For sale: the only house left in downtown Boston that was built in the run-up to the American Revolution

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The historic Ebenezer Hancock House at 10 Marshall St. in Boston is up for sale. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

The house was headquarters for a Continental Army's paymaster during the American Revolution. It was once owned by a founding father, and for years, the country's oldest continuously run shoe store occupied the first floor.

Dating to 1767, the Ebenezer Hancock House at 10 Marshall St., right by Haymarket, is chock full of history and thought to be the only house left in downtown Boston built during the period of the American Revolution, according to one city architect.

And it's for sale.

"The interior detail that's survived, you can't replicate it," said Dave Killen, a commercial real estate broker for LandVest who is selling the property for the owners, the Swartz family.



Some of the original ceiling beams in the Ebenezer Hancock House on Marshall Street. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

The law firm of Swartz & Swartz bought the Hancock House after "it was left vacant following a serious car accident in the 1970s, which nearly destroyed the storefront at the corner of the building," according to the book "Boston's Oldest Buildings and Where to Find Them," by Joseph M. Bagley, a city archeologist.

The house is the 27th oldest building of any kind in Boston, according to Bagley.

Given the inevitable vertical build-out of downtown, which is more and more being defined by urban canyons of steel and glass, the property and the surrounding historic "Blackstone Block," said Killen, are "that much more worthy of protection."

"We're looking for an owner occupant that loves the building and loves the history and is enthusiastic about being the steward of a landmark site like this," said Killen during a recent walk-through of the 5,700-square-foot structure. "And the highest and best use for that owner occupant is likely to be some version of mixed use."

That could mean retail and office, but the sellers also think the third floor could be converted into a residence, he said. The brokers selling the property declined to detail the asking price; Boston has the property assessed at $1.6 million. It's been on the market for about nine months, and Killen said he could not speak to why Swartz & Swartz is now selling the building.

According to Bagley's book, John Hancock, a founding father who would become most famous for his eye-catching signature on the Declaration of Independence, inherited a parcel of land on Marshall Street from his uncle in 1763. Four years later, he bought more land nearby. He built a home that would be occupied by his brother, Ebenezer, who once was derided by one writer as a "nonentity and a failure," someone whom history would have easily forgotten if not for his more famous sibling.

The house, a three-story home featuring Flemish bond brickwork, would serve as the Continental Army paymaster's headquarters during the Revolution. Ebenezer Hancock was a deputy paymaster general of the army, a gig he may have secured because of his brother's influence in the Continental Congress. (John Hancock served as the president of the Continental Congress and governor of Massachusetts during his lifetime.)



The Ebenezer Hancock House at 10 Marshall St. is one of the oldest buildings in Boston. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

According to one city document, the house was an important military rendezvous during the Revolution, the place where money was disbursed to troops fighting for independence.

“A loan of 2 million silver crowns from Louis XVI of France for the financing of the Army, negotiated in Paris by Benjamin Franklin, is reported to have been stored in the house in 1778,” the Boston Landmarks Commission said in 1977.

“It must have been a pretty busy street,” said Peter Drummey, chief historian with the Massachusetts Historical Society, recently outside the house.

It remains a bustling thoroughfare in modern Boston. Just off the Freedom Trail, it’s close to other major historic tourism attractions including Faneuil Hall and the Union Oyster House.

John Hancock sold the home to a merchant in 1785; it remains the last home still standing associated with him in Boston. After Hancock's home on Beacon Hill was razed to make way for new development in the 19th century, some locals were furious that such a historic property could be destroyed, said Drummey. Local preservationists did not want the same fate for 10 Marshall St.

Exterior of the Hancock House on Marshall Street in 1961. Built by John Hancock, the house was occupied by his younger brother, Ebenezer, deputy paymaster general of the Continental Army. From 1798 to 1963, the first floor of the building was occupied by a shoe store. JOE RUNCI/GLOBE STAFF

A shoe dealer occupied the first floor in 1798, and the shoe business would have a presence there until the 1960s. The building also hosted a glass and ceramic store, restaurant, tavern, boarding house, officers club, and privately operated museum, according to the city report.

The building is designated as a Boston landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places, and it stands within the Blackstone Block Overlay District. Under such historic preservation designations, the exterior and certain interior details must be preserved in their original architectural detail, said Killen. That means no vertical development, he said, and any renovations require Landmarks Commission and Boston Office of Historic Preservation input.

The East India Trading Company, inside the Hancock House in 1973. JOE DENNEHY/GLOBE STAFF

Killen said the original building was L-shaped and that after an addition, more than half of the structure today constitutes the original house, which during Colonial times would have had large barn doors to accommodate freight brought in on carriages.

Inside, Killen gestured toward beams thought to be from the original construction, their surfaces scored by tools that Colonial era builders would have used. He pointed out the beveling of a window casing, which he said was designed to maximize light in a time before electricity. In another room, there is an enormous hearth with an antique mantel piece and beehive oven.

The original hearth in the Ebenezer Hancock House. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

“The house has one of the best preserved early interiors in Boston,” Bagley wrote in his book.

“In the middle of this ongoing glass-steel development that is an inevitable historical trajectory here, it’s something that we’re all excited about preserving,” said Killen.

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