

CHRS Celebrating 60 Years of Preservation

A Look at Capitol Hill Restoration Society's Early History

John Muller — 01/04/2015

Imagine if East Capitol Street was flanked by monuments and federal buildings instead of small-scale residential and commercial buildings. Imagine if a highway bisected Capitol Hill. Imagine if historic Hill landmarks such as the Sewall-Belmont House had been razed to make room for administrative buildings. All of these proposals and more, which would have permanently altered the streetscape and character of the Hill's neighborhoods, would have been a reality had it not been for the advocacy work of an organized group of citizen-activists.

A history of the neighborhood-based preservationist movement in Washington is filled with spirited successes, destructive losses, leading personalities and numerous associations, societies, and leagues. Over the last sixty years one of the most visible and consequential organizations has been the Capitol Hill Restoration Society (CHRS). Founded in early 1955, CHRS is recognizing its diamond jubilee throughout 2015 with a series of articles telling its story of promoting, preserving, and enhancing the character of Capitol Hill's historic neighborhoods.

Founding and Early Efforts

In March of 1955, the Stanton Park Citizens' Association celebrated its 35th Anniversary and welcomed a presentation by a group of their neighbors who, six weeks before, had formed the Capitol Hill Restoration Society to "emulate the work done by property owners in Georgetown." From its start, CHRS sought to form alliances and relationships with existing civic groups who shared an interest in the rehabilitation of residential and commercial properties and had an institutional knowledge of the mechanics of local government, which, in DC, means a familiarity with Congress.

Saving the Sewall-Belmont House

During the spring of 1955 a bill before the Senate Public Works Committee called for the razing of the Ava Belmont House at 144 B Street NE in order to construct a new Senate office building. In response, Richard H. Stringfellow, president of the nascent Capitol Hill Restoration Society, sent a letter to the committee requesting that CHRS be given an opportunity to testify during the hearings. Stringfellow asked that the Belmont House, erected in 1800 and rebuilt after being burned by the British in 1814, be excluded to "preserve a tangible place of history for the benefit of the country." The Belmont House was spared and the reputation of CHRS as an emerging player on the Hill was established.

Preserving East Capitol Street

When a proposed "East Mall Plan" was forwarded by the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) in the late 1950s, CHRS was one of the leading opponents. The proposed legislation called for the creation of a second mall which would flank East Capitol Street from the Capitol to the edge of the Anacostia River.

In March 1959 a special meeting convened by CHRS drew an "overflow crowd" that "grumbled so loudly they often had to be quieted with the president's gavel." Despite reassurances from George E. Finley, director of the NCPC, that affected property owners would get market value for their homes on land planned for the construction of new Federal buildings, residents objected. Leveraging their early restoration efforts, residents argued "the planning commission encourages them to improve their homes even though they soon plan to level the sites." Adding his voice and authority to the opposition was J. George Stewart, the eighth Architect of the Capitol.

After the legislation bounced back and forth within the House Public Buildings subcommittee for nearly two years, the East Mall Plan, a proposed initiative of planners for more than three decades, was finally dropped. Due to the advocacy of members of CHRS and other groups, staff members of the NCPC proposed that East Capitol Street instead be "made into a tree-lined avenue flanked with quality residential buildings." But it already was. Ideas for a drastic transformation of East Capitol Street were abandoned.

House and Garden Tours

According to a recent article published in the Journal of Urban History, "discussions of neighborhood restoration and preservation" in Washington "were almost entirely focused on Georgetown between the 1920s and 1940s." However, by the early 1950s the neighborhood restoration movement began its eastward march through the city to the Southeast and Northeast areas of Capitol Hill.

Taking a cue from regular house and garden tours that began in Georgetown in the late 1920s, an emerging trend occurring on the periphery of DC to highlight "historical worthies who had built or inhabited" homes in the suburban and rural counties, and a small-scale effort intended to raise funds for local settlement houses including the former Friendship House, CHRS organized its first house and garden tour in May 1958. The tradition continues today.

"Neither rain nor sleet nor heat of day can deter the true do-it-yourself spirit," the Washington Post proclaimed in a caption showcasing the recently re-painted and re-masoned Victorian home at 11 Fourth Street NE. The home of attorney John A. Robertie, Jr. was one of 16 houses and St. Mark's Episcopal Church at 301 A Street SE to be featured on CHRS' inaugural house tour. As is the practice today, tickets were sold in advance and the day of at the featured homes.

The tours aided in raising the public profile of CHRS and encouraging the preservation and restoration of the Hill's residential housing stock. On display were not just the architectural diversity of Hill homes, but the landscape settings and furnishings including collectibles such as antiques, books, and maps.

By 1960, organizers sold more than 700 tickets, "evidence of a burgeoning restoration constituency ... highlight[ing] the fact that urban residential neighborhoods, not just the hamlets of the rural hinterland, were of growing historical interest and cultural prestige to nonspecialists."

The success of the tours was two-fold: revenue was generated to further the mission and activities of CHRS and potential restorers and remodelers were able to see examples to emulate or gain ideas from.

Participants included both native Hill denizens and national figures living in the neighborhood. Some of those who opened their homes in the early years included members of the House of Representatives, the national press corps, retired military personnel, renowned artists, and local business leaders.

"The rigid conformity that critics of modern America attribute to suburban living does not exist on the Hill," wrote resident Constance McLaughlin Green, a preeminent Washington historian, in an introduction to the CHRS 1964 tour brochure.

A New Town Look

By the early 1960s the restoration efforts of residents in Capitol Hill, Foggy Bottom, Georgetown and Kalorama were being hailed as epitomizing a "new look," which gave intown Washington "an orderly new residential character." According to a September 1961 profile in the Evening Star, "Not many years ago, more and more people were despairing of cities. Unthinkingly, they were saying that slums were inevitable, that nothing could be done about deterioration." Due to the organizing efforts of the CHRS and similar neighborhood-based groups, "Private individuals had the courage to risk their own funds ... [and] ... Congress had the good sense to recognize that the quality of cities was a national problem."

During this time Washington was increasingly being acknowledged throughout the country as "further advanced along the comeback road than any other city." In less than a decade, CHRS was able to secure its legitimacy as a leading organization within a sophisticated field of individuals and groups advocating for inner-city preservation and restoration across multiple neighborhoods. In the years to come CHRS would continue to build relationships and its significance through a series of news programs and campaigns while continuing its popular house and garden tours.

For more information on upcoming events and activities of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society, and to read an accompanying article by Hill activist and author Lucinda Prout Janke on the historical tradition of community activism on the Hill, visit [the CHRS website](#).

