A Preservation Primer

by Montrose Morris

Chapter One: A Movement Begins

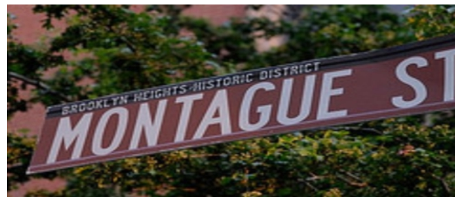

Illustration 1: urbanspacesandplaces.com

There's only one thing that stays the same in New York City: the fact that it's always changing. The skyline shifts sometimes weekly, with new skyscrapers puncturing the clouds, or old buildings razed to make way for another wave of development.

And yet amid this fast paced and continual reinvention we do have constants, neighborhoods and buildings that beat a steady drum along the streetscape, protected from the wrecking ball, real estate speculation, and the whims of markets. And even those New Yorkers who love the city for its ability to renew itself often know the words Historic Preservation, Landmarks Preservation Commission, historic districts and landmarking… and to appreciate what they mean. They're integrated both into our vocabulary and into our hearts.

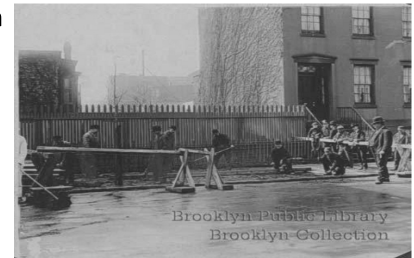

Illustration 3: Brooklyn Public Library: Bklyn Hts subway construction, 1902.

Yet we tend to take preservation for granted, inured to the brown street signs that signify a historic district as if they've always been here, woven into the urban fabric. In reality New York City's historic neighborhoods, specifically those in Brooklyn, would not be here today if it were not for the many individuals—some prominent, some unknown—who fought and lobbied, protested, advocated and agitated for the protection of the beautiful buildings that make our neighborhoods so desirable. These activists believed passionately that our architectural treasures are worthy of protection. They make the city a more desirable place to live; impart a legacy for our children and New Yorkers-to-be; and celebrate the architectural skills, craftsmanship, and beauty of the buildings that make our city one of the wonders of the world.

The preservation movement in the United States began as early as 1813, when Independence Hall in Philadelphia was saved from demolition to make way for more lucrative subdivided parcels. In 1853, the

Mount Vernon Ladies Association saved George Washington's Mount Vernon from those who wished to destroy that historic site, finding it too costly to keep up. But preservation, as a movement, did not resonate with the Manifest Destiny mentality of the late 19th century**,** which prized exploration and growth, literally railroading over historic sites to search for economic opportunities; preserving the past was seen as a hindrance to progress.

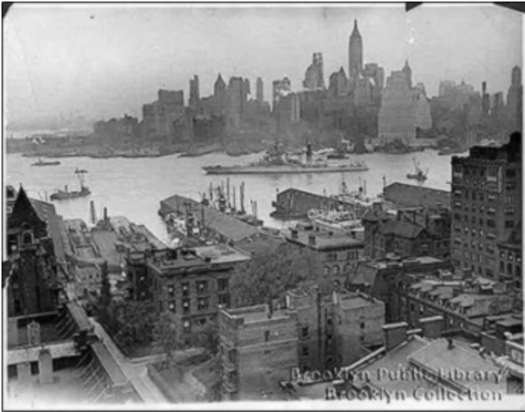

Illustration 3: Brooklyn Public Library: View across to Manhattan from the Heights

Here in Brooklyn, our 17th century Dutch and English Colonial past was routinely destroyed to make way for modern buildings. As Brooklyn grew as a city, commercial and civic buildings, some large and impressive, fell by the wrecking ball, and often by fire, to be replaced by bigger and even more impressive buildings. Private homes fell as well, with much of Brooklyn Heights changing from wood frame villas on large lots to Federal style row houses, both wood frame and brick, and later to brownstones, followed by large apartment buildings.

Some areas within the Heights took a different route, shifting from working class housing to slums and tenements and then to factories and warehouses. Eventually they improved until the housing stock evolved from tenements to modern apartment buildings, pushed forward by commerce, technology, population expansion and a culture-wide search for all things newer, bigger, better. At some point in this ongoing quest for a better future, we had to stop and ask ourselves what parts of the past we should maintain.

Illustration 4: Wikipedia, Jefferson Market in Greenwich Village, Manhattan

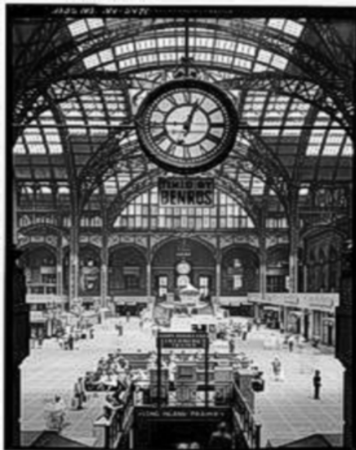
Illustration 5: Pennsylvania Station by McKim, Mead and White, torn down in 1963.

In 1935, under the New Deal, Congress passed the Historic Sites Act, which established historic preservation policy "to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States." The Act also led to employment for over 1,000 out-of-work architects and photographers. Fourteen years later, inspired by the National Trust in Great Britain, the National Trust for Historic Preservation was established to link the preservation efforts of the National Park Service and the private sector. At the time, the focus was more on sites of national historical interest, like Mt. Vernon, Monticello or Independence Hall—not necessarily neighborhoods, local landmarks, or even important buildings by important architects.

Here in New York, organizations like the Municipal Arts Society, founded in 1893, had been fighting to protect our neighborhoods and architectural treasures. Along with activists like Jane Jacobs, they had prevented the destruction of Greenwich Village by Robert Moses, pressed for zoning changes that would protect the character of residential neighborhoods, and saved the Jefferson Market from the wrecking ball

in 1961. But they, and other like-minded people, were not powerful enough to prevent the destruction of Penn Station in 1963.

Only fifty-three years old, the magnificent station, designed by New York's famous architectural firm, McKim, Mead, and White, was torn down to make way for a smaller station in the age of the automobile, its elaborate ornamental elements dumped unceremoniously in the swamps of New Jersey. This catalyzed New Yorkers, even those who had cared little for preservation before, and convinced the politicians and policymakers that the city needed a formal board for the protection of its architectural heritage. In 1965, the City of New York created the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The Commission landmarked many individual buildings in that first year, but the first landmarked district created was Brooklyn Heights.

Robert Moses, New York's "Master Builder," wanted to run his Brooklyn Queens Expressway straight through Brooklyn Heights in the 1940s, destroying most of the neighborhood in the process. He was stopped by the unflinching opposition of residents, led by the Brooklyn Heights Association, a neighborhood group founded in 1910. After much negotiation a compromise was reached, which resulted in the cantilevered highway running below the Promenade it created. The highway opened in 1950, resulting in the loss of some houses and apartments in the Heights, as well as the hillside leading to the piers, but most of the neighborhood was saved, and the very popular Promenade became the largest tourist attraction in Brooklyn. With that near miss in mind, it is no wonder that the Heights lobbied for, and became, the first historic district in the city.

In Chaper Two of this series, we'll look at the beginning years of the LPC, their successes and failures, as well as the activists who tirelessly advocated for the buildings and neighborhoods of our city. We'll see how local neighborhood organizations have been the foot soldiers of this fight, and the non-profit preservation organizations have worked behind the scenes to protect our neighborhoods and architectural heritage. Later, we'll explore what qualifies a building or a neighborhood for landmark protection, and talk about the actual process of landmarking. There is much more to come.

Illustration 6: Brooklyn Heights Promenade at night.