

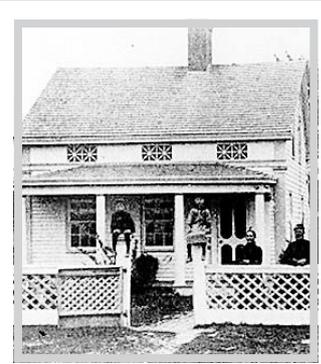
## Albert Mott House

**Built:** 1824

**Original parcel:** 30 acres

**Location:** South side of Middle Country Road, just east of Homestead Drive

**Owners:** Albert and Joanna Mott lived in home with their seven children in 1870s. Motts eventually turn house over to their daughter Lavina and her husband, Dr. Isaac Smith.



**1** The 19th-century house was abandoned, but still standing, until last week.



**2** After windows and doors were removed last week, the house began to crumble before neighbors' eyes.



**3** The site was quickly cleared, and opportunities to examine debris were lost.

# History loses in a knockout

## Bid to renovate an 1824 house turns to dust in Coram



**THE COLUMN**

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**N**ow you see it, now you don't. And that's just how the historic Mott House in Coram came a-crumbling down.

All it took was three days and a crew of contract workers laboring last week under the direction of Brookhaven's parks, recreation, sports and cultural resources department.

And now the community has lost a building that not only was a window into 19th century architecture and construction but was to be the home of Gordon Heights' new chamber of commerce and civic association. The town supervisor has promised an investigation into what happened.

Everyone, from the supervisor to the parks commissioner, agrees that the workers went in to clean the 185-year-old building, which was littered with everything from squatters' debris to dead cats and live snakes.

But then, residents said, they watched as workers over a period of three days removed parts of the building, starting with roof shingles and a piece of plywood that had stretched across a gap that covered most of the building's back wall.

"Driving by, you could look through the front of the house on Route 25 and see the woods in the back," said Suzanne Johnson, president of the Longwood Historical Society, who is assistant director of the Longwood Public Library. She drove by the site on Monday.

On Tuesday and early Wednesday of last week, several residents of Gordon Heights — Mott House sits at the community's major intersection — said they watched workers remove the home's windows and interior doors. And the floor-to-ceiling cabinets. And a web of thick trumpet vines wrapped around the chimney.

"I watched them take it apart, piece by piece," said Leon Bovell, vice president of the Greater Gordon Heights Committee of Concerned Citizens.

By Wednesday afternoon last

week, the house started making noises. "I heard it, like, creaking all over the place," said Linda Morning. She said she walked past the Mott House that afternoon on her way to a nearby deli.

As she walked back, "I heard this big crash," she said. "And when I took a couple of steps and got to where I could see the house, it looked like the roof was sitting on the ground."

The house where Albert Mott, a seaman, and his wife, Joanna, raised seven children in the 19th century, is no more.

In the haste to clear the site, Brookhaven squandered an opportunity to examine the debris and excavate the site for historical significance.

"It reminded me of that episode of 'Charmed,' where they made the house disappear and forgot how to bring it back," said Gerry Luke of the Gordon Heights civic association, as we looked over the eerily pristine vacant lot this week.

The town had planned to put \$89,000 toward the renovation of the site. Gordon Heights residents had even drafted a federal Community Development Block Grant fund application for money to restore the building and beautify the area around it.

"Now, we are in a situation where we have until Oct. 6 to put together a totally different CDBG application," said chamber president Nicole Christian-Goodine. "There is no Mott House, so what do we do?"

During a town board meeting this week, Councilwoman Connie Kepert offered a resolution to have experts help the town with its historical sites.

It passed, but that did little to quell residents' anger.

"I have never seen this kind of incompetence," Tawaun Weber told the board before the vote.

Supervisor Mark Lesko said that he would launch an investigation. "I don't know what happened here, but we need to find out," he said.

Lesko said he was disappointed that Carol Bissonette, the deputy parks commissioner who has worked with local historical societies on preservation projects, did not attend

Tuesday's board meeting or work session where Mott House was discussed.

Johnson said she saw Bissonette on the site after the house had collapsed. "I asked her what happened," she said.

Bissonette did not return repeated calls for comment.

Parks Commissioner Edward Morris said that he could not discuss in detail what had happened.

"We went in there with the best of intentions to begin a restoration to get the Gordon Heights community in there," Morris said. "It's an unfortunate incident."

According to two former parks department employees, a 2006 study determined that the Mott House was structurally sound. So what went wrong last week?

"To get someone in there [for a cleanup] was the right idea," said Joel Snodgrass, of Historic Construction Management Corp., a Huntington Station firm that specializes in construction, restoration and preservation. He said he had seen photographs of the collapsed home.

"What I don't understand is the removing of things like windows and doors, which may have played some structural role in the building," he said.

Snodgrass said it was not uncommon for people to go into restoration efforts with the best of intentions but have things go awry. "That's where these efforts need some expertise," he said.

"It feels like there were a number of steps that we might do in restoration work over time that were compressed into one," he said.

And that appears to be the closest thing to an explanation town residents are going to get, for now.

**4** The house is not a home — or anything at all but a vacant lot

