

# Georgetown Record

Friday, February 17, 2017

Georgetown.WickedLocal.com

Vol. 24, No. 1 ■ \$2

## BUILDING COMMUNITY



Georgetown resident Ed Des Jardins poses for a photo in 2014 as he looks through a binder full of historical home drawings he worked on while inside his home. WICKED LOCAL PHOTO BY DAVID SOKOL

## History's savior

By Bryan McGonigle  
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For nearly a half century, he helped save a plethora of historic buildings in three different communities and brought history to life for several generations. Now, he's stepping aside.

Ed Des Jardins has resigned from the Georgetown Historical Commission, for which he served as chairman.

"I want to spend some time with my kids on the West Coast and my grandchildren," Des Jardins said as he sat in his home on Larkspur Circle and looked through photographs

Historical Commission Chairman Ed Des Jardins steps down

and recognitions he's earned over the years.

### Boy from Bucksport

Des Jardins, 80, has always had a passion for buildings – designing them, drawing them, researching

SEE DES JARDINS, A5

## Capturing the past

The work of a preservationist isn't easy or simply a hobby. Des Jardins has spent more time researching buildings, cemeteries and other quiet standing monuments to local history than most people could imagine. He's channeled his passion and expertise to secure grants to save and refurbish properties in Georgetown, Byfield and Rowley that otherwise would have crumbled into oblivion or been torn down.

And in the end, at that moment when a building is saved from demolition or disrepair, Des Jardins says it's worth it.

"It's terrific – you're saving part of the town's history," Des Jardins said. "People don't realize, once these are gone, they're gone forever. You can't bring history back. So you try to capture some of that."

Des Jardins and his wife, Jeannine, first lived in Georgetown from 1967 to 1976, and Ed served as chairman of the Historical Commission back then as well. He was also in the Historical Society for nine years.

In 1970, Des Jardins oversaw the sale of the Historical Society's first home, the 1692 Pillsbury-Dickinson-Witham House.

"It was out in the boonies, and some of the elderly couldn't get to it," Des Jardins said. "It needed a lot of work, and there weren't a lot of funds available for that."

So Des Jardins and the Historical Society bought a new place (well, a really old place) in town, the Brocklebank-Nelson-Beecher house, now the Brocklebank Museum.

Interesting fact: The Brocklebank Museum is part of abolitionist history. Rev. Charles Beecher, brother of famous author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, bought the house in 1858, and it was used as part of the Underground Railroad. When doing repairs in the basement many years ago, workers discovered a "slave hole."

"They opened up the wall,

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## DES JARDINS

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them and saving them – as well as a curiosity for history.

He was raised in Bucksport, Maine, a small town along the Penobscot River, which even today has fewer than 5,000 people. After serving in the U.S. Air Force, Des Jardins studied architecture in Boston and, while in graduate school at Harvard, studied under a well-known genius of design.

"I went to Harvard and learned from the chairman of the Department of Architecture, Benjamin Thompson, who had his own business," Des Jardins said.

That boy from Bucksport joined Thompson's Cambridge-based architecture firm and went on to enjoy a thriving career in architecture, working with Thompson on Boston's Faneuil Hall markets, the South Street Seaport in New York and Colonial Williamsburg, and embarking on a thriving architecture career.

"And that kind of got me into historical preservation" he noted.

In what spare time he has, Des Jardins likes to sketch pictures of buildings. He's sold many and includes many in his holiday cards. And a few years ago, he donated dozens of his drawings of Bucksport to that town's library so they could be sold to raise money for the library's restoration.





**Historical Commission Chair Ed Des Jardins has stepped down after decades of historical preservation work. Left to right, back row: Selectmen Joe Bonavita, Doug Dawes, Gary Fowler and Steve Sadler. Left to right, front row: Selectmen Chair David Surface, Ed Des Jardins and former Selectman Phil Trapani.** [COURTESY PHOTO]

and there was an entire room where the slaves used to come on the Underground Railroad," Des Jardins said. "They would park in the back where the barn was and take them through the cellar entrance, and they'd stay here for a day or two and then ultimately move on to Maine and eventually to Canada."

Des Jardins went on to save more historic buildings in town, including an old church no one wanted.

"One thing that was interesting was purchased – and you drive by it on the way up North Street – the 1829 Old Baptist Church," Des Jardins said, flipping through a scrapbook packed with photos of his accomplishments. "They were going to tear it down and demolish it, and I said, 'No, we can't have this,' so I bought it."

Des Jardins had that church converted into a youth center for the town. Eventually it would be sold again and converted into apartments.

Des Jardins also designed the town flag in 1970. And he's responsible for what we know as "Old Nancy,"

a replica of the gun carriage that held the Historic Cannon, which was captured from the British munitions ship "Nancy" in 1775, on display in the Georgetown Town Hall basement.

"I did some research over at the Harvard library and found out exactly what the cannon base looked like and how it was built, through documents and drawings," Des Jardins said. "I was able to take that and I met with the head of Spaulding Reproductions, and we were able to put the cannon back on an exact base like it came off the ship."

**Flying away**

In 1976, Des Jardins was appointed chairman of Georgetown's Bicentennial Commission, setting up a program to commemorate the nation's 200th anniversary. For such a momentous occasion, Des Jardins went sky-high.

"My brother is a hot air balloonist from Pennsylvania," he continued. "I had him bring up a helium-filled balloon on the back of his truck."

The balloon, piloted by



**Drawings of "Old Nancy" a Revolutionary War canon, top, the 1660 Captain Samuel Brocklebank House, center, and the 1692 Pillsbury Dickenson House, bottom, lay on the desk of Georgetown resident Ed Des Jardins inside his home office.** WICKED LOCAL PHOTO BY DAVID SOKOL

Des Jardins' brother John, went from Georgetown to Newbury as Ed followed in a vehicle below.

"You can't control those damn things – once the air gets at it, it takes it wherever it takes it," Des Jardins laughed. "One of the things I did learn from John was once they did land, they tried to land in a farmer's field or something like that, and we did just that in Newbury. And once it lands, what you're supposed to do is have a bottle of champagne in the balloon itself. And as the farmer comes running out, screaming, 'You're ruining my crops!' you hand him the bottle of champagne."

Des Jardins and his family lived in Byfield from 1976 to 1994 and in Rowley from 1994 to 2005. And Des Jardins stayed active in his historical restoration crusade in both towns.

While in Byfield, he served on the Board of Directors of the Lowell's Maritime

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Foundation in Amesbury and worked on preserving the 1793 Lowell's Boat Shop. He also prepared construction documents to get funding for work on the 1877 First District One Room Schoolhouse.

In Rowley, he served on both the Rowley Historical Commission and the Rowley Historical Society and was involved in saving a 1775 barn from demolition by having it moved to the 1677 Platts-Bradstreet House, home of the Historical Society.

He even co-wrote a book, "Images of America: Rowley."

**Coming home**

And in 2005, Ed and Jeanine Des Jardins returned to Georgetown.

Des Jardins again joined the Historical Commission and the Board of Directors of the Historical Society.

He helped oversee the restoration of the Brocklebank Museum, which included basement structural work, adding a handicapped-accessible ramp and additional parking and more, with funds from the Community Preservation Act, which was established by the state in 2001 to help communities pay for historical restoration as well as purchase open space and housing.

He helped oversee the restoration of the historic Union Cemetery and Harry Murch Park as well as a historic survey of 51 properties in the Elm Street District, all in 2008 and all funded in part with CPA funds. Under Des Jardins' leadership, the commission also conducted a survey of 90 properties in the Village Center and helped the town get CPA

funds to convert part of Perley Elementary School into the new Senior Center.

"Thank God for the CPA," Des Jardins said with awe.

In 2014, Des Jardins was honored with the Massachusetts Historical Commission Preservation Award.

Now that Des Jardins is stepping down, former Selectman Phil Trapani will chair the commission.

"What you may not know is Ed's been waiting for three years for me to finish my selectman duties so I could take over the Historical Commission, and then he could walk away," Trapani joked at Monday's Board of Selectmen meeting, where the board presented Des Jardins with a citation for his years of service. "Ed was absolutely instrumental, and I'm very humbled that he's trusting me to take over."

In addition to the Board of Selectmen, Trapani was on several other committees in town but scaled back to focus more of his time on his family. He stayed with the Historical Commission, though.

"Phil's going to take the [chairman] role now, and he's very good," Des Jardins said.

Will Trapani be up to filling Des Jardins' shoes?

"He thinks he will be," the boy from Bucksport laughed as he closed his scrapbook.

**What is Building Community?** *Through news coverage and outreach, Wicked Local's Building Community initiative is meant to enable a path toward civic involvement and help forge new ties that bind the community together. If you have a suggestion for a local story or event, email us at [georgetown@wickedlocal.com](mailto:georgetown@wickedlocal.com).*