

HELEN BURGESS
SOME ASPECTS OF HISTORIC
PRESERVATION IN THE U.S.A.

This is a crucial time for Historic Preservation. Organized efforts are everywhere needed today more urgently than ever before. Many historic buildings — and even undeveloped but important areas — which have so far withstood the slow erosion of time, are now being assaulted by the swift destruction that passes under the name of « progress ».

Much of this destruction could have been avoided IF informed and influential people had become active EARLY enough to persuade the authorities to recognize the historic importance of some building or area that stood in the way, and make the slight shift in planning which is frequently all that is needed to safeguard the historic landmark.

Every country must find ways to meet the challenge of Historic Preservation according to its own circumstances, geographic or otherwise. But methods and techniques which have proved successful in one country can sometimes be helpfully adapted to others. We have all come here to learn from each other, so I am happy to present to this distinguished Congress some of the aspects of Historic Preservation as it is being carried out in the United States.

The controlling factor with us is that our civilization is spread over an immense territory, divided into fifty states, each with a strong local government. (The recent admission of Alaska and Hawaii as the 49th and 50th states of the Union, means that we are now concerned with an area that girdles half the globe.) Starting with the thirteen original colonies, all on the Eastern Coast, our country gradually expanded 3,000 miles to reach the Pacific, adding state after state as the territory came under civilized control. The result of this development is an intense devotion throughout the U.S.A. to the principle of « State's Rights » versus Federal control. This principle carries down to county, municipal and township loyalties. Great local pride in, and a desire to improve, one's own community is an almost universal trait of the American character.

It is for this reason that the organization I have the honor to represent here (the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States of America) has recognized the importance of developing its program through the medium of local groups; each one organized to preserve either a whole community, or quite often a single historic building — and not necessarily a large one at that. It suffices that the building should have been important in the history or culture of its particular locality.

The American National Trust, which was chartered 17 years ago by Congress, but which is strictly non-governmental and receives no financial support

from the Government, accepts as its primary mission the need to build in our citizens awareness of and a sense of responsibility for our historic landmarks wherever they may be situated throughout the country; and it recognizes that this can best be accomplished through autonomous local groups. Over 500 of these groups or associations belong to the National Trust as organizational members paying annual dues. The Trust in return provides leadership and general information through its regular publications, as well as expert advisory services to individual projects — but no financial support.

A few of these conservation projects do, however, receive some state or municipal assistance. (The Federal Government has its own preservation program under the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior, but this is mainly concerned, as its name implies, with our national parks; although it does accomplish some notable work on building restoration such as at Independence Square in Philadelphia).

Recent statistics indicate that in the U.S.A., over 68% of Historic Preservation is privately initiated and supported.

This clearly puts a widespread mission of education upon the National Trust, both as to building popular awareness and developing technical proficiency. We are providing this leadership through our regular publications (an illustrated magazine published six times yearly, and 14 newsletters), and through seminars which are held in various parts of the country, usually in conjunction with local groups.

Our educational mission thus falls into two parts. The first is to alert the public whenever it is learned that a historic landmark is threatened. This calls for much research, and the wide connections which the Trust enjoys with important organizations such as the National Park Service, the A.I.A. (American Institute of Architects) and the S.A.H. (Society of Architectural Historians). The second part of the educational program is designed to provide advice and training for those who engage in actual preservation. There is a shortage in our country of trained personnel for the mounting number of historic projects.

In addition to its educational program, the National Trust has accepted responsibility for a few important properties which are, in most cases, open to the public on a daily basis. However, the policy of the Trust has been to encourage local ownership wherever possible for reasons already stated.

Our National Trust derives most of its income from the dues of its members. In addition to the 500 organization members already mentioned, there are approximately 5,000 individual members and a few corporate members. This third category is for business firms having no immediate concern with historic preservation, other than a patriotic desire to assist the National Trust in its important and ever expanding efforts to protect our nation's heritage.

There are three points which might be considered as basic in the American preservation picture.

- 1 - That the citizen and local organizations, rather than the national government, take the main responsibility for Historic Preservation. (68%)

- 2 - That we believe in decentralization, in stimulating and encouraging organizations at the community level, rather than in one controlling national society. (500 local organizations)

- 3 - We believe that great monuments are certainly very important, but

that there cannot be a full historic record of a country except it include consideration of the small community and the dwellings of simple people.

To illustrate, our National Trust is currently engaged with the Department of the Interior in the preservation of a very small dwelling which, if not quickly moved to another site, would be razed to make room for a new super-highway. The reason this house is important enough for the National Trust to grant it a new home site in one of its own historic properties, is that it is the pioneer example of one of our most noted architects, Frank Lloyd Wright, to meet the needs of a low cost, low maintenance house for moderate income families.

We do not profess, of course, to be the only nation concerning itself with the historic importance of simple buildings or early communities. Several countries have developed fascinating historic preservation projects in villages and mining towns. To wit: Denmark's Frilands Museet, Sweden's Stockholm Village, Mexico's Taxco, Brazil's Oro Preto, France's Richelieu and, in the U.S.A., Old Salem, North Carolina.

There is also another type of community preservation in the U.S.A., perhaps more properly designated as historic reconstruction (insofar as most of the buildings are concerned), which is designed especially to teach today's generation how yesterday's lived. These projects represent meticulous archeological research, both as to exterior and interior furnishings; and serve the valuable educational purpose of enabling the visitor to establish a sense of identity with his forefathers. Outstanding examples of this type of community museum are Williamsburg in Virginia, and Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. Both of these have been initiated and developed by private enterprise, and both are National Trust members.

We strongly believe in this process of identification with the past by means of recreating livable and homelike interiors in historic houses; and any members of this Congress who visited Mount Vernon, Woodlawn, Kenmore and Gunston Hall (to mention only a few) will understand why so many visitors say with surprise, "Why I could settle right down here!" Thus the past is linked with the present. Again, all the House Museums I have mentioned are privately restored and maintained, and all are members of the National Trust.

From these brief notes I hope to leave with you the impression that the most significant feature of the American National Trust is its emphasis on non-governmental achievement in the field of Historic Preservation, and its recognition and encouragement of local responsibility.

HELEN BURGESS
QUELQUES ASPECTS
DE LA PRÉSERVATION HISTORIQUE AUX U.S.A.
RÉSUMÉ.

Les U.S.A. sont divisés en cinquante Etats et chacun d'eux a un Gouvernement local. Il en résulte un intense attachement, d'un bout à l'autre de la Nation, pour le principe du « State's Rights » contre le Contrôle Fédéral. C'est pour cette raison que le Trust National pour la préservation historique aux U.S.A. s'est rendu compte de l'importance de développer son programme par le truchement de groupes locaux.

Notre Trust National est strictement non-gouvernemental et ne reçoit pas d'aide financière du Gouvernement. Sa mission de base est d'éveiller un sens conscient des responsabilités envers les témoignages de notre histoire et il l'accomplit à travers des groupes autonomes locaux car il reconnaît que c'est ce qui peut donner les meilleurs résultats. Plus de 500 de ces groupes appartiennent donc au National Trust en tant que membres actifs payant des cotisations annuelles. Le Trust, en retour, assure la Direction de ces groupes par des publications régulières et les aide avec un service de consultations de spécialistes qui examine les projets individuels. Mais il ne fournit pas d'aide financière.

Le Trust national retire la plus grande partie de ses revenus des cotisations de ses membres. En plus des 500 organisations membres il y a approximativement 5000 membres individuels et quelques membres constitués.

Le Trust National américain exerce une mission d'éducation qui se divise en deux branches: sa première tâche est d'alerter le public toutes les fois qu'il apprend qu'un témoignage de notre histoire est menacé et de prodiguer, toutes les fois que cela est possible, tous ses efforts pour le sauver; sa seconde tâche est de donner des conseils pour permettre à ceux qui s'occupent de la préservation de se perfectionner.

En plus de son programme éducatif le National Trust a accepté d'être responsable d'un certain nombre de propriétés qui sont, dans bien des cas, ouvertes journellement au public. Par l'intermédiaire des séminaires à l'Université ou d'autres groupes, le Trust insiste sur l'importance qu'il y a à conserver les coutumes qui contribuent à donner aux édifices historiques un rôle vivant dans les communautés.