

## Will Whim Museum Recover Its Former Glory?

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Some in the St. Croix community have been asking why Whim Museum seems closed, and no efforts to repair the extensive damage after the 2017 hurricanes are apparent. Residents have voiced concerns about the lack of communication from the board of St. Croix Landmarks Society, the managing organization, and the executive director.



Hurricane damage on the north side of Whim Museum from 2017. (Photo courtesy of Michael Connors)

The current state of the Estate Whim structures, including the Great House, show hurricane damage, and some are covered with blue tarps. The buildings are closed to the public, but people can wander the grounds two days a week. Reportedly, there are two or three paid

employees for maintenance, appointments for the library, and renting the property for events. The phone rings unanswered with a recording to leave a message.



Whim Museum roof damage from 2017 hurricanes. (Photo courtesy of Michael Connors)

Duane Howell, a board member, told the Source the organization is working as it should, although on an abbreviated schedule.

Hoping to learn more about the workings of the museum and the status of repairs, the Source made various attempts over several days to contact executive director Sonia Jacobs Dow, leaving messages and emails directly for her and through other people, but she did not respond.

Howell, the vice-chair of the SCLS board, said they have waited four years but last year received approval for FEMA funding. The funding will cover infrastructure repairs of the library, carriage house, and the great house. But the museum must provide \$1.3 million matching money up-front, and they don't have the resources, he said.

The SCLS board "just learned" from the governor at the beginning of April that there is a \$10 million fund available for FEMA matching grants, but they must submit a proposal directly to the governor. At the last board meeting in mid-April, it was decided to move forward with the proposal.

Board members will work with Sonja Jacobs Dow, the executive director, "quicker rather than later," and Howell estimated they will have a proposal in around six weeks.

While they haven't spoken to any architects or issued any requests for proposals, there have been conversations with several contractors. Howell said there are architectural drawings from before the hurricanes when they wanted to expand the library and add a few other structures for what is to become the living museum – the centerpiece of the museum.

"You have to understand that the Great House is not the centerpiece of the museum. It's part of the story of the museum," Howell said.

Anticipating difficulty in sourcing authentic materials, the board is already trying to locate roof shingles for the Great House.

Howell was somewhat vague, saying they have a full board but may have some openings for a few new trustees. He did not know the exact number of trustees nor the number of members.

Since COVID, the board has met quarterly, according to Howell — the last one in mid-April with sufficient trustees to comprise a quorum. The board planned a virtual annual meeting for June — the first one in a year and a half, also due to COVID, he said.

Howell said he is aware there are people questioning the workings and communications of the St. Croix Landmarks.

"The Save the Whim people — We don't know who these people are. They've never once come to the board and said, 'We're trying to help. They have never formally asked to meet with the board,'" Howell said.



South view of Whim Museum hurricane damage in 2017. (Photo courtesy of Michael Connors)

Michael Connors is a St. Croix resident, former Whim trustee for 15 years, and head of Museum Collections. Connors is one of the critics of the inactivity at the property. He wonders if the lack of repair is due to “incompetence” and “lack of leadership.”

“Unfortunately, after much research and submitting numerous questions to St. Croix Landmarks Society’s executive director and board of trustees, there is little substantive information to report,” Connors wrote in St. Croix This Week.

An anonymous trustee told him the board is working with FEMA and VITEMA and hopes to release a request for a proposal for the Great House roof soon. The board member said there are no items missing from the collections, and the museum’s furniture is being stored on the property. Additionally, the library and archives have never been closed and are open by appointment.

The trustee told Connors he would hear from the executive director, but, as in the case of the Source, he did not.

To date, there have been no answers to Connors' (and other people's) other questions. Why have there been no ballots sent to life members' annual meetings after 2016? Is there a current list of the museum's inventory? Is there a plan for restoring the items in storage? Are tax and other legal forms being filed on time? What is the status of the endowment fund?

Another concerned citizen is May Adams Cornwall, whose brother Roy Adams was one of the SCLS founders. She said she has communicated with several board members and requested public documents.

"The lack of transparency and responsiveness is the biggest challenge now. SCLS has lost the public trust," she said.

Information Cornwall is seeking includes names and terms of board members and any vacancies. Were IRS forms for 2019 and 2020 filed? What is the status of the lease with the V.I. Government? Who are the current members, and how do people join Landmarks since that part of the website is not functioning? She also has questions about the annual report and an annual meeting — both required according to by-laws.

Taking action to help, Cornwall is spearheading a grass-roots membership drive to engage residents and increase the SCLS volunteer base.

"I'm an advocate trying to rally support out of the community. Like Come Home to St. Croix (a previous SCLS program), Come Home to St. Croix Landmarks. Sign up and pay \$50 to become a member," she said.

Cornwall also has tried to contact Dow with no success.

One of the island's most beloved landmarks, Estate Whim, was being developed in the 1700s, and by 1749, there was a Great House, constructed by African masons of cut coral and stone and six smaller structures. In the 1770s, the stone windmill was constructed. The museum was incorporated in 1949 and is operated by SLCS, a non-profit organization.



Damage to the Whim Museum ceiling after Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. (Photo courtesy of Michael Connors)

Over the years, the property has hosted special events, concerts, summer camps for children, house tours, auctions, archeology programs, and a museum store. The library is regionally recognized as an important source for genealogical research and includes collections of historical photos, papers, and maps.

The buildings and land are owned by the V.I. government, and the SCLS lease expires in 2023.