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THE CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC PHILADELPHIA

BY CHARLES E. PETERSON

SUPERVISING ARCHITECT HISTORIC STRUCTURES
U. S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

DECEMBER 1954

DIVISION OF DESIGN
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UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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In reply refer to:
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Eastern Office
Division of Design and Construction
Philadelphia 6, Pa.

January 25, 1955

Kahler
Pete has done a better job on this
go on Philadelphia
see [unclear]

Memorandum

To: The Director
From: Chief, EODC
Subject: Peterson paper presented to San Juan Congress

Herewith are two copies of a paper by Architect Peterson as presented to the V Congress of Inter-American Municipalities last month and mimeographed by them.

Mr. Peterson would like to remind readers that it was got out in a hurry and would appreciate suggested changes or additions in case it is ever given again.

(SIGNED)

Edward S. Zimmer
Chief

Attachments

Copy to: Regional Director, Region One
Supt., San Juan National Historic Site
WASOHC w/attachment

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Dec. 1954

THE CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC PHILADELPHIA

by Charles E. Peterson

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To speak of our historic buildings in the United States before representatives of the Latin-American countries requires a degree of humility. We in the North well realize that the colonizers from Spain and Portugal had created important cities with handsome and impressive buildings well before the Anglo-American had put up his first modest wooden shelters at Jamestown in Virginia and Plymouth on Massachusetts Bay. While on a visit to Mexico in 1941 I was deeply impressed to hear that ten thousand churches had been built there in the colonial period. Every one of them I saw had something fine about it, many were spectacularly beautiful and some were so old as to have been built in the Gothic style of the early sixteenth century.

For antiquity we cannot, of course, match your oldest structures. But as we get acquainted with the work of our own early builders we find a great deal to admire in their works. While in matters of style our architecture was mostly derivative from the English, a comparison with structures in both countries demonstrates that the Americans soon created attractive idioms

of their own. By the close of the colonial period we had at least one structure that Europeans crossed the Atlantic to study. Finally, in the nineteenth century enough important innovations of structure and materials were brought forth in our country as to influence the world's architecture. Few of these, however, have yet been recognized as "historic" in the popular sense of the word.

In the realm of human affairs, however, I believe we can claim some priority, having touched off the long series of revolutions which eventually freed most of the Western Hemisphere. Our old friend, the great scholar of the Spanish-American colonial period - the late Herbert Eugene Bolton of the University of California - used to point out that our Revolutionary War, which may be said to have started with the rebel Congress convened in Philadelphia in 1774, was only the first phase of a general movement. The flames of revolt did not die down with the peace of 1783. They spread southward, where one colony after another threw off the shackles of European domination and won their national existence.

If you will grant the Anglo-American struggle to be the first successful step towards victory, I believe that Philadelphia should appeal to you, as it does to us, as the historic seat of the freedom we enjoy today.

When I was asked to select one of our cities as the subject of this paper I chose Philadelphia for several reasons. First, the two great projects currently under way around Independence Hall hold a timely interest to all of those concerned with preserving the landmarks of American history. Many hope to find therein solutions to similar or related problems in their own communities. Second, because I have lived there five years and have had a chance to explore its history, only part of which is to be found on the printed page. The physical evolution of our cities has received very little study on what might be called a professional level. Even now, we don't know too much about any one of them. It is a deficiency which must be overcome before reconstruction of historic areas can be properly undertaken.

The two projects - one by the United States Government and the other by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania - may total in cost some twenty-five million dollars by the time they are completed. They are not the result of a political whim materializing overnight, but rather the culmination of a growing popular interest over a long period. The partnership with the City is of more than passing interest.

The political and cultural background of the City of Philadelphia is remarkably rich. Commercially success-

ful, the settlement organized in England by Quaker William Penn and Laid out on the ground in 1682, grew to be the second largest English-speaking city in the world in a little better than a century, surpassed only by London. It was the capital of the colony and its wealth created a colonial culture of real distinction, the architectural remains of which are still to be seen on every hand. In 1774, as we have seen, it became the political center of our Revolutionary War and after its successful culmination a constitution was designed and adopted at Philadelphia. There, too, the new national government was organized and put into operation, Fortunately, most of the public buildings which knew these momentous events have been preserved. Their existence after so many years is due to the unusually active appreciation by its leading citizens of the value of historical landmarks. Many of the private buildings have also survived, though the majority exist largely by accident.

This sentiment in Philadelphia developed early and can be traced back over two centuries. Peter Kalm, the well-known Swedish agricultural explorer, visiting Philadelphia in 1749 remarked that even at that time the inhabitants were keeping an old log cabin as an interesting reminder of pioneer days. This is, incidentally, the earliest American example that has come to my attention of preserving architectural relics of the past. But

log cabins, like other wooden structures, are not easy to maintain and somewhere along the line this one vanished into oblivion).

The next example to have been treated as an historic landmark is Independence Hall itself. Built as the "State House" of the Province of Pennsylvania, this structure was begun over two hundred years ago, and, when completed was considered to be the most imposing public building in the Anglo-American colonies. But it has a greater distinction. Fate had decreed that it would be the structure in which many outstanding political events took place during the founding of our nation.

After 1800, (when the capital of the United States moved south to Washington and the capital of the state moved west to Harrisburg), the building became much less important, and it served a variety of local functions. It was not until 1826, when General Lafayette of France, a popular hero of the Revolution, made his triumphant return to America, that Independence Hall was again in the public eye. A great procession met the old hero at the city limits and marched with him back to the Hall. A wave of enthusiasm swept the country as he stood in the very room where the Declaration of Independence had been signed a half-century earlier. Those who had an eye for architectural detail about this time noted changes

in the fabric since the great days of the 18th century and a demand soon arose to have the modern features removed and the earlier restored. The wooden steeple, which had been missing for some time was put back, more or less along the original lines, in 1828. Two years later a movement was well under way to restore the Assembly Chamber (setting for the signing) to its original appearance. Soon afterwards, another project was advocated to refurnish it as it stood at the time of the signing, a pioneer attempt to treat a building, inside and out, as an accurate "period piece".

Shortly afterwards Christ Church, a leading house of worship at the time of the colonial period, needed repairs and interior improvements. That promising young architect, Thomas U. Walter (who later helped build the harbor at La Guaira) was engaged to make plans, and he approached the problem as an essay in restoration. When the work was completed in 1838 the committee of inspection were convinced "that this ancient and venerable edifice is now in a state of conformity with the original design of the architect, and likely to continue for a long time, as it always has been, a cherished object of the affections and pride of Philadelphians."

A couple of decades later (1857), the Carpenters' Company reclaimed their old hall (landmark of the first

Continental Congress) and set it aside as a "shrine." This included moving out the tenants, restoring the premises and opening it free to the public and is probably our second example of the dedication of a building as an historical exhibit. (It followed soon after the saving of Washington's Headquarters at Newburgh, New York and precedes the purchase of Mount Vernon, home of George Washington, by a few years).

In the years after the Civil War, Philadelphia enjoyed considerable prosperity, and the city seemed to recognize further responsibilities in this field of historic conservation. The greatest collective accomplishment over the years was undoubtedly the preservation of the old country seats in Fairmount Park now known as "The Colonial Chain."

The Park as a public reservation had its origin in 1812-1819 when the city purchased the site for a waterworks and the right to raise an old dam in the beautiful valley of the Schuylkill River. Through the years one private estate after another was added to the public domain field, hill and forest had grown to what is thought to be the largest municipal park anywhere.

Although the area was not acquired for historical purposes many of the old houses along the river - among which "Mount Pleasant" and "Lemon Hill" are perhaps the best known - had somehow managed to survive with little

change. Custodianship of these houses was assumed by the Park Commission (chartered in 1867), which beginning about 1925, had them restored, furnished in period and opened to the public. Some were entrusted to civic organizations to maintain and use. In addition, certain other old houses of the city - when their existence was threatened on the original - were moved bodily into the Park to be protected there, such as the Laetitia Street House (1883), "Cedera Grove" (1927) and "Hatfield House" (1930). The group became famous among connoisseurs of Early American architecture and their interiors have been fitted with household furniture and accessories of quality. Examples of the best early craftsmanship in the decorative arts are thus conserved and the public is given an impression of the society which they once served so handsomely.

The precedent of Fairmount Park was followed in creating smaller city parks, such as "Bartram's Garden" (1891), which includes the home and proving grounds of the great eighteenth century explorer-botanist-horticulturist John. Bartram. Altogether, it must be admitted that the City of Philadelphia has done an outstanding job in caring for examples of its early architecture. In 1933 a Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks was formed especially for such purposes and is supported by private contributions. When the various

projects developed by such semi-public organizations and individuals are added to the list, it adds up to a quite impressive accomplishment.

While the City continued to maintain the landmarks on Independence Square with commendable diligence; (the American Institute of Architects and others keeping watch) the surrounding neighborhood steadily deteriorated. Philadelphia suffers from the same physical changes as other growing cities and, as its original business center near the Delaware River moved west, many historic neighborhoods were more or less abandoned and became very shabby.

A number of ideas for improvement by enlarging the park area around Independence Hall had been brought forth through the years, but the cost of acquiring additional lands and redeveloping them seemed to be of an order beyond the means of the City. It was not until World War II that a successful movement to solve this problem was initiated on a large scale. In the early war years the possibility of enemy bombing and a general conflagration in the old historic area of the city became a matter of great concern. A group of Philadelphia citizens organized the "Independence Hall Association" for the purpose of prompting improvements and leadership of a high order insured immediate progress.

Independence Square was first officially designated as a "National Historic Site" by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and then projects to develop the neighborhood through the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the U. S. Government were undertaken on a grand scale.

While I must avoid an enumeration of the legion who have contributed in important ways I will have to name the president of the Association, Judge Edwin O. Lewis, that resourceful civic leader who has kept the efforts of the three governments moving always toward the goal.

The opportunity of expanding the park-like area of old Independence Square was limited by the architectural development of the neighborhood as it stood in the 1940's. The west and south sides of the Square were bounded by large buildings, hardly feasible to acquire and clear away. But to the north and east the situation was somewhat different. Three long squares to the north wide interstate highway was about to be cut through to the great Delaware River bridge. A physical connection from this important artery to the Square was advocated - one which would lead visiting motorists direct to the great historical landmark. A wide vista between the two would have the advantage of creating a much needed fire break through a crowded area

of highly inflammable old warehouses. A landscape development plan, conceived with an axial view of the Independence Hall steeple in the grand Baroque manner was procured by the City of Philadelphia and presented to the Commonwealth for execution. Financed by state highway funds and by other moneys appropriated for park purposes (to the Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters) nearly half of the lands have now been acquired and one third of them has been cleared and "parked". These very conspicuous improvements have brought forth much favorable comment.

Only one building considered "historic" remained in this area - a two-story brick Quaker meeting house (1784) built for veterans of the Revolutionary War. It is to be retained, but will have to be moved several feet to allow the uniform widening of the street on which it faces.

Immediately to the east lay an area of a different character in that it had still standing a remarkable group of buildings of historic interest. The Congress of the United States, in line with its established policy of conserving historic buildings (through that bureau of our Interior Department called the National Park Service) voted funds to set up the "Independence National Historical Park Project." A real estate

acquisition program was adopted embracing four individual areas. The Second Bank of the United States (built 1819-24) was already in possession of the Federal Government. The First Bank of the United States (1795-7) was to be purchased, as well as the Philadelphia Exchange (1832-4) a monument of Greek Revival architecture and some seventeen 18th and 19th century houses of varying importance, mostly of value to help maintain the urban picture. A cooperative agreement was worked out with the City of Philadelphia by which the physical maintenance of the structures on Independence Square was turned over to the National Park Service. (An exception was Philosophical Hall - 1785-9 - owned and recently restored by the American Philosophical Society and therefore in a safe situation). Special contracts were also made with the Carpenters' Company regarding their old Hall (1770-74) and with the vestry of Christ Church (1727-44, 1755) defining a sort of joint jurisdiction over their physical fabrics. During the course of the studies on the site two mid-nineteenth century structures standing in the area the Jayne (1849-50) and the Penn Mutual (1850-51) Buildings were found to be of great architectural-historical importance. H?

In addition, the courtyard site off Market Street of Benjamin Franklin's house (1763-4) and a strip of ground for a landscaped promenade extending down into the "Society Hill" district were marked for purchase and re-

development.

While this "package deal" totalled only a dozen acres, it embraced perhaps the most notable group of early buildings in the country. The cost of purchasing all these properties - and the program is now nearly complete - totals over seven million dollars.

The problem of producing plans for the restoration of these structures, varying in style and construction over two centuries, is now a formidable one. There are very few knowledgeable architects in the country capable of producing authentic designs. When a restoration is done without a thorough professional background its insufficiency is soon noted and the work must be done over again in subsequent years. Each time the physical evidences of the original design become scarcer and the chances of getting an ultimate satisfactory effect less. Architectural students especially interested in this special kind of work have been employed here to prepare careful measured records of the various structure with such success that the University of Pennsylvania is making plans to offer a graduate course in what might be called the archaeology of American buildings.

The share of the City of Philadelphia in these proceedings is not as apparent as the other agencies but is quite substantial. Actually, it is left with the

responsibilities for the care of the streets while forfeiting the customary taxes on the adjoining lands. But Philadelphia has shown its confidence in the future by turning over to the nation the great landmark which it had preserved alone for nearly a century and a half-Independence Hall and has shown its willingness to cooperate in innumerable ways.

These improvements intended to rescue the fine old public buildings from the shabbiness of their present-day setting resulted from initiative taken by Philadelphians in getting outside public agencies to undertake them. The remaining program, and one which would seem most logically handled by individual enterprise, is the rehabilitation of the nearby Society Hill area. The district was once a fashionable place to live and fine old houses by the hundred are available for rehabilitation by those who recognize good architectural character and who wish to do something substantial for the improvement of the city. Your speaker was so taken with the latent possibilities of the area that he moved in and purchased two of these houses himself, with restoration work now under way. In the meantime the moving of the old crowded and unsanitary produce market on one side of this district has now been undertaken and seems to be the last obstacle to the upgrading of a once

important and interesting section of the City.

Also, I would like to invite you to attend the annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians in New York City next month. On January 27 there will be a series of papers by eminent authorities on the history of Latin American architecture arranged by Professor George Kubler of Yale. On the 29th there will be a session on the restoration of American buildings arranged by the writer. For details you may write to Professor James G. Van Derpool, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York City.

We hope that we will have the pleasure of seeing all of you in Philadelphia as these splendid projects mature, and before you leave Puerto Rico, we would also like to have you visit El Morro, the great sixteenth century fortress that the National Park Service is dedicated to preserve. It is an important part of Old San Juan where the opportunity for saving a picturesque area of Spanish colonial architecture seems very bright at this time.

Suggested Collateral Reading

1. Ronald F. Lee, United States - Historical and Architectural Monuments Instituto Panamericano de Geografia e Historia, Mexico, D. F., 1951
2. Sylvester K. Stevens and Donald H. Kent, Conserving Pennsylvania's Historical Heritage, Pennsylvania

Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pa.,
1947.

3. American Philosophical Society, pub., Historic Philadelphia, From the Founding until the Early Nineteenth Century, Philadelphia, 1953.