SURROUNDED by a spacious lawn and giant oaks, the stately mansion graced the rolling landscape along Babcock Boulevard in Pine Township, north of Pittsburgh, since 1910. In less than two hours on the afternoon of May 22, 1993, the house vanished. A roaring fire supervised by 80 firefighters reduced the elegant structure to charred beams, rubble, and two free-standing four-story brick chimneys.

The mansion had been unoccupied for many years. Current owner James H. Bregenser said at the scene that he chose to burn the historic mansion down to avoid the substantial renovation and maintenance costs, high utility bills, loss of liability insurance on the structure, and heightened potential for vandalism due to the new Pine-Richland Senior High School nearby, once part of the original estate, called Vosemary Farm.

The exquisite wood frame Colonial Revival structure was built as a summer home by the late lumber millionaire Edward Vose Babcock. The spacious dwelling had expansive porches and a distinctive porte-cochere visible from the road. It was the centerpiece of Vosemary Farm, which once encompassed 700 acres. The name Vosemary derives from Babcock’s middle name and that of his wife, Mary.

In 1985, the Vosemary mansion was described and pictured in a Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation publication, Landmark Architecture — Pittsburgh and Allegheny County.

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The fabulous Vosemary mansion, above and on following page, was once home to a Pittsburgh mayor for whom Babcock Boulevard in the North Hills is named. It was intentionally burned in May. The owner said he could not longer afford to keep it up; the authors say the incident highlights key considerations for suburbia’s history.

Cynthia Johnson and Drew Ley live in the Wexford area in suburban Pittsburgh’s North Hills. They were recently awarded a Small Business Innovation Research Grant by the U.S. Department of Agriculture — one of seven such grants in the nation. Their goal is to create a methodology for stimulating rural economies through an electronic inventory of images and products marketed to the motion picture industry. Research for that project was used for this article.

dvelopment, the Foundation surveyed Allegheny County to identify significant structures deemed part of the county’s local architectural heritage. Selected by the Foundation for its unique architecture, the mansion also shared an historical significance associated with achievements of its builder.

Plentiful water supplies, easily navigated rivers, and abundant coal and timber resources led to the emergence of great industries in Pittsburgh and its region by the mid-1800s. Born in 1864, E.V. Babcock grew up
and learned the lumber business during the robust economic times of the late nineteenth century. By the early 1900s, according to a written history of the firm, the family-owned Babcock Lumber Co., Inc., became the leading hardwood producer in the world.

Babcock was not only a very successful businessman, but also a leading public figure. In 1911, Pennsylvania Gov. John K. Tener was forced to intervene in Pittsburgh government, after years of blatant mismanagement by elected and appointed officials. Gov. Tener appointed E.V. Babcock to an interim governing body known as the Council of Nine, which administered the city’s business affairs. Babcock remained as a council member for two years. In late 1917, he was elected mayor of Pittsburgh, serving from Jan. 7, 1918, to Jan. 2, 1922. Information gathered from numerous published sources shows that during a conflict-ridden term, Babcock was responsible for a record number of infrastructure construction projects for roads, bridges, and utility lines which benefitted the growing city.

Babcock was also a University of Pittsburgh trustee and he contributed to the erection of Pitt’s Cathedral of Learning.

In 1925, E.V. Babcock was appointed to fill an opening on the Allegheny County Commission. He was later re-elected for an additional term. As a county commissioner, Babcock achieved what he is said to have regarded as his most significant undertaking. He proposed and partially financed acquisition of land which became Allegheny County’s North Park and South Park. His vision and actions provide a continuing legacy to generations of county residents. In 1948, Babcock died; he is buried at Homewood Cemetery in Pittsburgh.

The Babcock family sold the mansion and its acreage in the 1950s to Radio Advertising Co. of Pittsburgh, which owned Pittsburgh’s KQV-AM.

Although Vosemary might have qualified, the mansion was never designated an historic landmark entitled to protection. The owner had the legal right to destroy the building. Safety and monetary considerations overshadowed architectural and historical importance.

But who owns the past? Is there a public interest to be served in preserving important symbols of our heritage? The mere identification of architecturally and historically significant structures is no guarantee of protection. An intervention strategy on behalf of the public interest must be developed to preserve valued buildings. In the absence of such a strategy, more structures will disappear from the landscape as development accelerates in Allegheny County’s outlying suburbs. Our interest led us to identify at least six other structures of valued architectural and historic lineage in the North Hills area. And in a competitive real estate marketplace, conflict between private gain and the public interest can be all too easily decided.

The purchase of development rights by non-profit preservation entities is an innovative and increasingly used means of protecting agricultural land within Pennsylvania. The commonwealth’s voters, in a 1987 referendum, approved the selling of bonds to fund purchase of development rights, and compensation of farm property owners who do not sell or convert their land to non-agricultural uses is now administered under the state’s so-called Agricultural Security Law. Voters demonstrated their understanding of the need to preserve historically productive farm land, so why couldn’t a similar approach be used to preserve architecturally and historically significant structures? We believe we are offering this idea for the first time, for we can find no record of such proposals by local preservation organizations and policy-makers.

In addition, the creation of a less costly and more limited category of property rights, which might be called pre-demolition historical rights, is necessary to permit the holder a specified time to document the history and condition of the structure, prepare floor plans and/or renderings, photograph the structure, as well as removing and retaining for posterity distinctive features or architectural details which would otherwise be lost during demolition.

Pre-demolition historical rights, however, will not save buildings. These rights would only permit preservation of an accurate record and memory of them.

As flames consumed the Vosemary mansion in May, eyewitnesses were haunted by troubling questions: “Could it have been saved?” “How?” and “Why wasn’t it?” By the end of the day, only a single wood frame chair remained as a memorial to the Vosemary mansion.