Sunnyside was built in 1873 by Chester’s famed cabinetmaker, James Topping, who lived in the house next door (that would eventually become Larison’s Turkey Farm Inn). After his son died, James Topping built Sunnyside for his granddaughter, Leila, and recently widowed daughter-in-law Nellie Topping. Leila would become a well known concert pianist and lecturer¹.

We believe James Topping used his cabinetmaking skills and high quality standards to construct Sunnyside. It was one of the “handsomest houses in Chester²” for many years. I think there is another good explanation of why Sunnyside was so grand – iron ore!

James Topping grew up in Chester and at fifteen was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker in Westfield. He returned to Chester and founded a successful cabinetmaking business. In 1829 he purchased 53 acres and a house from Isaac Corwin for $1400. He used the rear two rooms of the house for his workshop where he made bureaus, tall clock cases, and wagons³. His house and store in town can be seen in the 1868 Beers Atlas of Chester Village:

---

³ Chester, New Jersey - A Scrapbook of History by Frances Greenidge, Chester Historical Society pub.
1867 was a momentous year for Chester. T. Perry Skellenger found iron ore in his backyard and subsequently iron ore was found in James Topping’s front yard! This discovery established the Samson (or “Sampson”) mine which was the most important mine in what would later become “Chester Borough”. The Samson Mine operated until 1887. From 1880 to 1885 the Samson Mine produced almost 35,000 tons of ore. Topping was blessed with not only one but two mines! In 1873 another mine was opened not far from the back door of Sunnyside, appropriately called the Topping mine. With iron ore selling for between $2 and $5 per ton, the 1880-1885 revenue from the Samson and Topping mines, $1.5-$3.9 million in 2016 dollars, would have made the Toppings one of the wealthiest families in Chester with plenty to spend on Sunnyside and they did! (NB: The mines have ceased operation, but the shafts, tunnels, and voids may still exist.)

Chester’s Iron Heyday by Larry Lowenthal. Chester Historical Society pub.

At $2/ton, the ore would be valued at $1,540,000 in 2016 dollars; at $5/ton the value in 2016 dollars is $3,850,000.

In 1939, the nationwide Historic American Buildings Survey came to Chester and selected three buildings to document. The Isaac Corwin House was one of them. More appropriately the building should have been called the “James Topping House”. Topping died in 1874 at age 94 and was one of the most honored and respected men of Chester. He lived in the house for 45 years and greatly expanded and embellished the original building. Though the following 6 drawings are of the Isaac Corwin House, I believe they are indicative of the care and detail that went into Sunnyside. One other interesting note, in his will James Topping expressly mentioned leaving portions of the “homestead farm and minerals” to his heirs. His granddaughter Leila and her mother received a one-third share (farm and minerals) and the “new house lately erected on the homestead farm”, i.e. Sunnyside. The Samson and Topping mines would operate for another 13 years after James' death – including the very lucrative 1880-1885 period. Leila, her mother, and Sunnyside would not want for money.
In 1945 Willis Larison bought the Topping properties from Leila’s heirs and started Larison’s Turkey Farm Inn. After 30 years of success, Willis sold the Turkey Farm Inn to restaurant magnate Arthur McGreevy in 1974. In 1986 Sunnyside and the Isaac Corwin House (Larison’s Turkey Farm) were listed in the New Jersey Historic Sites Inventory – Morris County Cultural
Resources Survey\(^6\) highlighting their historic value.

In 2000, McGreevy contracted to sell the Turkey Farm to Site Development Inc. of Cherry Hill who planned to move or raze the Inn and build a CVS pharmacy and bank. A public outcry ensued over the plans. In January 2001, the Chester Borough Council rezoned the site to Office Professional and extended the Chester Borough Historic District to cover the site. Later in 2001, Arthur McGreevy sold the property to Harold Wachtel (who later formed Turkey Farm Acquisitions LLC).

In 2007 Harold Wachtel sold the northern 44 acres, mostly undevelopable wetlands, to Chester Borough and Morris County as open space for $3.74 million. It appears none of those funds were used to improve or safeguard Sunnyside.

Over the next ten years, many efforts and proposals by the developer and the Borough were discussed to develop the Turkey Farm site, but none bore fruit. In 2016, Turkey Farm Acquisitions, LLC and West Chester Acquisitions, LLC, proposed developing the site with 244 units of rental housing, a mixed retail/commercial complex, and a sewage treatment facility\(^7\). In May of 2017, Turkey Farm Acquisitions, LLC applied to the Chester Borough Land Use Board to demolish Sunnyside.

The Chester Historical Society advocates that Sunnyside should not be demolished, but protected as mandated by Borough Ordinance -ARTICLE XI -Historic Preservation and Architectural Review Sections § 163-84. - § 163-87.1. We advocated for adaptive reuse of Sunnyside in our testimony\(^8\) at the May 11, 2017 Land Use Board Meeting.

A review of the “Standards of consideration” in § 163-87 – “Architectural review procedures”, clearly shows that the application to demolish Sunnyside must be rejected. I have reproduced parts of the ordinance below in **bold typeface** with my comments in the following paragraph.

**§ 163-87. Architectural review procedures.**

D. Standards of consideration in architectural review. In regard to applications to demolish, construct, modify or remove designated buildings or buildings and structures in designated sites or districts the following matters shall be considered:

(1) The impact of the proposed action on the historic and architectural character of the building, site or district.

---


\(^7\) [http://www.highlands.state.nj.us/njhighlands/morris_county/chester_borough/final_post/Appendix_A_Public_Comment_20160713.pdf](http://www.highlands.state.nj.us/njhighlands/morris_county/chester_borough/final_post/Appendix_A_Public_Comment_20160713.pdf). Turkey Farm Acquisitions testified about their plans at the 7/21/17 Highlands Council meeting.

\(^8\) Three documents were circulated at the May 11, 2017 Land Use Board meeting by Edward Ng: “The Chester Historical Society Board of Trustees strongly opposes the demolition of Sunnyside (24 Route 24, Lot 101 Block 14)” 4 pages, “A Sample of Chester Historic Houses Successfully Reused”, 2 pages; “Raritan Inn – Before and After”, 1 page.
Demolition of Sunnyside would obviously have major impact on the historic and architectural character of the building- its utter destruction. The current condition of the building though lamentable, is not a consideration and immaterial to this standard of consideration.

(2) The importance of the building, site or district to the municipality and the extent to which its historic or architectural interest would be adversely affected to the detriment of the public interests.
Sunnyside is an important building with significant historic and architectural interest, whose demolition would adversely affect the public interests. Sunnyside was home Leila Topping, one of the most fascinating Chester woman of the 20th century and built by James Topping one of the most well regarded Chester man of the 19th century. They helped create enduring memories for Chester’s historic heritage and should be perpetuated in Sunnyside. The current condition of Sunnyside is immaterial to this standard of consideration.

(3) The extent to which the proposed action would adversely affect the public’s view of a landmark building or structure in a historic site or district from a public street.
The demolition of Sunnyside would obviously adversely affect the public’s view of a landmark building in a historic site. Even with poor landscape management and decades of neglect, Sunnyside still graces the hillside above Main Street (see picture above). It is still an elegant reminder of Chester’s history for walkers and bikers. In front of Sunnyside, Main St. is honored to host 4 trails: Chester’s History Hike, Morris County’s Patriots’ Path, New Jersey’s Del Water Gap to Liberty State Park Trail, and the USA’s National 911 Memorial Trail. All those walkers will miss the beauty of Sunnyside if it is demolished. The current condition of Sunnyside has no bearing on this standard of consideration.

(4) The impact of the proposed action would have on the character and ambience of a historic district and its visual compatibility with the buildings, places and structures to which it would be visually related.
The demolition of Sunnyside would destroy a historic and architecturally significant building, negatively impacting the character and ambiance of Larison’s Corner and the Chester Borough Historic District. James Topping rebuilt the Isaac Corwin House and built Sunnyside as a companion house. The Isaac Corwin House and Sunnyside have been intertwined for 144 years. They complement the 18th and 19th century houses which define Chesters’ Historic District. Many of which have been successfully reused (see appendix). The current lamentable status of Sunnyside is immaterial to this standard of consideration.

I would also like to draw the Land Use Board’s attention to the subsequent ordinance which reiterates the importance of historically significant buildings such as Sunnyside and mandates that the Land Use Board “shall use the criteria set forth in this chapter”, i.e. § 163-87 D(1-4) listed above and § 163-87.1 reproduced below.

§ 163-87.1. Demolition or moving of structure. [Added 8-6-2001 by Ord. No. 2001-09]

A. The demolition of a historically and/or architecturally significant structure, or a portion thereof, shall be discouraged by this chapter, as the loss would be a common loss to the Borough and to the neighborhood. Moving of such a structure should be encouraged as an alternative to demolition if there is no other way to save the structure at its existing location.

B. All applicants for full or partial demolition or moving of structure shall be referred to the Planning Board for consideration. In making its determination, the Planning Board shall
use the criteria set forth in this chapter. If the Planning Board determines that demolition or moving is not appropriate, it may postpone issuance of the permit for a period of six months. During this period of time, the Planning Board may hold other hearings to determine if there is some other means to preserving the building. The Planning Board is empowered to work out with the owner feasible plans for preservation of structures where demolition or moving thereof would be a great loss to the public, the Borough, the streetscape or the neighborhood. In the event that it is shown that the owner has a reasonable economic use of the property, and that the structure should be preserved on the basis of the standards set forth in this chapter, the Planning Board may deny the application for demolition.

Conclusion: Using the criteria set forth in § 163-87 and § 163-87.1, the Land Use Board should uphold the law and reject the application to demolish Sunnyside, a historically and architecturally important building in Chester’s historic heritage. Thank you for your attention and time. Edward Ng Chester Borough

Appendix: James Topping’s quality of craftsmanship and quality of materials helped Sunnyside survive 144 years and decades of neglect. Sunnyside has been a prominent Chester home and graced the Larison corner landscape with its elegant form. We believe it has potential to be creatively and adaptively reused. Here are 9 examples on Main St.: