HISTORIC PRESERVATION
IN PHILADELPHIA

BY HONORABLE HAROLD D. SAYLOR*

FOR many years prior to 1950 there was little interest in preserving Philadelphia's considerable heritage from colonial times of historically and architecturally important structures other than Independence Hall, Carpenters' Hall, the Old Custom House and three churches of considerable significance in the city's and country's history. Six or seven hundred dwelling houses which survived the impact of commercial expansion were not generally regarded as worthy of preservation. They suffered disfigurement, demolition or merely plain neglect because their owners either were ignorant of their value or were interested only in the top dollar obtainable by their conversion or sale.

In the past ten years this has happily changed. Not only have practically all public buildings of the colonial and federal periods become objects of appreciation and attention, but scores of private dwellings have come once more into their own as desirable homes. Many others are about to be restored and rehabilitated by their owners. Whether they be newcomers to Society Hill or old-timers there, these owners are now aware of the need to preserve the charming city homes which nearly two centuries ago were occupied by the leading citizens of Philadelphia. This situation has come about principally by virtue of the activities of public and private organizations, the managers of which have joined with the handful of enthusiasts whose voice for a long time was only a voice in the wilderness.

The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Historic Landmarks was practically alone in the field when, under the leadership of the redoubtable Frances A. Wister, the Powel House, the magnificent home of a colonial mayor, and Grumblethorpe, the Ger-

*This address by Honorable Harold D. Saylor, Judge of the Orphans' Court of Philadelphia, was delivered at the annual luncheon meeting of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies at Lancaster, June 16, 1962.
mantown mansion of John Wister, were saved for posterity and subsequently restored. The funds and the efforts of the Philadelphia Society were restricted to these two fine houses. Other fine houses fell by the wayside with increasing frequency throughout the first half of the present century. Lack of money and public apathy made it impossible to save them from the despoiler and the wrecker.

In 1953 we organized a group of men and women who were deeply interested in preserving Philadelphia’s architectural heritage and who had as individuals been acting to that end. Miss Wister was one of the two score men and women in that group which included architects, city planners, members of historical societies, garden clubs, patriotic bodies, judges, lawyers and plain citizens. This group was known as the Philadelphia Historic Buildings Committee. It had no formal organization, no officers, no money, and no power. However, it did through correspondence and personal contact successfully exert its influence in protecting a number of structures, and it gradually created among those in public office and in other positions of authority an interest in the cause.

The group persuaded the managers of the Greater Philadelphia Movement to provide a dinner at which was brought to the attention of men and women in a position to offer public or private assistance the pressing need for action if many valuable ancient buildings were to be preserved.

Victor A. Moore, a member of City Council, decided to take official action in a cause for which he had long expressed sympathy. He prepared and presented to City Council an ordinance for the creation of the Philadelphia Historical Commission with power to certify structures which by virtue of their age and historical and architectural significance should be safeguarded from mutilation or demolition. Mayor Joseph S. Clark, Jr., signed the ordinance following its passage late in 1955. His successor, Mayor Richardson Dilworth, appointed to the Commission Councilman Moore, Harry A. Batten, Charles E. Peterson, R. Norris Williams, II, and Grant M. Simon, men not only much concerned about the matter entrusted to them but by training and experience well qualified to perform their duties. This commission under the chairmanship of Mr. Simon, assisted by a secretary and a historian, has to date certified throughout the city over 1,700
buildings, changes in or destruction of which cannot be accomplished by the owners without their first producing plans acceptable to the city Department of Licenses and Inspections as in harmony with the purposes of the Commission. Presently 135 of these houses bear on their fronts metal plaques attesting their certification.

While this law does not give the Commission the power which New Orleans, Winston-Salem, Williamsburg, Alexandria and other American cities have for some time entrusted to their commissions in protecting their architectural and historical heritage, it does require a breathing period during which steps can be taken to persuade owners not to sacrifice values in their buildings. In the absence of funds with which to acquire the properties, the city is unable to forbid such sacrifice without compensation to the owners, whose property cannot be taken or controlled otherwise.

Another major milestone in the progress of the movement for historical preservation was the creation of the new Food Distribution Centre in South Philadelphia, made possible largely by the efforts of Harry A. Batten and the realization by Mayor and City Council that the outmoded Dock Street Markets between Independence Hall and the Delaware River had to be superseded by a modern multi-million dollar establishment adequately served by rail and motor transport. With the aid of federal and city funds the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority has acquired and razed the great majority of the structures in the Dock Street area. Its rehabilitation as a downtown residential site will give great impetus to the restoration, to a semblance of the colonial city of Revolutionary times, of the nearby section named Society Hill, where land was purchased from William Penn by the Society of Free Traders of London.

The Old Philadelphia Development Corporation was chartered as a private agency to assist the city and the Redevelopment Authority in the work of rehabilitating the old downtown area. With a board of directors and officers representative not only of the great business concerns, the banks and the utilities but also of the historical preservation movement, this private organization has been most active and helpful in planning for the new structures and as well for the preservation of a majority of the several hundred colonial and federal period houses which had been certi-
fied by the Historical Commission. The owners of these houses are permitted to retain them if they protect and restore them at their own expense to habitable dwellings under carefully prepared regulations intended to preserve original exterior design and texture. The result is apparent in what is known as Washington Square East, Unit 1, of the area now being redeveloped. Other adjoining areas will in turn be restored. There will result not only the survival of individual houses but of large groups, thereby preserving in mass the outward appearance that whole area possessed in colonial days.

Besides all this, tremendous impetus has been given to the redemption of the colonial Philadelphia by the creation of the Independence State Mall and the Independence National Historical Park. The Mall occupies the entire space from Independence Hall north to the Benjamin Franklin Bridge Plaza, between Fifth and Sixth Streets. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has spent a score of million dollars in acquiring by purchase or condemnation hundreds of properties which it has razed and replaced with a park-like area. It has beautified the site by erecting walls of red brick and marble around spaces graced by trees and shrubbery. Instead of a somewhat neglected district devoted to business, there is now an attractive park which gives a proper and appropriate vista and approach to the country’s most historic and important public building, Independence Hall is now far better protected from fire than ever before.

The Independence National Historical Park extends from Fifth Street on the eastern edge of Independence Square and between Chestnut and Walnut Streets to Second Street. Within these bounds lie Independence Hall, Carpenters’ Hall, the Merchants’ Exchange, the Bishop White, Dolly Madison, McIlvane and a few other houses, the First Bank of the United States, later the Girard Bank, and the Second Bank of the United States, better known as the Old Custom House. Although not physically linked with this area, plots of land have been acquired by the federal government to provide pedestrian ways and green areas adjacent to Christ Church, St. Joseph’s, St. Mary’s, and Gloria Dei Churches and the site of Benjamin Franklin’s house on Orianna Street between Market and Chestnut Streets. Not only has the federal government assured the preservation of the historic build-
ings in its park, but it has also most meticulously researched their
history and is restoring them authentically.

Those responsible for these developments by the federal and
state governments are the members of Independence Hall Associ-
ation, under the leadership of Judge Edwin O. Lewis. For two
decades Judge Lewis has been assiduous and untiring in his efforts
to assure for posterity the preservation of Philadelphia's rich
heritage of priceless historical structures. This end he has ac-
complished. In addition, his efforts in persuading government to
appropriate large sums of money have brought about the restora-
tion of the heart area of Philadelphia's colonial beginnings.

The result of all these combined actions by government, organi-
zations, and private individuals has been the preservation of not
only scores of individual ancient houses from ultimate disfigure-
ment or total destruction but the restoration of a large section of
the city to a state of utility and beauty. In evolving a plan to re-
store a run-down area by eliminating slum structures and at the
same time preserving individual properties worthy of preservation,
the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority has set an example to
other communities. The field of action of the bulldozer, the demo-
lition crane and the swinging ball has been restricted in old Phila-
delphia. Historical and aesthetic values for the use and enjoyment
of generations to come are presently being protected and preserved.

There is no unanimity of opinion, of course, as to what should
be spared and what destroyed. In the clearing of the area for the
National Park many post-colonial buildings were removed, such as
the Jayne Building and the Tradesmens Bank, distinguished ex-
amples of architecture and the use of construction materials but
not considered of such historical significance as to warrant their
retention in an area devoted to the colonial and federal periods.
With the removal of these and other business structures, space
has been provided and beautified that embraces the important
buildings that have been retained. The construction of walls in
harmony with those of the Mall and with the buildings they frame
has given the city and the nation a park setting worthy of its
most important historic group: Independence Hall, Congress Hall
and Old City Hall, once the home of the Supreme Court of the
United States.

The Mall and the Independence Park combined with Independ-
Deshler-Morris House, Germantown

Here President Washington spent the summers of 1793 and 1794.

Germantown Historical Society

ence and Washington Squares provide Philadelphia with green beauty and breathing space where not long ago were many third rate offices, stores, and vacant lots and considerable congestion around the historic structures. The whole downtown area of the city has taken a new lease on life. Where there was a steady decline in real estate values and in business and residential use, there is now a revival of interest in both. What was close to being a slum is now one of the most desirable areas in the city.

Of course, not every ancient structure has been saved, and there are many which need prompt attention if they are to survive. With restoration costs as high as they are now, when an authentic job is to be done it is understandable that some owners cannot afford to do it. Surely, however, the city must salvage the fine old buildings at Fort Mifflin once the property of the federal government is redeemed. And the city should restore the nearby Cannon Ball House that goes back to Swedish times. Everything old and valuable cannot be retained, but a very good beginning has been made.
In the meantime there has been created a new realization of the importance and significance economically and aesthetically of the preservation of evidences of a great past. Henceforth there should be no recurrence of a typical incident such as the razing by an uninformed purchaser of a charming pre-Revolutionary house in Society Hill. This man acquired the property at sheriff’s sale for a few hundred dollars when the owner got behind in his taxes. While he was demolishing the house to provide a place to park his truck, an architect discovered that the interior of the modest little dwelling was beautifully panelled and that there was a penthouse in the rear suggesting the English style of the seventeenth century. When the architect attempted to persuade the truck owner to stop the demolition so that steps could be taken to buy and save the house, the owner demanded in cash nearly ten times what he had paid for the property. The money was not available, and the house is gone.

Meanwhile some neighbors, becoming aware of what was going on in Society Hill, told the truck owner that he should watch his step, as otherwise the “Hysterical Society” would get after him. It is interesting to note that where the little gem of a house stood a few years ago there has been erected, at a cost no doubt a hundred times greater than what was paid for the seventeenth century house, a splendid reconstruction of a “colonial brick house.” While it is not the genuine article esteemed by the advocates of historical preservation, nevertheless it is evidence of a belated realization by the owner of what the Historical Commission is intended to accomplish.

Those who are fortunate to be the owners of an ancient structure in Society Hill are not likely to disregard, as did the property owner here referred to, the wishes of the “Hysterical Society” nor of the ever-growing number of people who are endorsing the cause of historical preservation. There is a far better and much more general appreciation in downtown Philadelphia, at least, than heretofore of the monetary as well as the sentimental values possessed by original buildings of the colonial and federal periods.

Far more important than all this, however, is the ever-growing awareness that not just sentimental lovers of old houses and defenders of ancient examples of architecture of a great period but government bodies as well, government officials and taxpayers’
money, can now be enlisted to serve together in a cause that is close to the hearts of all who cherish the fine survivals of past ages and hope that "progress" will not mean the obliteration of all that is old and not in the modern fashion of "phonystone" or artificial brick, great expanses of glass of all colors, over-size illuminated signs, rotating or otherwise, and idiosyncrasies of structure.

In its nearly a century of existence the Fairmount Park Commission has set the example for historic preservation within the boundaries of the many parks under its supervision. In Fairmount
Park itself there are ten or a dozen buildings dating back to the colonial period which have been preserved and protected over the decades. It was not difficult to do this because, occupying space on park property, these houses were not threatened by the march of commercial progress. However, it is to the credit of the Commission that the houses themselves were cared for and not allowed to go to ruin. Today they supplement, as only these fine colonial dwellings can, the many houses situated in the built-up section of the city that have been or are being preserved.

With its success downtown, the City of Philadelphia and its Redevelopment Authority are now planning another great project in Germantown, an important community only a year younger than the city of which for over a century it has been a part. Germantown possesses many fine houses of the colonial and federal periods, a score of which are in safe hands. Stenton, the home of James Logan, Penn's secretary and later governor of the state, is owned by the city and cared for by the Colonial Dames. Loudoun on Nagley's Hill and Vernon, the home of one of the John Wisters, are also owned by the city. Cliveden, the Chew House, where much of the battle of Germantown was fought in 1777, and Wyck, the Haines family mansion for seven generations, are safe in the hands of descendants of the original owners. The Hacker, Baynton, Bechtel and Michael Billmeyer Houses are owned and maintained by the Germantown Historical Society. Upsala, the Concord School House, the Johnson House, Belfield, the Germantown Academy Buildings, all at least as old as the Revolution, are protected. There are other houses of that age that are not yet in safe hands. It is hoped that the plans for redeveloping Germantown will provide for their retention and restoration.

Unfortunately, although Germantown is rich in houses of early America those that remain are not located in groups except in a few instances. There are a half-dozen or more near Queens Lane on Germantown Avenue and nearly as many at Upsala Street, all of which should be preserved. The Market Square is rich in houses of early Germantown, with the unsurpassed Deshler-Morris House, the home of President Washington during the summers of 1793 and 1794. The house is owned by the federal government and is in the custody of the Germantown Historical Society. The Fromberger House across the street, reputedly the first brick house in
a community that made the Pennsylvania stone house famous from the early days of the province, is owned and occupied by the Germantown Fire Insurance Company. That company has built nearby a reconstruction of the De la Plaine House on the site of its colonial predecessor, which was dismantled to make room for a Victorian office building which has itself been replaced. This very thing has happened, incidentally, in the old city, where the once modern Drexel Building was razed and part of its site taken for the reconstructed Library Hall, the original of which was unfortunately destroyed when three-quarters of a century ago it stood in the path of "progress" of that day.

There are prospects that in the plan for redeveloping Germantown the two-century-old buildings of Germantown Academy will be continued in use despite the ultimate removal of this fine school to the country. And it is hoped that Market Square, the center of the colonial community, will be fully restored to its pre-Revolutionary appearance, when it boasted a scales, a fire house, and a dozen beautiful homes.

So it appears that the good people of Philadelphia and Germantown have come to realize, more generally than heretofore, I believe, the necessity to preserve for future generations the concrete evidences of their past. They possess distinctive specimens of this great country's early architecture and irreplaceable evidences of its historic action—not just for themselves and their contemporaries elsewhere but for all who come here, particularly from the fast-growing communities of our Middle West and Far West, whose buildings in their almost complete similarity in design and construction lack the charm of those colonial survivals which are to be found only in the East and are devoid of historical association with the days of the Founding Fathers and America's entrance upon the world scene.

History can be read in books or recalled on the movie screen or by television. But nothing can call back the spirit and the atmosphere of days long gone so well as the actual bricks and mortar of a house where history was made. In Germantown when the British Army occupied the Chew House as a fort and held up the American advance on Germantown Road, Washington stood on a mounting block in front of the Billmeyer House, two hundred yards away, and watched the progress of the fight on that foggy morn-
ing in October, 1777. His telescope belongs to Germantown Academy; the mounting block is in the museum of the Germantown Historical Society; the houses still stand where they stood then. May they ever remain there, cherished and preserved, mute evidence of a day when the future success of the Revolution was in doubt. It was the audacity of the Americans and the plan of their attack that, together with news from Saratoga, enabled Benjamin Franklin to persuade the French to make the alliance that led to Yorktown. How effectively these relics speak to the men, women and children of today!

No such relics should be neglected and lost. The brick house where Thomas Jefferson lived in 1776 and labored on the Declaration of Independence is gone. On its site at Seventh and Market Streets in Philadelphia a bank was built. The bank is gone, and a “hoagie stand” or “eaterie” has succeeded to the spot where the document that gave hope to millions throughout the world was born. Gone too is old Kryder’s Gun Shop at Second and Walnut Streets, dating from colonial days and typical of homes
of that time. Miss Wister and her organization could not raise the money to save it when the wreckers took over. Perhaps some day there will be authentic reconstructions of those two houses. On the site of the Gun Shop the owner has caused to be erected a fine colonial type building which occupies as well adjoining properties. Perhaps their loss to the "progress" of the days of their destruction will serve as warnings that other edifices equally worthy of preservation may be in danger.

The City of Philadelphia's priceless and unique Head House to the market at Second and Pine Streets has been properly and adequately restored at public expense after being allowed to deteriorate dreadfully over many years and after much prodding to rescue it. But some of the market structure was removed to provide parking space for automobiles. The Robeson House dating back to 1700 was not safe, even in part of Fairmount Park. It was demolished to make room for a huge traffic interchange which some say is grossly over-designed. The Engle House, of Germantown stone, closely associated with an old and honored Germantown family, was given a respite when moved back from the Main Street some years ago to make way for a shop, but finally it had to go to make space for a parking lot for the shop. The Dirck-Keyser House, a particularly fine example of colonial Germantown architecture, has been replaced by a typically undistinguished food market. These and other losses have occurred, and others may follow them.

However, with the Historic Commission on the scene and the improved climate for historic preservation in Philadelphia, the optimists hope that further destruction may be avoided. Other historic American cities have been criticized for the failure of their redevelopment programs to contribute to area preservation. Not so in Philadelphia. There not merely single houses but groups of them are now being saved. Redevelopment is no longer a matter of one hundred per cent clearing of ground. The worthwhile is being preserved.

It is so important for all of us to realize that, particularly in a country whose people enjoy freedom under a constitution that provides a republican form of government and protects by the Bill of Rights the least of its citizens, if we are to maintain the principles of democracy and educate our children in the ways of
a free people we must preserve the monuments of our past. We should understand that individuals and private groups must bring home to those in public office the compelling need to participate with fervor and with public funds in the preservation and restoration of those monuments.

In Philadelphia this has come about. Elsewhere it can be made to come about. In Philadelphia we are achieving historic restoration that will enable its citizens to welcome with pride those who come to the country's most noted shrine. Just so elsewhere in Pennsylvania all concerned can work together with vigor and determination to convince the people that not only is historic preservation essential to the good of all, but that above and beyond sentimental and aesthetic considerations it pays dividends to those who view the matter from the point of view of "good business."

In the various communities, as now so successfully in Winston-Salem and in our own Bethlehem, the merchants and manufacturers as well as the professional men and women must be enlisted in the cause we all believe in.

It has been an enjoyable occasion, this luncheon meeting, and I have thoroughly enjoyed myself as your guest. I hope that what I have said in this rather informal talk may be of some help and profit to you. I have spoken on a subject with which many of you here today are actively concerned and in which all of you are interested. It has been a privilege to address you on a matter that lies close to my heart.