

GARDNER MUSEUM OF ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

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PROTECTING AN ENDANGERED SPECIES: QUINCY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

by Paul Larson

There was a time when historic preservation meant attending to the architectural monuments everyone in the community knew about. The John Wood Mansion and the Villa Kathrine are good Quincy examples of this early stage of preservation awareness. They are the sites where local history gained a modern foothold.

Had preservation activity stopped there, historic preservation would never have risen above the status of a very minor special interest, its local landmarks little more than desolate reminders of a past increasingly isolated from the mainstream of current activity and development.

At a national level all that has changed in the last decade. Historic properties are no longer lonely battleships futilely resisting a sea of change, but important signposts in the rediscovery of historic landscapes. Cities and towns throughout the country have begun to reassert their regional and individual character and have found in their architectural heritage the strongest single assertion of that character. If they are fortunate, as Quincy is, to have a heritage that is already a powerful physical presence, then they are blessed with a built-in magnet for redevelopment and tourism alike.

From a personal standpoint, I would not have considered coming to Quincy from a major metropolitan area like the Twin Cities if its sole architectural promise was a series of scattered monuments. I wanted a terrific living environment, one with potential in every direction. And Quincy has precisely that. To an outsider's eye, the glory of Quincy is not its individual architectural monuments—which are legion—but the wonderfully diverse tissues and textures of each of its many historic neighborhoods.

Yet Quincy has barely begun to embrace all of its possibilities as a mecca of architectural environments. Two of its neighborhoods, the historic Downtown and the East End,

have been singled out as National Register Districts. But they are the tip of the iceberg. As they have come down to us, both the Downtown and the East End are largely second and third generation outgrowths of the lives and economic activities of the north and south sides.

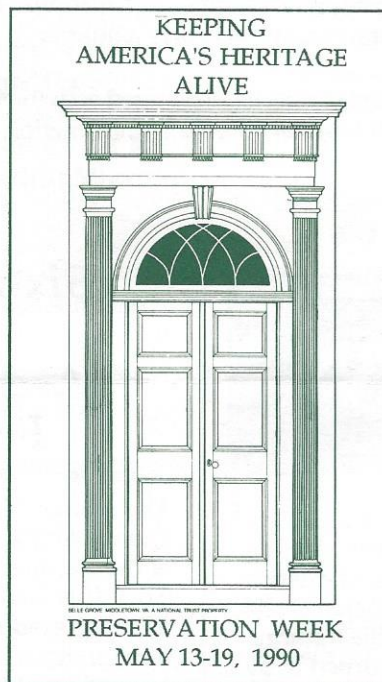
Above and below the present downtown is where the diverse elements of a raw river settlement were first articulated into a city. Important fragments survive of the early industries

that were once so powerful a force in the region, of the German settlement that comprised its primary European heritage, of the historic Afro-American community that was Quincy's badge of honor during slave days. Much larger concentrations survive of the distinctive brick cottages that housed the workers whose labors gave rise to East End affluence, and of their wealthier companions, the north side merchants of Fifth and Sixth Streets.

Historic sites and neighborhoods such as these are typical of the second order of preservation awareness, which concerns the health and vitality of our communities as a whole. The architectural environments of the north and south side are for the most part a shadow of what they once were; yet they appear to have survived as vital living places, lacking not so much in care and money as they do in direction and incentive. Enough of a glimmer remains

of their historic character to offer hope that they can once again become points of aesthetic as well as historic pride in the community. They deserve far more attention and celebration than they have received.

The endangered species of historic preservation is not the mansion in all its splendor, but the cottage in all its simplicity. For these latter, as for endangered natural species, the survival unit is not the individual, but the habitat, the neighborhood. Letting the forest go for a few outstanding trees loses much of what even those trees can give and tell us. Letting historic environments slip away is even worse for our cities. It amounts to aiding and abetting memory loss, and with it loss of character and identity. The self-aware community and its living past rise to meet the future together.



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