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Photograph by Kelly Mintz

# Artists Reflect on the Inspiration of [House Name] While Its Fate Hangs in the Balance

MELISSA RUSSELL (<https://www.nshoremag.com/author/melissarusell/>) x MAY 7, 2024

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At first glance, it's just an old, dilapidated house sitting in the middle of nowhere. Its pink paint peeling after a century of battling the wind, rain, and sun, the battered house with the empty windows squats on the road as cars pass by on their way to Plum Island.

It's easy to overlook.

But come in early evening as the setting sun illuminates the empty windows. Marvel at the glowing sky that mirrors the pinkness of the paint. The remoteness of this domestic structure in a wild place becomes a metaphor for sturdy New England resilience in the face of harsh elements.

The quiet solidness of the Pink House in Newbury has made it a subject of countless works of art, and its century-long presence has made it a welcome mat for those visiting Newburyport and Plum Island.

But, the days of the Pink House may be numbered. In March, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the house, built in 1925, will be removed from its site at the Parker River Wildlife Refuge, with its land restored to wildlife habitat. Keeping the house intact would strain the refuge's limited resources, according to the service. The property floods routinely, and with sea levels projected to rise, that will only increase in future. Additionally, the site contains asbestos and other materials deemed to be harmful to human health.



*"Pink House Half Moon" by Cathy Grassello*

For the past eight years, the service says, it has worked with local elected officials and advocacy groups to find a plot of land to swap for the house land. But, because the habitat is of high value to the refuge, only an equal-value land exchange valued at about \$450,000 would be acceptable. In their final environmental assessment, Fish and Wildlife stated there had been an exhaustive search for land to exchange, but no viable parcel was located.

Rochelle Joseph, president of Support the Pink House, remains optimistic that as long as the house is still standing, there is hope it will be saved. "We've always worked for a win for all," Joseph says. "We love the refuge. It's just the right thing to do."

What is so special about the Pink House? First, there's the colorful legend. The story about a "spite house" built by a divorced man to get the final revenge against his ex-wife by building her a house in an isolated salt marsh gives it a certain mystique, according to Sandy Tilton, photographer and a member of Support the Pink House.

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"It's been passed down from generation to generation," she says. "It's a mystery that grabbed th

While the legend may or may not be true, original owners Harry and Ruth Cutter did divorce after the house was owned until 2011, when it was purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service/Parker River Natic

*"Rebecca's Pink House" by Rebecca Klementovich*

For generations of residents and visitors to Plum Island, the house's presence has been a marker that the journey is almost over, and vacation has begun.

Artist Kelly Page says, "People say 'Plum Island won't be the same if it isn't welcoming me when I go by. It's a sense of security, of consistency, and for families it means summer is coming, and that becomes part of the memory.'"

Nancy Gardella, executive director of the North of Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau, agrees. "It is part of the beloved landscape of the region that people look forward to when they return year after year. There is tremendous value in that," she says. "When we see it, we feel happy. It brings out every happy memory from our childhood."

For the artists, domesticity juxtaposed against wildness makes the house an appealing subject.

"Because it is an anomaly on the landscape, it has become a source of creative energy for those who see it," says Bronson de Stadler, a member of the Newburyport Preservation Trust board. "Seeing its very striking and unorthodox presence against the vast empty marshes with woodlands in the distance and the sea seconds away inspires us. It makes us wonder about our presence in the order of nature."

Tina Rawson, a visual artist and teacher, has made the house, which she calls wobbly and wonky [Up Next - Rockport Renovation Embraces Dramatic Dormer...](#) ×

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"There is something about the shape of it, how it sits in the landscape, it has a personality," she says. "It's a washerwoman—practical, solid—and it feels like a grandmotherly presence."

*"Spring Pink House" by Tina Rawson*

Rawson is not the only one who feels a feminine presence in the house. De Stadler imagines it as the work of a 1970s-era "counterculture grandmother who decided to paint the house to her liking and said, "The hell with what people think."

"She could also have been an artist who wanted to make a statement, to bring color to the often-dreary New England landscape," he says.

Artist Cathy Grassello sees a symbol of New England toughness and beauty in the face of harsh elements. "It's been there almost 100 years, and it probably shouldn't be. It's survived king tides and snowstorms and all kinds of things, and it is still there," she says.

Should the house be demolished, Grassello says, its loss will be felt.

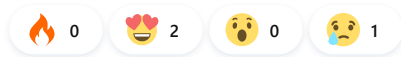
"Newbury will lose a part of its culture," she says. "Maybe this isn't the most historic or valuable or beautiful house ever built, but it is a part of Newbury's soul and also a huge inspiration for people. That welcome sign will be gone."

For more information about efforts to save the Pink House, visit [supportthepinkhouse.com](http://supportthepinkhouse.com) (<http://supportthepinkhouse.com>).

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**HeadSurgeon** 2 days ago

Wonderful article! Loved this "The remoteness of this domestic structure in a wild place becomes a metaphor for sturdy New England resilience in the face of harsh elements." Beautifully written.

One critical TLTR (too long to read) note:

The FWS is justifying their plans to demolish the Pink House based on a single assertion. As mentioned in this article and their final Environmental Assessment, they claim, "We were unable to locate a suitable exchange parcel despite 8 years of searching, and the likelihood of success for an exchange is minimal in a reasonable time frame." This is just not the case!

While it has been 8 years since the FWS first halted plans to demolish the house, they spent only a small fraction of this time searching for land. For the first 5 years, the Support The Pink House Inc. nonprofit group (STPH) worked with Greenbelt and others on potential solutions. STPH also spent significant time preparing the house for the land trade, including spending money on a yellow book appraisal, surveying and subdividing the land, and acquiring a preservation restriction. It wasn't until 2020 after the Greenbelt options didn't pan out that FWS Realty finally met with STPH. At this time they reaffirmed how much a land exchange would benefit their mission, and proposed an Agreement to Initiate an Exchange for a property they had already been working to acquire that they thought would be a good fit for the Pink House land trade.

Unfortunately, two years later the FWS lost this property. Soon after they reversed previous claims it would be easy to find land and announced they were giving up their search. In the fall of 2023, they announced their intention to once again demolish the house but they would still consider land for a land trade if submitted by the community. In late November 2023, under the pressure of public meetings, the FWS finally released its criteria for acceptable land. Once known, it took less than 3 months for just 2 STPH volunteers, searching only in New England, to find 9 properties that met the criteria but inexplicably not the FWS's interest!

So the claim that finding land is too difficult is just not the case. Also keep in mind, that finding land has been greatly simplified by STPH's restoration partner. He has committed the funding for the land for the trade regardless of where it is located in the country! He has also committed to restoring the house in compliance with STPH's perpetual preservation restriction that was approved by the FWS. If the FWS adequately publicized the search to all US refuge managers and effectively leveraged the

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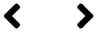
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