

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **When the government finally got it about historic preservation**

by Wayne Goldstein  
Chair, MCCF Historic Preservation Committee

During the 19th century, as state and local government fumbled and bumbled their way to eventual success with Independence Hall, and as the federal and state government refused to help save Mount Vernon, there were still glimmers of recognition by the government that it sometimes had an indispensable role to play in saving and restoring the nation's historic resources. Ironically, even as George Washington's home was allowed to rot away in Mount Vernon, the New York state government, in 1850, purchased what had been Washington's longest serving headquarters in the American Revolution, Hasbrouck House in Newburgh. It became the first publicly operated historic site in the country and was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1961.

The powerful presence of 19th century American women in historic preservation was expressed in a new way. Mary Jeffery Galt was determined to preserve Virginia's architectural heritage and wanted to do so by organizing a preservation society similar to the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. "With encouragement from likeminded women, Galt and Cynthia Beverley Tucker Washington Coleman, of Williamsburg, formed the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) on January 4, 1889, 'to restore and preserve the ancient historic buildings and tombs in the State of Virginia.' " That year, the APVA saved the Powder Magazine in Williamsburg, decades before Colonial Williamsburg was created.

In 1893, the APVA acquired the 22-1/2 acre traditional site of "old James Towne" surrounding the old church. Galt oversaw the excavation of the ruins of the church, doing some of the work herself. The APVA lobbied the federal government to construct a protective seawall along the most threatened stretch of the island's shore. It had been believed that the original Jamestown settlement was underwater. Thanks to the seawall that protected the island, later research determined that the original settlement was still above water.

Other state-based historic preservation organizations were created in the early 20th century, including, in 1931, the Society for the Preservation of Maryland Antiquities, now known as Preservation Maryland. 1931 was also the year that the first historic district in the country was created in Charleston, SC. After a Williamsburg minister was able to persuade John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to underwrite the cost to accurately rebuild what became known as Colonial Williamsburg, this unique effort captured the imagination of the public in the '20s, sparking an enduring fascination with Colonial Revival architecture. "It also encouraged preservationists to think in terms of saving entire communities, not just individual buildings." Charleston residents visited this new old town "in hopes of discovering how they might preserve the historic architecture of their famous South Carolina port city."

The Preservation Society of Charleston, the oldest community based historic preservation organization in America, was founded in 1920 by Miss Susan Pringle Frost and others initially concerned about the future of the circa 1802 Joseph Manigault House, which was eventually restored. In 1931 the Society was instrumental in persuading the Charleston City Council to pass the first zoning ordinance enacted to protect historic resources. The ordinance established the first Board of Architectural Review and designated a 138-acre "Old and Historic District." The district has since been expanded to include over 4,800 historic structures.

This Board had the authority to review exterior changes to buildings within the district and issue certificates of appropriateness if such changes were deemed compatible. The establishment of the Charleston Historic District constituted, in many ways, the birth of the modern historic preservation movement in the United States.

Charleston became a prototype for many other early historic districts, including New Orleans' French Quarter, which was authorized by an amendment to the Louisiana state constitution in 1936. This was followed by San

Antonio in 1939 to protect La Villita, the original Mexican village marketplace. Alexandria, Virginia created its historic district in 1946, Williamsburg in 1947, Winston-Salem, NC in 1948; and Georgetown in 1950. By 1965, 51 communities nationwide had enacted preservation ordinances.

Over the course of a century, the Federal government took increasingly strong actions to preserve important national resources, starting with the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. In 1889, Congress appropriated funds to protect the Casa Grande adobe ruin in Arizona from looting, the first such funding for preservation. Later, in response to the looting of the Mesa Verde site in Colorado, the Antiquities Act of 1906 was passed, establishing stiff penalties for destroying federally owned sites. It also gave the President "authority to designate" historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest "situated on federal lands." In 1916, the National Park Service was established within the U.S. Department of the Interior to manage both natural and historic federal resources, giving it this dual responsibility from its very inception.

In 1960, the National Historic Landmark program was established to list the most important national historic sites in the country. In 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act was passed, creating the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) to list important state and local historic sites. There are 2,442 such landmarks, compared to about 80,000 on the NRHP. The first landmark listing was the Sergeant Floyd Monument in Sioux City, Iowa, which honors Charles Floyd, a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, who died on the upstream voyage in 1804 and was buried there. A number of Charleston historic properties were among the first landmarks, as was the Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis. The Maryland State House soon made the list, followed by the U. S. Naval Academy on July 4, 1961.

Maryland created the Maryland Historical Trust [MHT] in 1961 as "a quasi-governmental organization whose primary goal was to serve as a 'holding agency' for historic properties. In 1963, MHT was granted authority to designate and protect historic sites, an action that significantly expanded the scope of the Trusts' activities. With the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, the Trust assumed the role of the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and became part of the Department of Economic and Community Development, and later, the Maryland Office of Planning.

"The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 is undoubtedly the most important piece of legislation dealing with historic preservation ever passed by Congress. The Act established the [NRHP]; created the concept of certified historic districts; authorized enabling legislation to fund preservation activities; encouraged the establishment of [SHPOs]; established an Advisory Council on Historic Preservation."

This comprehensive federal law accelerated the involvement of Maryland in historic preservation, which passed enabling legislation that allowed its counties and municipalities to pass their own local historic preservation ordinances. At the MCCF meeting on January 12th at 7:45 p.m. in the first floor auditorium of the County Council Office Building in Rockville, representatives of the county's Historic Preservation Commission and MHT will tell us more about how Montgomery County and Maryland implement our historic preservation laws. I will provide details of the history of historic preservation in Montgomery County in a future column.

*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 waynengoldstein@hotmail.com*