



This January photo shows the ceremonial front entrance to Liberty House on North Avenue in Burlington. Developer Eric Farrell and his team retained as much of the building's historic nature as possible, while also adding a new copper roof, energy efficient windows and numerous amenities. Liberty House is part of a larger development, Cambrian Rise, to be built on the waterfront site (see following article). Sierra Pacific windows supplied and installed by Acme Glass. Photo by Carolyn Bates.

# ‘Liberty House Is Special’

By Dick Nelson

“We were lucky to have the opportunity to work on this building, because there aren’t that many of them. New buildings are...well, new buildings.

Liberty House is special.”

Developer Eric Farrell is sitting in the expansive, brick-and-stone-walled lobby of Liberty House, the former orphanage

on the grounds of the Archdiocese of Burlington property overlooking Lake Champlain, which has been reborn as a 65-unit luxury apartment building.

The historic structure had served as both an orphanage and a refuge to hundreds of other local children facing hard times for a century before closing its doors in 1982. After that, it was a residence to the archbishop and other church officials until finally being sold by the church to Burlington College in 2010.

The finances of the college went from bad to worse in the years that immediately followed, as has been well-documented, and by 2013 college leaders, including president Jane Driscoll, decided they needed to put half the prime 34-acre property up for sale and development.



This photo of “St. Joseph’s Orphan Asylum,” taken in 1954, shows Catholic Church members and residents gathered in front of the North Avenue entrance.



Stepping inside the new, handicap accessible main entrance, on the Lake Champlain side of Liberty House, site of the building's former basement. The rear of the building was regraded to allow for the new entry. The walls, a combination of brick and stone, were preserved as part of the spacious lobby/meeting area. Brick cleaning by Champlain Blasting Solutions. To the left is a separate bike/delivery entrance, bike cleaning area and a bike storage room. Inset shows the lobby's gas fireplace (from The Chimney Sweep). Staircase at rear from Hayley Custom Stair Co.

"I was one of those who responded," says Farrell, "and they ended up selecting me. We made a deal to develop 16 acres and they would keep the rest. Before long, they realized they needed to sell more of the property and we bought more acreage, including the orphanage, while they kept the (adjoining) administration building and six acres. That bought them another year, but that wasn't enough and they finally went under."

Very quickly, Farrell ended up in charge of developing the entire parcel, as part of an ownership group entitled BC Community Housing, LLC.

"That wasn't the original plan," Farrell smiles. "Suddenly, I had a tiger by the tail."

### What to Do?

One thing was clear. Farrell's group was now the owner of one of the most prized tracts of land in the state of Vermont, and two buildings to boot—one of which was a historic gem, but in need of extensive TLC.

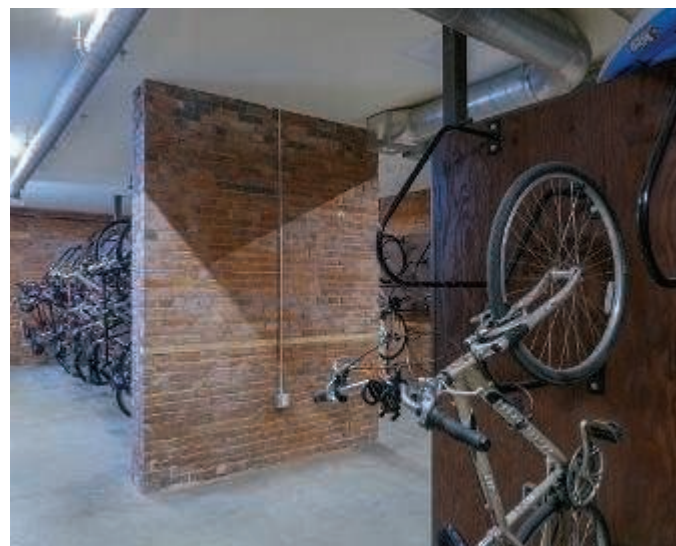
"I kept thinking to myself, 'We have only one shot, so we have to do it right,'" Farrell says.

So what to do?

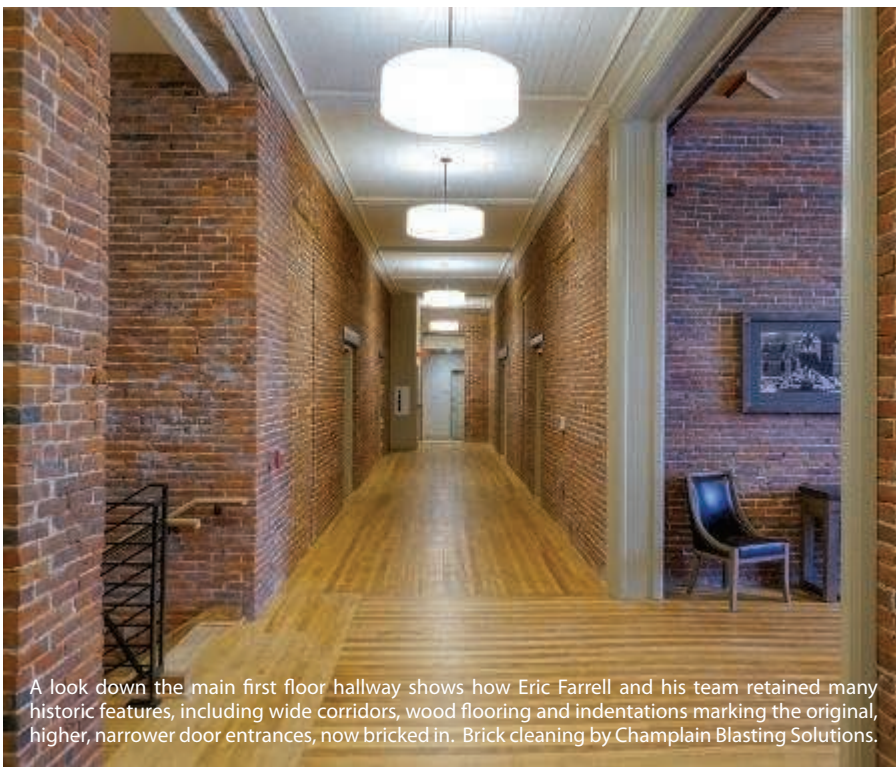
"We didn't want to rush it," he says. "So we went through

a year-long public input process. We had a couple of public hearings and came up with a master plan."

Farrell's regular design partners, Duncan Wisniewski



Inside the bike room.



A look down the main first floor hallway shows how Eric Farrell and his team retained many historic features, including wide corridors, wood flooring and indentations marking the original, higher, narrower door entrances, now bricked in. Brick cleaning by Champlain Blasting Solutions.

Architecture, and his longtime landscape design partners, T.J. Boyle Associates, were brought in to add their expertise. The City of Burlington also had a big say in the proceedings, as issuer of the necessary permits.

The final deal, struck in January 2016, included selling 12 acres of the property to the city as a park, including 1,000 feet of sandy shoreline, which was nicknamed Texaco Beach, having been the site of a previous oil tank farm.

“It was the only piece of beach on the “urban waterfront” the city did not already

own,” Farrell says. “They were very intent on having that beach. That left us with 22 acres to develop, including these two buildings.”

Besides Liberty House, which opened for business on July 1, 2017, and has now been totally rented out, his company is also soon-to-be owner of the 30,000 sq. ft. administration building, a newer, less historic structure. That building has now been permitted for a 45,000 sq. ft. addition which will include 84 apartment units on the upper floors with the first floor reserved for commercial enterprises,



Lynn Mansfield, Housing Vermont, along with Bob Duncan and Taryn Barrett of Duncan Wisniewski Architecture on the new veranda. It is one of many popular common areas throughout Liberty House.

including a transit hub and other uses to support the residents.

The remaining property, along with the two existing buildings, will all become part of a multi-building development to be called Cambrian Rise (see following article).

### ‘It Was Painful’

The five-story former orphanage was truly a unique structure, but one that presented an array of challenges. First, if not necessarily foremost, was dealing with the spirit, or spirits, of the building. After all, its history could certainly be described as fraught, having been the home to so many distressed souls over its lifetime.

“I called a woman I’d met,” says Farrell, “and asked her, ‘Do you want to come in and ‘cleans’ the building?’ So she did. She went into every corner of every room and cleansed it. It was important to some people to do it. So we did it.”

That out of the way, it was on to more concrete concerns.

“It was a great building to work on. But it had a lot of surprises. There always are on a building like this. It was painful.”

Luckily, Farrell has had lots of experience with all kinds of challenges, having helped conceive and build many of the most extensive projects in Chittenden County over the past four decades, including the total redesign and redevelopment of the area surrounding the intersection of I-189 and Shelburne Road in South Burlington.

He was the man for the job, according to longtime friend and business partner Dan Morrissey, owner and CEO of the construction firm Wright & Morrissey, the project GC.

“Eric has great vision,” says Morrissey. “He’s enthusiastic. He’s 10 years older than me, but it’s obvious that he loves what he’s doing. He enjoys getting up and going to work each day.

“He always takes a holistic view. What’s the highest and best vision for each project he’s involved with. I share that vision with him. We try to promote the best interests of everyone involved. He wants every project to be welcoming, attractive, a project that’s the highest quality possible, within the budget available. He’s proud at the end of the day to have a project we can all be proud of.”

### Lots of Issues

Bob Duncan of Duncan Wisniewski Architecture, designer for Liberty House and a longtime collaborator, recalls: “At



The kitchen and nook area of a 400 sq. ft. apartment overlooking Lake Champlain. The nook area retains some of the original brick wall.

first blush, it was an incredible opportunity, but with all kinds of issues to deal with. There were so many details throughout the building, some of which had been saved, some not. For instance, the wide corridors, wider than you would make them today. But those were load-bearing walls, so you don't get rid of those. The tin ceilings on the second and fourth floor. We kept things like that as much as we could.

"The original door openings were too narrow to keep, and had to be bricked in, but we set them back and put wood lentils over them, to differentiate from the new openings, which have metal lentils. The historic entrance had a curved double staircase with a wood railing, but it had been removed and there was no documentation. We knew the original railing wouldn't have met code, so we reinterpreted it and put in new metal railings that meet code but are reminiscent of what was there before."

His firm loves working with Farrell, says Duncan.

"Eric's a great client in so many ways. As a developer, his philosophy is that the deal doesn't work if it doesn't work for everybody involved: the general contractor, the community, the partners, the occupants, everybody. He's thoughtful and very interested in design. So we worked very hard to get everything just right."

### 'I'm In The Hospitality Business'

Farrell echoes those sentiments. "I've always thought I'm in the hospitality business. Great locations, lots of amenities, happy residents. That's always the goal."

This goal is reflected in every detail.

"We're pet friendly," says Farrell. "Not all owners allow it, but we do. Eighty per cent of our residents have a pet, and I think that's a great thing."

A new main entrance was created on the Lake Champlain side of the building, while the former "ceremonial" entrance on North Avenue was also retained and renovated. The grade was lowered on the Lake Champlain side to create the new handicap accessible entry point, with a spacious new lobby that preserves the original stone foundation, with furnishings from Restoration Hardware in New York City.

"I want residents to feel like they're walking into a boutique, extended-stay hotel when they walk in the front door," he says. "In all my projects I like to include generous lounges and open spaces. It fosters community among the residents." As he talks,

a retired resident passes by and reminds Farrell that the once-a-month winefest for residents is upcoming shortly.

"I'll stop in and carouse a bit with you," Farrell replies.

Resident Peter Chojnowski, whose 400-sq. ft. unit appears in accompanying photos, says he was attracted "by the view (overlooking the lake) first off, and by how they modernized the building, but kept the architecture from a different era." And although his apartment is small, "You have thousands of square feet of common areas available to you, which makes it seem much larger."

Beside the main lobby, the building has a common bicycle storage room, with several dozen bicycles hanging from racks (even a few kayaks), along with a common bike repair area and a bike cleaning area. There is also a common cost-free laundry, a fitness room and even a "pet wash" room inside the main entrance.

And then there's the veranda, which sits atop the L-shaped extension onto the back of Liberty House (which used to house the chapel), complete with a pair of industrial strength mounted binoculars, the kind you normally need to put a quarter into to activate.

"The veranda is a little bit of an afterthought," Farrell says. "But we realized if we truly wanted to create a sense of community, we had to do it. The residents love it up here. My wife and I came by a couple of times and it's always full of residents. If it's not rainy, they're up here, especially at sunset. "When you have common spaces like this, people get to know each other. They spend time together. They recreate together."

Adds Duncan, the architect: "(The veranda) is something Eric really wanted to do, but we wanted it to be sensitive to the historic nature of the building, so it stops short of the end of the building, so as not to be noticeable, or to impede the view from the rooms below."

### Construction Details

As longtime construction partners to Farrell Real Estate, Wright & Morrissey welcomed the challenge of creating a finished product of the highest quality. But it wasn't easy.

"It was pretty much a total gut, a total renovation," says Steve Theriault, president at Wright & Morrissey. "It was a very old building with lots of unknowns."

"We did a new roof, a total renovation of the cupola. We put in all new energy efficient windows. We had to match a certain



One of the apartment units on the top, fifth floor of Liberty House reveals a combination of modern conveniences juxtaposed with original wood beams from the St. Joseph's Orphanage, with modern maple tops (by Hammerworks) and cabinets from Kitchen World.



Stairs (from Hayley Custom Stair Co.) lead to a sleeping loft in the same unit. Stairs installed by Hammerworks.

historic look. We restored all the wood floors. We preserved as much of the original brick in the hallways and in the individual apartments as we could. We kept the high ceilings. The roof was in pretty poor shape, so it was changed from slate to copper, which requires less maintenance. In the lower floors, we tried to keep the original architecture. The top floor apartments are new, built into the former attic.”

Project manager John Gallagher adds: “In the chapel wing on the back, we created two long skinny apartments on each floor, plus the veranda, which has become very popular. We applied an inch of spray foam throughout, which is not as much as Eric would have liked, but Duncan Wisniewski did a lot of research and determined more than the one inch would have created condensation and damaged the building. The former attic got eight inches. So we tightened that up quite a bit, and we also installed a gas-fired high-efficiency central boiler system, with baseboard heat.

“It wasn’t a historic preservation project per se, but we preserved a lot of history, I think.”

The name Liberty House has a history of its own, said Farrell. “From what we heard, there was a ship that Benedict Arnold had confiscated from the British, early in the Revolutionary War, when he was still loyal to the U.S.”

It’s name: The Liberty.

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