

The Old Town Crier

**The Monthly Newsletter of the Old Town Civic Association, Inc.
March Program and Notice of the Meeting**

DATE: Wednesday, March 11, 2009
TIME: 7:00 p.m., Socializing with Neighbors; 7:30 p.m., Program
LOCATION: The Lyceum, 201 South Washington Street

PROGRAM AGENDA

- 1) ANNOUNCEMENTS
- 2) POLICE REPORT
- 3) PRESERVING HISTORIC PRESERVATION

1. *Panel Discussion*
2. *Question and answer session*
3. *Comments from invited stakeholders*
4. *Membership Discussion*

Hear Ye, Hear Ye



**Come all ye patriots and hear about
Preserving Historic Preservation.
March 11**

Mark your calendars for March 11, when we will celebrate, evaluate and venerate the wonder that is the history of Alexandria. Although the battle scars have a way of blinding us, it is time to remind ourselves just how majestic it is to have the history of "Our Town" relived with every step we take. Imagine that! Simply walking around, we get to see buildings, for example Christ Church, as

George Washington saw them. We get to see the Lee Boyhood Home and other delightful prisms to the times of yore, continuously reminding us of glory past.

In Alexandria we have the historic charm and ambiance so cherished that it beckons tourists from all over the world. Why is it so, people ask? Because of course it authentically ties us to the past, and it gives life to a young nation's history and cultural heritage. Yet many apparently are readily willing to change it without realizing that in doing so, they sever the cord to the past and in effect our historic ambiance.

Nonetheless, we have by fate, by chance and by perseverance been able to create a monument to the past that few communities can boast about. To understand how this preservation began, where it is now, where it is going—and above all, what needs to be done to save it, we have gathered a distinguished panel for our March 11 membership meeting. Invited participants include the Historic Alexandria Foundation, the city's Department of Archeology, the Office of Historic Alexandria, the Board of Architectural Review, and the Historic Alexandria Resource Commission.

And yet, most of all, OTCA needs you to come to this meeting. We want and need your ideas and your perspectives so that going forward we can all work together to preserve this special place we call "home" for us, for our nation and for our worldwide visitors. We want to be able to pass this flame of historic heritage to future residents—and we need your help in doing that.

See you on Wednesday, March 11, at seven o'clock at the Lyceum on South Washington Street.

ECONOMICS AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

According to Randall Mason, a leading researcher in the field of Economics and Historic Preservation, "there is broad agreement that the benefits of historic preservation outweigh the costs. More specifically, the economic costs of preservation are outweighed by the benefits—both economic and cultural—of a robust historic preservation sector"¹. Moreover, this applies both at the individual and the local level.

¹ ECONOMICS AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION: A GUIDE AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: Randall Mason, University of Pennsylvania; A Discussion Paper Prepared for the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program 2005. http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2005/09metropolitanpolicy_mason.aspx

On an individual level, Donavan Rypkema, who spoke at the Alexandria Historic Preservation Conference in 2007, echoes the consensus view in economics when he says that; “Virtually every analysis that has been done on the economic impact of [historic district] protection has indicated that values have maintained at worst, and usually are enhanced, because of historic district status,”²

Interestingly enough, economic analysis has found that local jurisdictions, as a whole benefits from historic preservation as well. Randall Mason even goes as far as saying that answer is a “resounding yes” to the question. Adding further “historic preservation yields significant benefits to the economy”³ (full quote in box).

“Another important set of questions relates to the effects of historic preservation as an economic development tool. Does public policy stimulating or investing in historic preservation yield positive fiscal benefits for the public sector. Such questions are often approached by performing economic impact studies. The question posed by economic impact studies is what effect investment in historic preservation activity has on the economy of a particular region. In other words, these studies ask the question, “Does preservation pay?” on more than a project-by-project basis. A significant number of these studies have been undertaken across the U.S., and the answer to this question is a resounding “yes”—historic preservation yields significant benefits to the economy”

These findings are not surprising, because questionnaires sent to tour companies, invariably specify “the historic ambiance” as the main reason for coming to Alexandria. Hence, the words of ED Braswell “similar to and compatible with” and “shall not detract from” become self-explanatory.

Given these facts, one would think that everyone would be on board; nevertheless, that is not the case. One reason is that the individuals are looking at different time horizons. The shorter the time frame, the more likely they are to assume that the historic ambiance, the catalyst for the value, remains intact. From this perspective, significant alterations can be made or any sort of infill development can be built, without affecting the value. On the contrary, the incentive will be to game it, especially if others are doing it. To illustrate why requires some diagrams. However, for our purposes, it will suffice to think of value as following the general trend of the historic district with variations around it. Short-term perspective will be to play on the variation rather than the trend. For larger developments, the incentive will be to take advantage of the trend as quickly as

² The Economics of Historic Preservation: A Community Leader's Guide. Washington, DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1994

³ See footnote #1

possible, because the effect of the development will distress the trend in the longer term.

For the long term, this can have a dramatic negative effect through the cumulative deterioration of the historic ambiance. This is where the government comes in, because they are the only ones who can ensure that the long-term considerations prevail.

In the City of Alexandria, this requires that the three legs of the chair are solid enough not to break. The Historic Preservationist must support the preservation, the BAR must enforce it, and the City Council must uphold it.

BAR GUIDELINES

The historic district was created to protect Washington Street in 1946 when the Federal Government threatened to take the George Washington Memorial Parkway away. Since, of course, the district has expanded to encompass a greater geographical area, and with it has followed different responsibilities for the BAR.

The relationship between the BAR and the City has been tumultuous with the BAR being dismantled once, and rebuked by the community for their approach to the George Washington Memorial Parkway. In the latter case, the City Council thought it was necessary to eliminate the BARs discretionary powers on Washington Street.

More recently, the perception is that the BAR and staff has begun playing inadequate attention, if not outright avoidance of the adopted guidelines. Phraseology such as “these are merely guidelines” eventually marginalizes them as a policy tool if uttered often enough.

The guidelines were adopted for the specific purpose of ensuring historic preservation and the orderly evolution of the community. A system must always be able to remedy inequity caused by unforeseen consequences of the societal norms. However, if these norms are never applied, the City will essentially have none, which in this case would be the historic ambiance.

The basis to judge is always the law and then the guidelines and then the specific criteria for deviation. As such, the Staff report should always start with the law then the guidelines, including purpose thereof, and very specifically delineate how the applications differ from these. The BAR must then formally indicate the rationale for their decisions to the community.

However, clarity of purpose has been effusive. On numerous occasions both the BAR, and staff as well, have been very quick to render approval without cause, precisely because they skipped the vital steps above. This not only breeds confusion and lack of confidence, but above else, a sense of indiscriminate favoritism that cannot be rationalized.

The City created the BAR for a specific purpose, for which laws and guidelines were adopted to support. But if the BAR and Staff overlook or choose to ignore the laws and guidelines, are they not in effect choosing not to uphold the original purpose and intent of their creation? Moreover, do they in fact have the authority to do so?

The real question though is this: are we willing to forgo the historic for the sake of change?

Ice Well

The renovation project was supposed to go before the BAR on February 18, but it was deferred until April. The project, although promulgated by the Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) a City department, was causing significant controversy about its suitability next to Gatsby's Tavern. This prompted the Historic Alexandria Resource Commission (HARC, which is an advisory board to the City Council) to approve a motion recommending that OHA withdraw the ice well proposal from BAR consideration until there is a public consensus about the design. OHA agreed, and put out the following statement.

“The OHA staff desires additional time to engage the public to further discuss the proposed design elements and details to the Gadsby's Ice Well viewing area and to solicit specific comments and recommendations to the existing design.”

OTCA and the Historic Alexandria Foundation have created a joint committee to work on this matter. Nevertheless, here is the letter OTCA sent in to the BAR:

The OTCA Board asks the following question; is this project similar to, or compatible with the adjacent iconic building, or does it detract from the adjacent iconic building? Although rather simple, these questions go to the heart of historic preservation. While appreciative of the endeavors to enhance the ice well viewing experience, it ought not to create a modernistic competitor to the historic structure, but rather complement it with a design that respects its reason for being here.

We cannot add to Mr. Kester's (*Mr. Kester wrote a legal brief that was submitted to the BAR*) excellent review except to say that we feel that the proposal is simply not in keeping with the historic proportions or design of the site and it will diminish the historic ambiance.

The historic district was created, in a manner of speaking, as a shrine to George Washington, of which the Gatsby's tavern is a prized structure. If you wish to proceed with this project, we will require significant changes that will be far more respectful of our founding fathers period. We do not believe that simple patchwork changes to this proposal will be sufficient to bring this project in line with historic precepts. For that reason, we strongly believe that, you ought to deny this project outright so that a new one more in keeping with historic precepts can be proffered

OTCA is willing to support the HAF position (*HAF submitted a request for the consideration to be deferred*) if we can be assured of the process they propose. OTCA was never approached on this project and, like HAF, we have significant concerns about the way in which this project has been carried forward

Finally if Ellen Pickering was here, she would more than likely be saying "Luminous glass sticking up on the sidewalk next to Gatsby's Tavern" "come off it guys".

Crime and safety

Information system

The OTCA Crime and Safety Committee will set up a notification system that will inform OTCA members of significant crime alerts in concert with the Police Chief. The first message will be sent out to all e-mail recipients, who can then opt out of the system if they wish. Those not on the e-mail list can contact Bert Ely at bely@oldtowncivic.org to get on it.

Lighting

The OTCA Crime and Safety committee will undertake an inventory of lighting conditions in Old Town in order to remedy it as quickly as possible. In the meantime, we urge all residents heed the Old Adage about shedding light on an issue. **Please leave your porch lights on.** It is an important deterrent to crime.

School Board Candidate Forum for District A:

Scheduled for Monday, April 20 at the Durant Recreational Center at 7:30 PM.

Next Meeting:

OTCA is scheduling a City Council debate. Date is to be determined.

Poul Hertel

Help Boost OTCA's Membership Count

Membership numbers are important in the civic-association world, for they translate into political influence -- the higher a civic association's membership, the greater the impact the association will have on important local issues. For OTCA, those issues include the preservation of Old Town's historic character, waterfront development, motor-coach regulation, and crime and public safety, to name just a few issues. OTCA membership will be especially important this spring as Alexandrians get ready to elect a Mayor and City Council on May 5.

If you are an OTCA member, encourage your neighbors to join. If you are not a member, please join as soon as possible. A membership application is included bellow; it also can be found on-line at: http://www.oldtowncivic.org/Pages/join_us.pdf. If you have any questions about OTCA membership or your membership status, please contact OTCA's Treasurer, Bert Ely, by calling him at 703-836-4101 or emailing him at: bert@ely-co.com.

Help boost OTCA's influence -- join OTCA today and encourage your friends and neighbors to join, too.

OLD TOWN CIVIC ASSOCIATION, INC. 2008/2009 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION AND RENEWAL FORM

To Join or Renew: Please complete the information below. For membership, the dues period begins each September 1 and ends each August 31. Dues paid after July 1 are applied to the dues for the next period.

Contact Information:

Name:

(For a Household Membership, please list up to two persons)

Address:

City: _____ State: _____ Zip+4: _____

Telephone: _____ Email address: _____

In an effort to keep dues low, we are trying to produce as few paper copies of our monthly newsletter as possible. Can we send you our monthly newsletter by email? [] Yes [] No

Dues: Single (\$12.00)	\$ _____
Household (\$20.00)	\$ _____
Additional Contribution	\$ _____
Total Dues Enclosed	\$ _____

Remittance: Please make checks payable to "OTCA." Mail the Completed Form and your check to:

**The Old Town Civic Association
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