 Updated Apr 7, 2022

A historic home of Harrisonburg lawyers and judges is to be torn down for James Madison University, according to city documents.

The Haas home, located at 741 S. Main St., was built in 1880 and was home to a dynasty of city legal leaders that included two local 20th-century judges.

"I think that's probably the oldest surviving house in that part of South Main Street," Jody Meyerhoffer, local historian, said on Friday.

He said he noticed the fence up around the property the day before and became upset at seeing another historic home slated for demolition.

An early record of the property, from an 1885 local atlas, shows the home on the northwest corner of Grace and South Main streets and the property extending to Grattan Street — totaling over 14 acres, according to the Harrisonburg geographic information system.

Across the street, there used to be many historic homes that have been replaced by JMU properties.

"All the 'old guard' families lived from South Main Street from Franklin Street going south, and Judge Haas' house I think was about the oldest one left out there," Meyerhoffer said.

"I just thought there was a very remote chance they'd use it for offices," he said. "I don't see the practical purpose of tearing it down myself."

The home seems to have been built for Charles E. Haas, a Harrisonburg lawyer, and his wife before it went into possession of their son, Talfourd Noon Haas, as the address is listed for T.N. Haas' father in 1880 census documents.

T.N. Haas held many roles over the years. He was the Rockingham-Page Circuit Court judge for over two decades, Rockingham Memorial Hospital president, Rockingham National Bank director, and Emmanuel Episcopal Church vestryman, according to his obituary.

T.N. Haas was born on Feb. 22, 1864, in Rockbridge County. He served as the circuit court judge for Rockingham-Page from 1906 to 1927 and died in Bluefield, W.Va., at the age of 74, according to "Men of Mark and Representative Citizens of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County," edited by John W. Wayland.

His son, Hamilton Haas, would also go on to become a Harrisonburg lawyer and judge after service in the Army. Hamilton Haas was born in 1900 and served with the 464th U.S. Army Air Corps and fought in Africa and Italy in the Second World War.

He was a lawyer and was named to the bench of the 25th Judicial District, which included Harrisonburg and the counties of Rockingham and Page in 1949. He retired in 1972. Like his father, he was heavily involved with Emmanuel Episcopal Church and lived at the South Main Street home.

City documents for the 4,000-square-foot, two-story home and the half acre it is now on show the property was donated to Rockingham Memorial Hospital on Dec. 2, 1993.

On Feb. 6, 2007, it was then given to The Diocesan Missionary Society of Virginia, and was used for the Canterbury Episcopal Ministry for university students until the property was traded to James Madison University a few years ago.

In the trade, the university sold the Diocesan Missionary Society of Virginia the parcel located between 640 S. Main St. and 610 S. Main St. for \$300,000 on Nov. 15. The parcel JMU traded to the Diocesan Missionary Society of Virginia was valued at \$344,000 in 2019, according to city documents.

The plan was for the campus ministry to stay at the 741 S. Main St. address for two more years as part of the deal, then-JMU spokesperson Bill Wyatt said in a December 2019 interview.

The 741 S. Main St. parcel was sold to JMU for \$610,000 and was earlier this year valued at \$478,300, according to city documents. This year, the property was assessed at \$502,500.

JMU spokesperson Ginny Cramer said the building was in such a state of disrepair that there was no choice but to tear it down.

“The building had gotten to a point where it couldn’t reasonably be repaired to an operable condition,” she said in an email. “Working with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, JMU plans to leave the area as a green space and to install a plaque, which will include a QR code to allow visitors to learn more about the T.N. Haas home online.”

A Friday afternoon request for how the building had fallen into disarray so quickly after in regular use by the Episcopal mission just a few years prior was not answered.

On Friday, local fire crews practiced on the building and on Sunday, an excavator was parked outside the home and inside the fencing.

Daily News-Record advertisement archives show it was used as a location for therapy sessions called the RMH Haas House in the late 1990s.

Hamilton Haas’ widow, Ethel, died at the age of 93 on June 1, 2002, and is noted in her obituary as having lived at the home until her husband’s death in 1987.

The former RMH lab technician was noted for her generosity to the hospital and was noted in the Daily News-Record property transfers to have sold a parcel at the corner of South Main Street and Grace Street to RMH for \$250,000 in December 1993.

The demolition permit for the structure was filed in the city on Jan. 31 and issued on Feb. 4, according to city documents.

“I had a feeling it was going to happen,” Meyerhoffer said.

Historic Harrisonburg Home Owned By JMU Reduced to Rubble

By IAN MUNRO Daily News-Record Mar 15, 2022 Updated Apr 7, 2022

The sounds of the intermittent beeping mixed with the sliding and crunching of wood and vinyl siding at the intersection of Grace and South Main streets Monday afternoon.

By the end of the day, a Victorian-style home built over 140 years ago was in ruins, much of it carted off by trucks with dump trailers.

"I think that's probably the oldest surviving house in that part of South Main Street," Jody Meyerhoffer, local historian, said on Friday. The structure was torn down Monday.

The historic home is not the first one in the area to meet such a fate, according to Meyerhoffer.

"All the 'old guard' families lived from South Main Street from Franklin Street going south, and Judge Haas' house I think was about the oldest one left out there," he said Friday.

JMU had the building inspected and the review found the wood framing, fireplace, chimney and foundation to be areas of concern, according to documents provided by city staff Monday.

"In order for the university to use the building a change of use would be required resulting in significant repairs and updates," Ginny Cramer, a JMU spokesperson, said in a Monday email.

JMU hired Engineering Solutions to conduct a review of the structure, according to Cramer.

"Engineering Solutions found several areas of the interior foundation with severe deterioration," she said. "Additionally, several issues were identified with the wood support posts in the basement and crawlspace where water and insects were recently active. The exterior foundation also has significant settlement along with a myriad of issues with the drywall, chimney and fireplace."

The 4,000-square-foot, two-story home has been vacant since it was last in regular use by the Episcopal college mission and was a meeting place for religious outreach efforts in 2020.

From when it was built until 1993, the structure was home to a dynasty of city legal leaders and their families that included two 20th-century judges, including Talfourd Noon Haas and his son, Hamilton Haas.

JMU had notified the Virginia Department of Historic Resources of its intention to tear the home down in June, according to Stephanie Williams, deputy director of the department.

"We have been in consultation with JMU continuously on this," she said.

The department recommended JMU conduct a survey to learn about the importance of the structure to local history.

"While both the report and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources concur that the 741 South Main Street house is not individually eligible for Virginia Landmarks Register/National Register of Historic Places, it is a contributing resource to the Downtown Harrisonburg Historic District," Cramer said. "The report, which contains detailed historical and architectural information of the T.N. Haas home, will be available online, as well as in hard copy, for members of the public wishing to learn about the structure."

The parking lot behind where the home stood will remain in use for JMU-owned residential properties at 10 W. Grace St. and 735 S. Main St., according to Cramer.

The space where the home once stood will become a green space, where there will be a sign describing the home and a QR code for those who are interested to learn more about the Haas house, Cramer said.

JMU acquired the Haas home through a 2019 land swap with the Diocesan Missionary Society of Virginia.

JMU sold a vacant parcel between 610 and 640 S. Main St. to Diocesan Missionary Society of Virginia for \$300,000 on Nov. 15, 2019, and the university got the Haas house. The missionary has since built a new building on the vacant parcel it traded the Haas house for.

The historic home also played a role in the renaming of nearby Cantrell Avenue to Martin Luther King Jr. Way nearly a decade ago, according to Daily News-Record archives and Panayotis Giannakouros, secretary of the Martin Luther King Jr. Way Coalition.

“In piecing together the story behind the name of Cantrell, Judge Haas was a pivotal figure,” Giannakouros said.

Evidence connected through the house’s history was “pivotal” in learning there was no military leader named Cantrell as thought and that it was based on a typo — and thus a defense of keeping the road name became moot, he said.

“It connected that part of the street to a lot of history,” Giannakouros said.

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T.N. Haas was also a member of the Harrisonburg town council during a period of growth and development for the town.

His son, Hamilton Haas, would also go on to become a Harrisonburg lawyer and judge after service in the Army. Hamilton Haas was born in 1900 and served with the 464th U.S. Army Air Corps and fought in Africa and Italy in the Second World War.

He was a lawyer and was named to the bench of the 25th Judicial District, which included Harrisonburg and the counties of Rockingham and Page in 1949. He retired in 1972. Like his father, he was heavily involved with Emmanuel Episcopal Church and lived at the South Main Street home.

City documents show the half-acre property that included the home was donated to Rockingham Memorial Hospital on Dec. 2, 1993.

Daily News-Record advertisement archives show it was used as a location for therapy sessions called the RMH Haas House in the late 1990s.

Hamilton Haas' widow, Ethel, died at the age of 93 on June 1, 2002, and is noted in her obituary as having lived at the home until her husband's death in 1987.

The former RMH lab technician was noted for her generosity to the hospital and was noted in the Daily News-Record property transfers to have sold a parcel at the corner of South Main Street and Grace Street to RMH for \$250,000 in December 1993.

The demolition permit for the structure was filed in the city on Jan. 31 and issued on Feb. 4, according to city documents.

The cost of demolition was estimated at \$150,000, according to the documents.

RAZED AND CONFUSED

JMU's Continued Demolitions Frustrate Residents

By IAN MUNRO Daily News-Record Apr 8, 2022 Updated Apr 8, 2022

James Madison University's recent demolition of yet another historic Harrisonburg home has sparked outcry among residents and Valley natives.

Some members of the community are calling for changes that would require the institution to go through a public process before it pulls such properties down.

On March 14, JMU began demolishing the Haas House, which was built in 1880, removing another historic home on South Main Street in the gateway to the downtown area.

"It was very hurtful that they didn't give Harrisonburg residents a chance to know what was going to happen before it happened," said Nancy Sowers, a city resident over 80 years old.

The 4,000-square-foot, two-story home had been vacant since it was last in regular use by the Episcopal college mission and was a meeting place for religious outreach efforts as recently as 2020.

From when it was built until 1993, the structure was home to a dynasty of city legal leaders and their families that included two 20th-century judges, including Talfourd Noon Haas and his son, Hamilton Haas.

The university cited its poor structural condition as a reason for its demolition.

Other city residents the Daily News-Record spoke with said they also didn't like how JMU went about the demolition of the home, but declined to go on the record as they felt the large institution could somehow retaliate against them or their families' finances.

JMU does not only tear buildings down downtown. In the same week, it had pulled down another home — a single-family farther down South Main Street.

According to city real estate records, JMU bought the 1,180-square-foot single-family home for \$325,000 on Nov. 8.

Last year, the home and the 1.23 acres it was on were assessed at a combined \$169,700, according to city real estate documents. It is now a field.

“We value the university’s relationships within the community and always look to continue fostering those partnerships,” said an emailed statement provided by JMU spokesperson Mary-Hope Vass. “The university has heard the concerns from our fellow community members about this specific process and will take that into consideration as we move forward.”

Vass said the university works with the city staff and elected officials through a liaison committee and other “valuable partnerships.”

She also provided a [link to planning documents](#) that are open to the public to view.

Some local residents see the continued demolition of historic Harrisonburg buildings as an untenable trend that goes beyond the school, such as Andrea Dono, director of the Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance.

Dono has written a letter to facilities management and the university president, Jonathan Alger, to ask them to “please put the priorities of historic resources ahead of some of their decisions that have been made on finances.”

Dono said the destruction of historic buildings has left a mark on the community.

“I think part of our built environment is what makes Harrisonburg, Harrisonburg,” she said. “And once you start removing those assets and changing our character, you’re changing Harrisonburg. So if you’re doing that without community involvement, you’re not putting appropriate interest on community values.”

HDR is working on a proposal for a new city ordinance that would be through the 1966 Historic Preservation Act, according to Dono. It would require City Council to enact a historic preservation district, which would require a design review board to look at plans for historic buildings of large enough scale, such as a demolition. In some cases of preservation ordinances, owners have to put the building up for sale at market rate for up to one year to see if there is a buyer who would purchase it and restore the property, if the current owner did not have the means or interest.

Dono said such an ordinance here locally is “long overdue.”

“If you look at maps of what downtown had, and now the parking lots we have in their place, we have lost so much,” Dono said. “Really, if we wait any longer, 50 years from now, who knows what downtown could look like and how many more buildings could be lost.”

Penny Imeson, director of Rocktown History, said the organization hasn’t had conversations about such an ordinance before. She said she would want to see the proposed ordinance before backing such a measure.

“I’m waiting to see and interested to see how this conversation develops,” Imeson said.

She said sometimes historical preservation can be difficult to achieve.

In one instance, the historic Morrison House on the corner of Liberty and West Market streets was offered to the historical society to pick up the building and move it. But after 12 years, not enough funding had materialized, and the building ended up being razed.

One neighbor to a property JMU tore down this year found out about the demolition the morning it began when some members of the crew that had gathered at the site were wearing clothes that read JMU.

“That’s how I was notified,” said Robert Smith, a Harrisonburg renter. “Definitely came as a surprise.”

“I don’t necessarily mind [JMU] being expansive,” he said. “However, when it comes to residential areas like this, I wish they would slow things down a little bit — make a more centralized effort and then push outward from there, rather than picking little pieces from the town till there’s nothing left.”