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Urban Farming Institute to Set Down Roots on Historic Boston Farm

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A historic farm built in Boston a decade after the Revolutionary War is being retooled into an urban farming education and training center for the 21st century. Spearheaded by local developer Historic Boston Inc., the renovation of the Fowler Clark Epstein Farm in Boston's Mattapan neighborhood is made possible, in part, by federal and state historic tax credit (HTC) financing. Completion is expected by late October or early November, with occupation by the end of the year.

The property's development includes three additional Boston partners: the Urban Farming Institute of Boston as tenant and operator; The Trust for Public Land, which provided funding and technical assistance for the land; and North Bennet Street School's preservation carpentry department, which is restoring historic elements of the buildings.

"Some people would say this is a classic Historic Boston project: empty for the better part of a decade,

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Image: Courtesy of Historic Boston Inc.

The Fowler Clark Epstein Farm's barn (right) in Boston was built circa-1860 and will be stabilized before it's converted into a demonstration kitchen, classroom space and offices for the Urban Farming Institute.





Image: Courtesy of Urban Farming Institute

Boston Mayor Marty Walsh talks to Urban Farming Institute students at a farmers market.

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distressed, overgrown as far as landscape goes and very vulnerable,” said Kathy Kottaridis, executive director of Historic Boston Inc.

History

The historic 2,900-square-foot farmhouse was built between 1786 and 1806, while the 3,000-square-foot barn was built circa-1860. Five families have owned the property over the past 200 years, with three of them leaving the biggest influences: the Fowlers, Clarks and Epsteins. The Fowler family owned it in the 1700s when the estate was as large as 330 acres. “Over time, the city grew up around this property,” said Kottaridis.

The Clark family purchased the farm in the 1820s and over the next 100 years subdivided it into parcels as the area became a popular streetcar thoroughfare. By the time Jorge Epstein became the property owner in 1941, it was down to its current size of about an acre. Epstein, professionally a salvage dealer, left his mark on

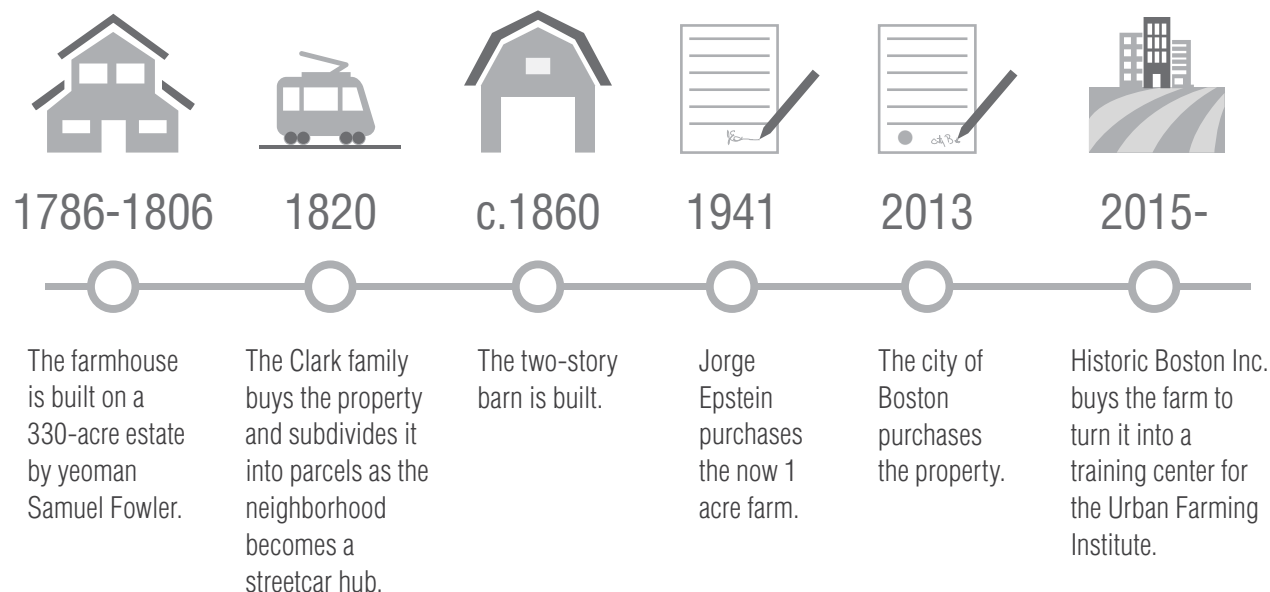
the property by incorporating items into the farmhouse from other historic buildings in Boston.

Historic Boston Inc.’s challenge was determining which features of the house were original and which were brought in by Epstein. With the help of North Bennet Street School, it was determined that none of the fireplace mantle pieces were original, but features such as the exposed ceiling beams and beehive oven were. The farmhouse windows were originally larger than they are today, so new windows comparable to the historic ones will be put in place.

The farmhouse was in decent shape, but was updated with new electrical and plumbing systems. It will house office and meeting space. The original layout of the farmhouse was largely intact, except for an addition to the rear of the house, which Historic Boston Inc. will repurpose into a two-bedroom apartment for the new farm’s manager.

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Fowler Clark Epstein Farm



Sources: *Historic Boston Inc., Novogradac & Company LLP*

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The barn was structurally unsound and needed to be stabilized with a considerable amount of steel. Once renovations are complete, the two-story barn will have a large classroom on the ground floor and a demonstration kitchen and offices upstairs.

The front of the property will be used as 10,000 square feet of farm land and a planned green house in the back will enable year-round growing.

Urban Farming Institute

The primary tenant and property manager will be the Urban Farming Institute. The local nonprofit provides training in commercial urban farming as a way to improve community health and economic outcomes, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods. "Our whole goal is to empower people in the community and promote production of local healthy food with sustainable methods," said Patricia E. Spence, executive

director of Urban Farming Institute. Neighborhood residents can receive job training to work on an urban farm or to start their own urban farming business.

Kottaridis said the Mattapan neighborhood has some of the highest rates of unemployment, poverty and diabetes in Boston, which makes the presence of Urban Farming Institute a benefit in more ways than one. "This is the perfect stake in the ground in terms of uses for the Mattapan neighborhood," said Kottaridis.

Urban Farming Institute currently leases two rooms in a community center and has scattered training sites throughout the city, but will make Fowler Clark Epstein Farm its new headquarters and training center. Urban Farming Institute's nine-week spring training program usually has about 30 students, while its 20-week fall program has a capacity for 10 students. Spence said the Fowler Clark Epstein Farm will allow Urban Farming

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Institute to at least double its capacity across both programs. “It will be a hub for all things urban farming,” said Spence.

Financing

Financing the Fowler Clark Epstein Farm renovation required several private-public partnerships. “I think [the historic tax credit] is an important source of capital for projects that are really difficult to finance,” said Kottaridis. “For us, it means there’s an opportunity to demonstrate how historic preservation can be part of an effort to revitalize neighborhoods and bring positive services to those neighborhoods.”

Kottaridis said that it’s often difficult to secure HTC investments for smaller projects because she doesn’t see as many small investment funds anymore. For the Fowler Clark Epstein Farm renovation, an individual investor provided about \$487,000 of federal HTC equity. “Having an individual who knows our work investing in the federal credit saved us considerable money in legal and accounting costs, and brought favorable pricing to the project,” said Kottaridis. An equity investor in the Massachusetts Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit hasn’t been finalized, but Historic Boston Inc. expects about \$481,000 in state HTC equity. Historic Boston Inc., itself, provided \$200,000 in owner equity.

About \$2 million was raised from a dozen charitable sources, with the major funders being the Amelia Peabody Charitable Fund, Barbara and Amos Hostetter and the George B. Henderson Foundation.

In addition to the \$3.8 million development budget, Kottaridis said that more than \$440,000 worth of pro bono or in-kind services has been donated to the rehabilitation from project partners, including professional fees and construction material.

The city of Boston also provided a \$150,000 loan and Historic Boston Inc. estimates that an additional \$570,000 in permanent debt will be necessary and will be supported by the rent that Urban Farming Institute will pay during the five-year tax credit compliance period.

Ownership of the Fowler Clark Epstein Farm will eventually transfer to the Urban Farming Institute. Spence said that the community’s investment in the Urban Farming Institute’s new home is an investment in the well-being of the entire neighborhood. “Our motto is, ‘We don’t just grow food, we grow people,’” said Spence. “That’s the most important thing to me: helping people grow in health and well-being.” ❖

Fowler Clark Epstein Farm

FINANCING

- ◆ \$2 million in fundraising
- ◆ \$570,000 permanent debt
- ◆ \$487,000 in federal historic tax credit (HTC) equity
- ◆ \$481,000 in state HTC equity
- ◆ \$200,000 Historic Boston Incorporated cash equity
- ◆ \$200,000 second mortgage/seller financing
- ◆ \$150,000 loan from the city of Boston

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