

"Federation Corner" column
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How the history of U. S. historic preservation began

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The alleged lack of understanding about historic preservation by county officials continued this week, but events perhaps took a turn for the better when the County Council delayed their final vote on whether or not to designate several dozen historic homes and farms in the Damascus and Goshen areas. This 60-day delay was ostensibly to clear up confusion about the historic designation process. Having been involved in the historic designation process for this part of the county for the last five years, I observed that the only people who are confused are those who have chosen not to listen to numerous careful explanations of the facts, whether property owners who continue to insist that historic designation of their property is unconstitutional or certain councilmembers who don't want to force historic designation on such owners.

The fact that this country has any important historic buildings and places at all did not happen by accident and did not happen because the government was the first to recognize that it would take intentional plans to save those buildings that have become symbols that define our nation to ourselves and to the rest of the world. Specifically, I refer to Independence Hall.

Independence Hall, originally known as the State House for the Pennsylvania Assembly, was built in 1732. The Second Continental Congress met there in 1775. George Washington was sworn in there as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. The Declaration of Independence was signed there in 1776. The Articles of Confederation were ratified there in 1781. The Constitution was written there in 1787. Independence Hall, since 1979, has been a U. S. World Heritage site according to the International Council on Monuments and Sites, one of only 20 such sites in the U.S. and one of only two such buildings in the U.S., the other being Monticello.

While no one would disagree how important this building is today, it was losing its character-defining features even when it was center stage in our early history as a nation. The steeple was removed in 1781 because it had rotted out and become a hazard. After 1800, when the U. S. government moved to Washington, the building was little used except during elections and as a courthouse. In 1812, the wings and their connections to the State House were demolished and were replaced with fireproof buildings.

In 1816, the state legislature needed money to build a new capitol in Harrisburg. The state planned to put the building and adjacent square on the auction block, including the Liberty Bell. However, they gave Philadelphia an option to purchase the entire area for \$70,000, less than half of its assessed value of \$150,000. The city could not refuse such a deal, and took possession in 1818.

During a week's visit to Philadelphia in the fall of 1824, part of a year-long return stay in the U. S., the Marquis de Lafayette "electrified everyone in the crowds especially the mayor and members of the city council. The State House, which had been neglected and in need of repair, suddenly became an inspiration to his audience the moment the legendary figure delivered a speech crafted with significant observations about America, its model government, the Declaration of Independence, and his military idol, George Washington."

As a result of his impassioned observations of what had been and what was being lost, the State House would become one of America's most important historic sites as it came to be called Independence Hall. Where there had been no plans or any serious thought about preserving the building as an historic shrine prior to Lafayette's visit, the public now demanded action by the government. As interest in restoring the

building began to increase, Independence Hall became the first major American effort at historic preservation.

The steeple was rebuilt in 1828. Major efforts were tried, with limited success, to restore the building to its original architecture, first, in 1854, then in preparation for the 1876 centennial. An 1868 plan by the city to fill the square with flamboyant Second Empire municipal buildings suitable for Paris was eventually abandoned when the city government realized it would dwarf Independence Hall. In 1896 the Daughters of the American Revolution received authorization from the city to restore, at their own expense, the building's second floor.

The 1812 fireproof buildings were also demolished around that time. But the rebuilding of the original wings was so poorly done that the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects took responsibility for the restoration work in the 1910s and 1920s. "The AIA restorations were landmarks in the field; the architects made careful measurements and subjected the buildings to rigorous architectural analysis." In 1942, the Independence Hall Association was formed to lobby for the creation of a national historical park incorporating the Independence Square structures and other important buildings and sites in Philadelphia. In 1948, the park was created and the National Park Service has restored and maintained it ever since.

The neglect, the rediscovery of its importance through one person's leadership, the community demands, the delays and the setbacks, and the eventual successful restoration of this icon helps explain the pattern of the stories of many other historic resources in the country and the county. In Montgomery County, we saw the benign or malicious neglect of such exceptional places as the Silver Theatre, the Red Brick Courthouse, Glen Echo Amusement Park and the National Park Seminary.

The attention brought to the C & O Canal by the group hikes on it led by Justice William O. Douglas and later by Congressman Gilbert Gude were instrumental in the path to creating this long and narrow national park. The rediscovery of these important historic resources were then followed by decades of delays and setbacks before they were restored and finally saved. All could have been lost to redevelopment, the canal could have also been lost to a highway and to a dam, if not for the opposition of county residents and county grass root organizations who determinedly fought the then wise and certain plans of the government or developers.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to waynmgoldstein@hotmail.com