

**Transcript from CHRS's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration  
January 28, 2015**

**Doug Wheeler**

[I know we've got a little over, but]...I hope you agree it was time well-spent listening to Mimi and Hazel. I'd just like to summarize briefly how we got to a point of Hazel's research, the designation of what was and has been the largest historic district in the city, if not the United States. What Hazel didn't say as she was walking the streets is that there are 8,000 buildings within this historic district, and we were required to document as many of those as possible in support of our nomination. The determination is made, as you probably know, by the Department of Interior, where I happened to be employed at the time and it is the National Registrar of historic places which finally represents the realization and acknowledgement that this is in fact not just a single site – a national historic landmark – but a collection of places which together create a district whose value, in many respects, is deserving of recognition and protection.

That second word is very important because designation as a historic district itself means nothing with regard to the protection of those resources. It is to be sure recognition of the significance of the place, and acknowledgement that indeed it has national significance. But the protection of that site or an individual building within the site is entirely the responsibility of the local jurisdiction in which the district exists.

It would not surprise you to know, given the history you've heard about Mary's Blue Room, and incidentally I've got a picture here – you can't see it, I'm sure, but the Historic American Buildings Survey had documented Mary's Blue Room prior to its demolition in 1972. So if you go on the internet today you can find the picture of the building that was on the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and East Capitol and we were among those who walked around the building too, trying to behave ourselves but also offering resistance. The point being that the city and the owners of that property – the church – were free to tear it down. There was nothing in the law that had said this was a significant property and contributed to the architectural importance of the community; it needs not to be destroyed.

Within a year – this was 1972 – in 1973 the District did enact a delay in demolition ordinance. The first step which said simply that before the District wrote a demolition permit, it was necessary to provide public comment or opportunity for comment and for the District to take into consideration that someone might actually object to the demolition of the building. As you might imagine, that didn't stop too many activities of this sort, but it did give us an opportunity to parade around more buildings here on the Hill. The point being that all this documentation on the significance of these places led to the nomination of the historic district successfully. We had looked very closely and you've heard this many times – we did have some envy of Georgetown at that time; we looked closely at the protection which had been afforded to the Georgetown historic district and discovered that that was a matter of federal law and as early as the Shipstead-Luce Act in 1935 there is a statute which establishes protection for Georgetown and the responsibility in the Commission of Fine Arts, a federal agency to review demolition, alteration, new construction in Georgetown.

So the option was to us – do we establish by Act of Congress protection for the Capitol Hill historic district, or do we seek another alternative? Having had the experience that Mimi had with Carl Albert, we didn't think that Congress was going to be too sympathetic. And so we decided not only to seek the designation as an historic district on the national register of historic places, which happened in 1976, but also to establish for the first time an historic preservation ordinance for the City of Washington. Believe it or not, there was no protection for historic property, even those so significant that they were on the national register.

Many of us were involved in drafting the ordinance, which was championed by our then Council member, Nadine Winters. Some of you might remember how a woman – an African-American – who represented the district that was rapidly gentrifying; it might not have been in her interest to support our recommendation if she were concerned about what that might mean to the Hill. But in fact, she supported us quite vigorously, and she took the proposal to the City Council and argued for the adoption of Washington's first historic district ordinance. It exists to this day as the District's Landmark's Preservation Act. It embodies all that you would hope to find, that is the need for permits if demolition were to occur or alterations, new construction – even for what we call demolition by neglect, that is, if you fail to maintain a historic property. You are liable to the District for failure to do so.

And it established a Historic Preservation Review Board to which we dutifully, at the Society, made recommendations on every permit application that came to it. And more times than not, they paid attention to those recommendations and those permits were denied. So the integrity of this place is very much the direct result of the fact that there is a city-wide ordinance in place which creates that procedure and which requires that permits be written for the protection of historic properties – not just the 8,000 buildings here on Capitol Hill, but in historic districts across the city. And there is now, of course, a widespread recognition that the fabric of these places, the vibrancy of this community are completely dependent on the protection of the built environment and all it means to all of us, which would have been lost had the freeway been built, and Mary's not been demolished, had we had the opportunity to protect against activities like the Pedestal Club. You are the guardians of this extraordinary legacy and you have a tool in the city's Historic Preservation Ordinance to effect the degree of protection that simply did not exist in the early days of the Restoration Society.

Not to say that it's perfect. We still have our battles as Monte can attest. But the fact is that we do have the levers, and I'm astounded, frankly, to see we have as city councilman, the young man who spoke to us this evening, clearly recognizes the influence that you all wield in this community, politically and otherwise – it is very important. I needn't tell you this, that you continue that vigilance and make use of the tools that are available to you to protect this extraordinary resource.