



HISTORIC  
SALEM INC

---

🔧 Preservation at work

January 2016

Dear Members of Salem City Council and Planning Board:

*RE: F.W. Webb Proposal for Universal Steel site and two adjacent parcels*

Historic Salem, Inc., whose mission includes ensuring that new development complements the historic character of the city, believes strongly that the current proposal from F.W. Webb for a combined warehouse, distribution center, and showroom on the Universal Steel site has a clear negative impact on important historic resources and should not go forward in its current state.

The former Universal Steel property is adjacent to the North River Canal Corridor Neighborhood Mixed Use District as well as to the McIntire District, which is listed on the National and State Registers of Historic Places. Among the many historic buildings adjacent to the site is the Peirce-Nichols House, a National Historic Landmark owned by the Peabody Essex Museum. The *Guide to Salem* speaks eloquently to the importance of the McIntire District: "This densely settled residential area of the city contains one of the greatest concentrations of notable pre-1900 domestic structures extant in the United States . . . . Collectively, they stand as a monument to the mercantile and maritime ascendancy of Salem in the latter 18th and early 19th centuries and constitute one of the most beautiful streetscapes in America."

The proposed building directly borders and is visually prominent from public streets and sidewalks on Federal, Beckford, River, Andover, and Lynde Streets and impacts at least 50 historic residences. The building is extraordinarily out of scale with the historic architecture and is monolithic in design and appearance. It will be an overwhelming visual intrusion on one of the most important historic districts in the country.

The McIntire District was also recognized as a Local Historic District in 1981, a designation that is regulated by the Salem Historical Commission. This is the highest level of regulation of historic features. Individual owners and residents have invested significant resources to revitalize this part of the McIntire District which had experienced severe neglect over the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The negative impact of both the visual intrusion and the activities associated with this particular commercial use, including the location of loading docks and constant truck deliveries directly adjacent to these residents, will certainly slow if not derail private investment in the historic inventory.

The 2015 Preservation Plan Update recommends that the City "Establish a system to determine if any public or private project receiving city funds, permits or any ordinance or policy will have potential negative impact on an inventoried or state register property or archaeological resource. For any project that may impact on an inventoried or listed property or relates to a broader preservation issue, the SHC should be notified and a non-binding

comment requested.”

It is very concerning that the City of Salem itself is supporting a project with a significant detrimental effect on the McIntire District. We recommend that comment be sought from the Salem Historical Commission on this project as suggested by the Preservation Plan.

Further, any consideration of B-4 zoning directly adjacent to a fragile historic neighborhood is not consistent with planning principles, and especially not with the R-2 zoning of the McIntire District. Moreover, the North River Canal Corridor Master Plan and Zoning was created to guide development of former industrial and commercial properties along the North River. In fact, the project would not be permitted under the Master Plan and Zoning.

Bridge Street is also a major entrance corridor into our historic downtown but it does not currently create a compelling experience as residents and visitors approach downtown. The design of any development along this route should improve the perception of the overall value of our downtown. The design of the proposed building is inappropriate. Even a utilitarian building such as a storage facility can contribute to streetscape in an interesting way; unfortunately, this building does not.

The current F.W. Webb building on Bridge Street is a well-preserved illustration of Salem’s former industrial economy. A commitment of reuse of this building is critical before the City disposes of property directly adjacent. We note that that building is not protected under any local ordinances.

Finally, the discontinuance of the centuries-old Beckford Street public way removes an important and valuable historic amenity for the neighborhood. This public way provides importance access to Leslie’s Retreat Park and the MBTA station.

We understand and appreciate the value of the F.W. Webb Company to the economy of Salem and appreciate that they wish to make an investment in the City. We encourage the City to work with Webb to find another appropriate location for this facility that does not have this detrimental effect on historic properties.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Firth  
President

cc: Mayor Kimberley Driscoll  
Salem Historical Commission  
Peabody Essex Museum