

Saving Historic Buildings and Places Requires Modern Skills



By Todd Kleismit, Director of Community & Government Relations, Ohio History Connection, Columbus

The movement to save the historic Unionville Tavern is just one example of a successful grassroots effort that used modern skills like social media. Photo courtesy of the Unionville Tavern Preservation Society.

Fifty-one years ago New York's Penn Station, a Beaux-Arts style architectural gem – inspired by the Roman baths of Caracalla when it was built in 1910 – was torn down. Its demolition generated a great deal of criticism locally and nationally and became a catalyst for the historic preservation movement that led, ultimately, to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Every Ohio community has examples of historic properties that were either demolished or saved. The Buckeye State has an abundance of places and buildings of historic significance. There are more than 161,000 properties on Ohio's Archaeological and Historic Inventories (many more that have yet to be surveyed), more than 4,000 National Register listings, and 73 National Landmarks.

Today's preservationists are not likely to chain themselves to buildings or lay down in front of bulldozers. They are more likely to employ negotiating skills, launch public education campaigns, and use social media to help save important historic buildings or places. They are finding success, too.

Junction Group Earthworks, a significant archaeological site just outside of Chillicothe, was saved in March through a short, yet intense, local effort to rally public support and funds to purchase 192 acres. More than 900 donors contributed about \$375,000 to help fund a portion of the costs that were negotiated with the owner just prior to auction.

Similarly, the Unionville Tavern in Lake County, following more than seven years of neglect, was purchased by the newly formed Unionville Tavern Preservation Society – just a day before a scheduled sheriff's sale. The Tavern dates to 1798 and was an important stop on the Underground Railroad. The Preservation Society, with several leaders in their 20s and 30s, devised a "30 Days to Save the Tavern" online campaign that raised enough funding to help make the purchase.

Even unsuccessful preservation attempts can yield silver linings. The 2011 demolition of the 1884 Seneca County Courthouse, the first such demolition of a county courthouse listed in the National Register, galvanized public opinion enough to spur an Ohio County Courthouses Symposium, held in May of this year. The preservation of Ohio's county courthouses is now gaining more public attention.

There are many more preservation tools now than ever before. Federal historic preservation tax credits have been in place since the late 1970s to rehabilitate historic buildings. Ohio added a complementary state historic preservation tax credit program in 2006 that is flourishing. The economic development benefits of these programs are well documented. The History Fund grants program, funded through Ohio Historical Society/Ohio History Connection income tax check-off contributions, is a new source of modest

funding for preservation efforts. The State Historic Preservation Office and nonprofit advocacy organizations such as Heritage Ohio and Preservation Ohio offer technical assistance and other resources for communities and organizations that want to preserve their historic assets.

“History is to the nation as memory is to the individual,”

Ohio native Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. once wrote. A lot of our important historic places have long since been lost or remain threatened even today. While we cannot save every architectural or historically significant building in Ohio, it is important to sharpen our negotiating, public relations, and social media skills to share with others what we know to be true – that we work to preserve today what is of enduring historical value so that we may share it tomorrow with future generations.

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