

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

STAFF REPORT

Growth Management Department



MEETING DATE:	April 6, 2022
PROJECT:	1261 May River Road – Request to Designate a Contributing Resource and Amendment to the Town of Bluffton Contributing Resources Map
APPLICANT:	Town of Bluffton, South Carolina
PROJECT MANAGER:	Glen Umberger, Historic Preservationist

APPLICATION REQUEST: The Applicant, the Town of the Bluffton as Owner, requests that the Historic Preservation Commission approve the following request:

1. **DCR-03-22-016503.** Designation of Contributing Resource application to designate the former Bluffton Health Center, now known as the Jennie Kitty Municipal Building, located at 1261 May River Road, identified by Beaufort County Tax Map No. R610-039-00A-0004-0000 within the Neighborhood General-HD Zoning District as a Contributing Resource to the Old Town Bluffton Historic District.

BACKGROUND: The Old Town Bluffton Historic District (OTBHD) was established by Town Council on June 19, 2007 and includes the Bluffton Historic District which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on June 21, 1996. The OTBHD comprises 84 contributing resources, of which 82 are structures and two are natural features (e.g., Heyward and Huger coves). A Contributing Resource is defined as:

Any building, structure, site, object, feature, or open space, as designated by Town Council, that adds to the historic associations, architectural qualities, or archeological values that relate to the documented significance of the Old Town Bluffton Historic District.

These resources are identified on the Contributing Resources Map, as accepted by Town Council on December 14, 2021. The Map identifies all Contributing Resources to the Old Town Bluffton Historic District that have been designated by Town Council and are visible reminders of the history and cultural heritage of the Town of Bluffton as well as the Lowcountry region.¹ (Attachment 1). Contributing Resources are eligible to receive Town of Bluffton Historic Preservation Grants, pursuant to Town of Bluffton Historic Preservation Grant Programs approved by Town Council on December 14, 2021, effective January 1, 2022 and Owners of such designated Resources have a duty to maintain, or cause to be maintained, the exterior features and structural elements of a Contributing Structure, including site features, and shall not allow Conditions of Neglect to occur.²

DESCRIPTION: The subject property consists of 0.23 acres located at 1261 May River Road and identified by Beaufort County Tax Map No. R610-039-00A-0004-0000 within the Neighborhood General—HD Zoning District (See Attachments 2 and 3). The structure is a 1,906 square foot, one-story, rectilinear structure constructed of concrete block and clad in red vertical textured brick in a running bond pattern sited on a concrete pad and topped by a protruding flat roof with a wide overhanging wood soffit and fascia; black numerals “1261” are affixed to the fascia above the main entrance.

The façade (south elevation) is divided into three bays: the western bay features a double, two-over-two double hung corner window set on a brick sills and a slightly larger double, two-over-two double hung window set on brick sills; the center bay includes the main entrance, a single modern steel door with a vinyl screened door set under a porch roof that is supported by steel hairpin columns, and features a slightly smaller metal framed single two-over-two double hung window set on a brick and double, two-over-two double hung corner windows set on a brick sill; the eastern bay (an addition from 1967 constructed in concrete block and clad in similar red vertical textured brick laid in a common bond pattern) features two single two-over-two double hung windows (fig. 1). The eastern elevation is entirely clad in red vertical texture brick in a running bond pattern without any fenestration. The rear (northern) elevation is divided into two bays: the eastern bay corresponds to the 1967 addition and features two, two-over-two double hung windows (without sills) that were added in 2018 on the northern

¹ See Unified Development Ordinance, Section 3.18.1.B.

² See Unified Development Ordinance, Section 3.26.2. *et seq.*

elevation and a single, modern steel door is inset on the western elevation of the addition paired with a double steel louvered doors enclosing a mechanical room; the western bay features a triple, two-over-two, double hung windows set on a brick sill and a single, two-over-two, double hung window on a brick sill. There is evidence of older fenestrations now infilled with matching red vertical textured brick on this elevation.

A non-historic, non-contributing shed is sited along the rear elevation near the northwestern corner of the structure.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLUFFTON HEALTH CENTER

The Bluffton Health Center was built in 1957 by Beaufort County as a local health clinic on parcels the County purchased from the Town of Bluffton and Jessie Mae Niver Boulware on March 31, 1951.³

In August 1964, the United States Congress enacted the "Hospital and Medical Facilities Amendments of 1964," known as Public Law 88-443.⁴ The Law provided grants administered by the United States Surgeon General

to assist several States in the carrying out of their programs for the construction and modernization of such public or other non-profit community hospitals and other medical facilities as may be necessary, in conjunction with existing facilities, to furnish adequate hospital, clinic, or similar services to all their people.⁵

Bluffton became a beneficiary of Public Law 88-443 in March 1967, when a contract was awarded to Coastal Contractors, Inc. of Beaufort for their lowest bid of \$12,322 to renovate the Bluffton Health Center.⁶ The renovations included the addition to the eastern end of the original building and a sign posted inside the building confirms the addition from 1967 was "constructed with federal assistance under Public Law 443 administered by the United States Public Health Service and

³ Register of Deeds for Beaufort County, South Carolina, Deed Book 92, page 130 and Deed Book 104, page 109.

⁴ Public Law 88-443-Aug. 18, 1964 78 Stat. 447 et seq. Accessed March 23, 2022. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg447.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "New Beaufort County Health Center," *The State* (March 17, 1967), 18.

the South Carolina State Board of Health, E. Kenneth Aycock, M.D., State Health Officer” (fig. 2) indicating that Bluffton’s sole healthcare facility was improved to better serve the needs of the local community. Although physically located in Bluffton, the Center served the population of Beaufort County regardless of where they resided in the county. For example, during hearings held before the United States Senate Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs in February 1969, it was noted that on Fridays, a boat from Daufuskie Island “takes those who need it to the Bluffton Health Clinic [*sic*].”⁷

In July 1990, the property was conveyed back to the Town of Bluffton from the County with the following deed restrictions:

[1] It is understood and agreed that the above-described property is to be used for municipal purposes within three years from the date hereof. Should said property not be utilized as required, then the property shall revert to the Grantor herein, its successors and assigns; and [2] It is further understood and agreed that should grantee construct a building on the property Grantee will offer space in said building to Grantor at no cost to Grantor.

In the late 1990s, the building was leased to a group of five antique dealers who operated Bluffton Antiques & Gifts until January 1, 2005 when the Town took over the building.⁸ At that time, the Town had plans to convert the building into a Bluffton Police Substation, but those plans were abandoned in September 2006 when it was determined that the plans were “too extravagant for the Town’s needs.”⁹ Instead, the Town completed approximately \$126,000 in renovations and moved the engineering department into the building in early 2007.¹⁰ Additional renovations were completed in 2018, including the replacement and installation of new, historically appropriate windows and interior renovations. The building is now used by the Town as office space for Watershed Management.

⁷ *Hearings Before the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs of the United States Senate, Ninety-First Congress, First Session on Nutrition and Human Needs, Part Four-South Carolina* (February 18-20, 1969), 1276.

⁸ “Substation Delayed,” *The Island Packet* (January 16, 2005), 1.

⁹ “Bluffton Drops Plans for Police Station,” *The Island Packet* (September 25, 2006), 2.

¹⁰ “Bluffton’s Engineers Move to New Digs,” *The Island Packet* (February 26, 2007), 2.

It was officially renamed the “Jennie Kitty Municipal Building” with a public dedication held at the building on September 9, 2021 (fig. 4).¹¹

REVIEW CRITERIA & ANALYSIS: Town Staff and the Historic Preservation Commission are required to consider the criteria set forth in Section 3.25 of the Unified Development Ordinance, “Designation of Contributing Resources,” in assessing an application for Designation of Contributing Resource. The applicable criteria are provided below followed by Staff Finding(s) based upon the review of application submittals to date.

1. Section 3.25.3.A. “Any Resource that is at least 50 years old and retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association” may be considered for a Contributing Resource designation by Town Council upon a recommendation of the Historic Preservation Commission.

- a. *Finding.* The proposed Resource was constructed in 1957, 65 years ago with an addition constructed in 1968, 54 years ago, and retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

2. Section 3.25.3.A. At least one of the following criteria must [also] be present:

1. The resource is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;

Finding. The proposed Resource does not meet this criterion.

2. The resource is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;

¹¹ Town Council unanimously approved the Resolution Memorializing the Watershed Management Building located at 1261 May River Road in Honor of the Legacy of Community Contributions and Public Service Rendered by Jennie Kitty at the Regular Town Council Meeting, June 8, 2020. Accessed March 25, 2022.
<https://mccmeetings.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/blufftonsc-pubu/MEET-Packet-c0e4fa0ae88f4b2faac3e719fe3d04f4.pdf>

Finding. The proposed Resource is associated with the work of Jennie Kitty (1930–2021), a prominent midwife and nurse who, for three decades, tirelessly advocated for health initiatives throughout Bluffton's African American community and who became known for her work to eradicate intestinal parasites. Her motto, derived from the hymn "If I Can Help Somebody" was "If I can help someone as I travel along the way, then my living shall not be in vain." In 1969, Kitty lead United States Senator, Ernest "Fritz" Hollings (D-SC) on a tour of the desperately poor living conditions in Bluffton, the visit and subsequent national media coverage resulted in the formation of the Beaufort-Jasper Comprehensive Health Center, which provides health services to economically challenged residents of the Lowcountry. Kitty worked at the Center for three decades under the supervision of Dr. Donald Eugene Gatch (1930–1980), who, in the 1960s, was one of the few white doctors who would treat black patients in South Carolina.¹² Known as the "Hunger Doctor," Gatch was an advocate for improving the living conditions, nutrition, and access to adequate health care among his patients; in November 1967, Gatch testified before the Citizens Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States at hearings held at Columbia, South Carolina. Dr. Gatch's work, along with the appalling living conditions of his patients, was documented by Swiss-born photographer, Frederick C. Baldwin, who traveled to Savannah, Georgia to visit his family in the 1960s and became socially involved in the community of the Lowcountry. As a result of his efforts to care for his patients, Dr. Gatch drew the unwanted attention of the Ku Klux Klan and in response to intense threats, Jennie Kitty organized a group of thirty armed African American citizens to protect her white boss, Dr. Gatch and the Center from harm while Mrs. Kitty kept Dr. Gatch's wife and young children safe in her own home. Dr. Gatch was eventually driven out of South Carolina by the Klan.

On June 8, 2021, Town Council passed a *Resolution Memorializing the Watershed Management Building located at 1261 May River Road in*

¹² According to Lannie Lee Wilson, Sr. of Bluffton, "Dr. Donald Gatch lived at 8 Palmetto Beach Drive off Myrtle Island Road across from me." "You Know You're from Bluffton When..." Facebook Group. Accessed March 22, 2022.

*Honor of the Legacy of Community Contributions and Public Service
Rendered by Jennie Kitty as "Jennie Kitty Municipal Building."*

3. The resource embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction;

Finding. The Bluffton Health Center is a remarkably intact example of an International-style ("mid-century modern") medical Center. Constructed in 1957, with an addition from 1967, the building is a rectilinear form, constructed of concrete block and faced in red brick with large corner windows and hairpin columns supporting the porch capped with a flat roof, all of which are defining elements of the International style. As a single-story, red brick commercial building on May River Road, adjacent to several Contributing Resources including the Deer Tongue Warehouse (1257 May River Road) and the Williams Cottage (1253 May River Road) and across the street from the Corinne Heyward Cottage (3 Wharf Street) and the Nathaniel Brown Cottage (1268 May River Road), the Bluffton Health Center is a striking departure from Bluffton's distinctive Lowcountry-style architecture and is noteworthy as one of only two commercial structures in this particular style of architecture extant in the Town of Bluffton; the other is the Bluffton Post Office located at 41 Bridge Street that was constructed in 1964-65. It should be noted that the building underwent major maintenance improvements in FY 2018 to FY 2019 which included the installation of four new windows and the replacement of historic windows: the new/replacement windows are an acceptable match to the historic windows and do not negatively affect the building's historic integrity.

The Bluffton Health Center was documented in the *Town of Bluffton Historic Resources Update, July 2019* as adopted by Town Council on December 14, 2021 (fig. 3) and described as: "1-story mid-century modern red brick building on slab with flat roof [and] some replacement windows."

4. The resource has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Finding. The proposed Resource does not meet this criterion.

NAMING A NEW CONTRIBUTING RESOURCE: While the Unified Development Ordinance provides Criteria for the Designation of a Contributing Resource, there is no specific criterion for nomenclature. Accordingly, when proposing a new Contributing Resource to the Old Town Bluffton Historic District, Town Staff will nominate the resource using its historic name, which conforms to applicable guidelines of the National Park Service when a property is being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. As such, the historic name “best reflects the property’s historic importance or was commonly used for the property during the period of significance ... [t]he historic name is preferred for general reference because it continues to be meaningful regardless of changes in ownership or use and most often relates to the reasons the property is eligible for National Register listing.”¹³ Therefore, the name of the proposed Contributing Resource for inclusion on the Contributing Resources Map should be **Bluffton Health Center**.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION ACTIONS: As granted by the powers and duties set forth in Section 2.2.6.E.4, the Historic Preservation Commission has the authority to take the following actions with respect to this application:

1. Reviewing and recommending to Town Council resources to be designated or removed from being designated as a Contributing Resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Based on the criteria found in Section 3.25.3 of the Unified Development Ordinance, Town Staff recommends Approval of the Bluffton Health Center, located at 1261 May River Road be designated a Contributing Resource to the Old Town Bluffton Historic District and subject to procedures specified Section 3.25.4 of the Unified Development Ordinance, that the Contributing Resources Map be amended and accepted by Town Council.

¹³ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resources. *Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms: Part A, How to Complete the National Register Registration Form*, (revised 1997), 8.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Town of Bluffton Contributing Resources Map, as accepted on December 14, 2021
2. Location Map
3. Zoning Map



Fig. 1
Jennie Kitty Municipal Building (façade)
1261 May River Road, Bluffton, SC
January 6, 2022
Photographed by Author

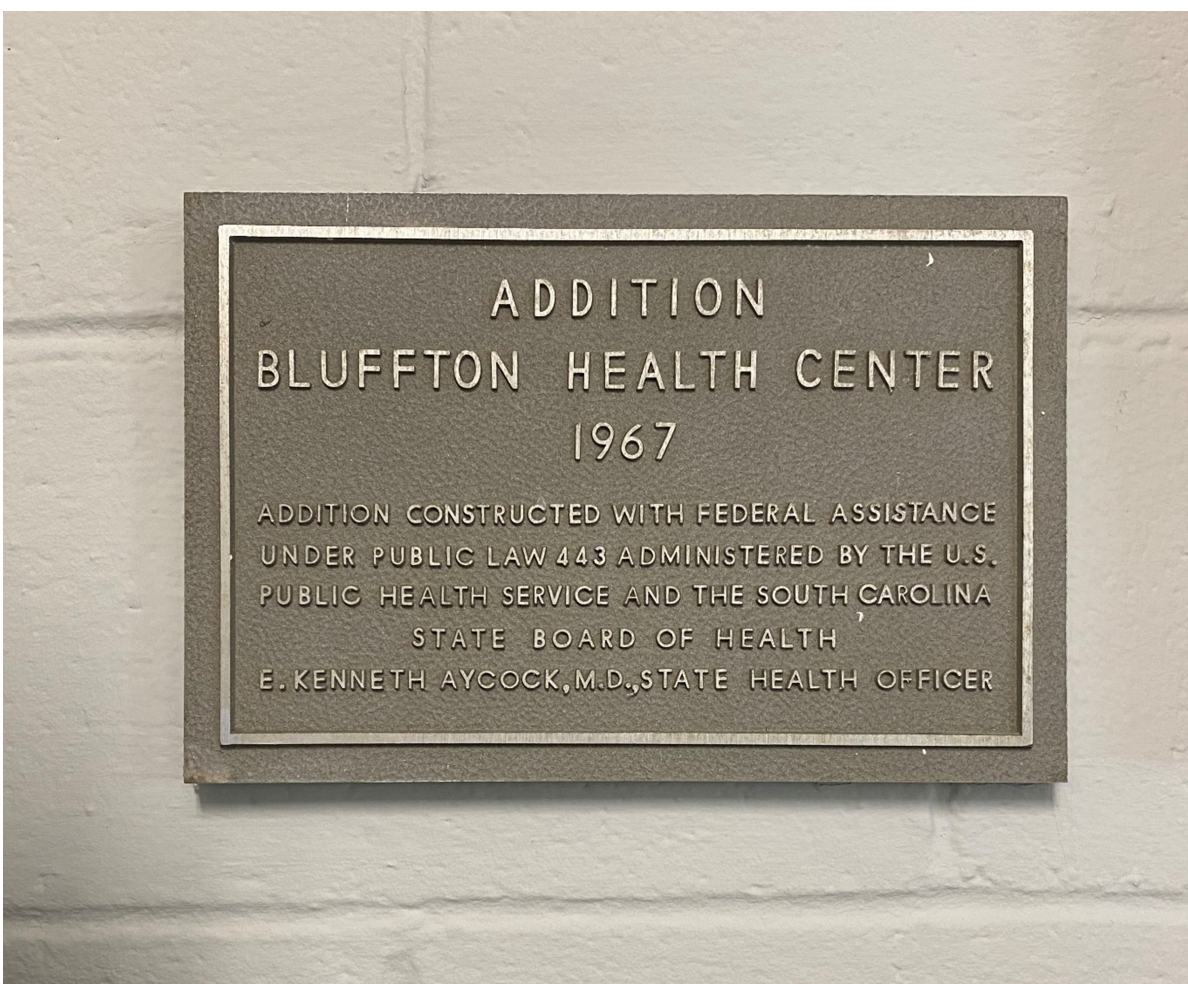


Fig. 2
Jennie Kitty Municipal Building (interior)
Historic Sign re: 1967 Addition
March 14, 2022
Photographed by Author



Fig. 3
1261 May River Road
(southeast oblique)
January 17, 2019
Courtesy of Brockington and Associates, Inc.



Fig 4.

Bluffton Officials and members of the Kitty Family at Dedication Ceremony
September 9, 2021

Photograph Courtesy of Town of Bluffton

<https://www.blufftontoday.com/story/news/2021/09/11/a-real-trailblazer-town-bluffton-honors-late-jennie-kitty/8271709002/>