A Passion to Preserve

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Design-Minded in the Mid-Atlantic States

THE MID-ATLANTIC REGION IS HOME to the enterprise typically deemed the origin of the historic preservation movement in the United States: the rescue of George Washington’s estate by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union in the 1850s. Another group of mostly women launched the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities in the 1880s. In the 1890s the Daughters of the American Revolution spearheaded the restoration of Independence Hall.

These culture-keeping ladies of the late nineteenth century had male collaborators, among them Henry Chapman Mercer. Born in 1856 in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, Mercer manifested a deep reverence for the past from a young age. Like many others, his interest in the material culture of his native region was stoked by the nation’s centennial, with the grand exposition in nearby Philadelphia. The handsome young bachelor helped organize the Bucks County Historical Society in 1880 and became an ardent collector of whatever old things appealed to him—a miscellany of objects from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries: quilts, signboards, clothing, pottery.

As Mercer was rummaging through a junk dealer’s mass of obsolete tools one day to find a pair of old-fashioned fireplace tongs, it occurred to him that he was looking at a trove of archaeological evidence of preindustrial culture. Cast away for a generation or more, often in favor of mass-produced implements, these objects were disappearing as inexorably as had the tools of early humans thousands of years ago. Driven by the conviction that even the most prosaic artifacts were important links in Pennsylvania history, Mercer began scouring eastern Pennsylvania to make a systematic collection of such objects. In 1897 he issued a descriptive catalog of more than seven hundred items, The Tools of the Nation Maker, to accompany an exhibit at the Bucks County courthouse. In scientific fashion the catalog described each object and its Old World origins, specified the donor, and reported the folklore associated with its use, such as superstitions, songs, and rituals. With this carefully categorized and labeled exhibit and catalog, Mercer established
himself as a pioneer in the sophisticated use of objects to portray the history of everyday life among ordinary people.

By 1914, having collected more than fifteen thousand objects of historical interest, Mercer turned his energies to making a museum building in Doylestown. He designed it around the collection and built it of reinforced concrete, with tiers of galleries around a high central atrium. Boats, wagons, baskets, cradles, gristmills, and other large objects were suspended above the courtyard and groups of smaller objects, from apple parers to anvils, were arranged by type in their display compartments below. The museum reflects the love of curiosity-clutter, the passion to preserve, and the mania for typology that characterized Mercer’s Victorian-era imagination. Convinced that by studying its tools one could chart a culture’s course, Mercer collected as many examples of each tool as he could find and displayed them in chronological sequence.

While the never-married Henry Mercer was engrossed in collecting and museum building in Doylestown, James Denholm Van Trump was growing up in Pittsburgh. Born in 1908, the artistic Van Trump was a shy and solitary student of his native city’s history and architecture for the first half of his eighty-eight years. But with the destructive tumult of urban renewal in the 1950s, he metamorphosed into a visionary preservation pioneer, awakening his fellow Pittsburghers to their city’s history as manifested in its architecture and landscapes. The activist in Van Trump emerged in 1953, when he issued a lonely cry to save Pittsburgh’s soon-to-be-demolished city hall. He began to pour his long-accumulated knowledge and passion into poems, articles, and books on the buildings, architects, gardens, and communities of his home region. A founder of the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, he became a local celebrity through his preservation ministrations on radio and television.

Having found his calling, Jamie Van Trump blossomed into this “Father Pittsburgh” role with enthusiasm and flair. He let his hair and side whiskers grow long and sported the hip, priestly garb of a turtleneck adorned with a cross on a gold chain. “The past is part of the life of the land, and we are interested only in preservation for life’s sake,” he declared. “The human heart desires the past which is, in the end, the anchor of man’s dreams and his remembering.” Van Trump proclaimed his devotion to the past and to the past working in the present. “Many of the architects of the twentieth century are saying, ‘Throw the past out and we will start all over again!’ Everyone wants to create. As I see it, the architects should be doing rehabilitations as well as new creations. We live in a kind of cultural continuum, like a chain. We need a constant going back and forth from the present to the past. We have to have the past from which to move on.”2
The historical/cultural continuum about which Van Trump was so impassioned captured Joseph Svehlak’s imagination in childhood. First-generation American of Czech heritage, Svehlak has been a resident of New York City for most of the years since he was born in 1940. “Starting in 1957,” he says, “I began to witness the destruction of so many fine old buildings. I began to question the stability of my known world, as areas that had meant something to me and my family—whole neighborhoods, including the streets themselves—were given over to modern development. My history was being obliterated before my eyes.”

Svehlak found an outlet for his passion to preserve in the 1970s, buying and restoring three working-class row houses in the Brooklyn neighborhood where he grew up. “I was very interested in helping to save the neighborhood from further decline, and my old houses weren’t the only things that needed fixing. There was a drug problem in the neighborhood, and city services needed improving. For more than fifteen years I was a community activist involved in preserving and promoting the neighborhood. I started the big neighborhood house tour: it got hundreds of people to come into the neighborhood each year, so they would find out about the community and some of them would eventually buy a house there.”

Now a licensed tour guide, Svehlak leads tours for the Municipal Art Society—Grand Central Terminal, Rockefeller Center, the Flatiron District, Manhattan’s Civic Center, Brooklyn Heights. “Not only am I doing architectural history; I’m doing social history: what old city neighborhoods were like, what’s happening currently, and how things can be preserved and have a new life. Am I more sensitive to my environment because I’m gay? I don’t know, but I do know that I enjoy making my tour-goers aware of what’s around them and how fragile our built environment is. So I’m still an advocate for good city planning and design. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, we make our buildings and our buildings make us. Preserving one’s environment is, in a way, self-preservation. Preserving a sense of place and our history and trying to hold onto some of the values that we had. In my last year of Catholic grammar school, I thought I wanted to be a teaching missionary. I guess I’m doing my missionary work with my tours.”

A generation younger than Svehlak, Paul Daniel Marriott has been with the National Trust for Historic Preservation since 1993. He directs the Rural Heritage program, wrote Saving Historic Roads, and organized the first national conference on historic roads. Marriott’s experience with the National Trust suggests that the longstanding design- and preservation-minded alliance of straight females and gay males thrives: “There’s a joke at the Trust, that it’s staffed by lots of gay men and divorced women,” he says.
“If you look closely, it’s not far from the truth. Like the design field, preservation is full of gay men.”

The four individual narratives that follow illustrate the close relationship between historic preservation and design sensibilities. Urban preservationist Ken Lustbader pays close attention to how things are looking in his New York City neighborhood and advocates planning and design that respect the city’s complex and many-layered historical fabric. As a child, artist James Nocito was enchanted by the historical layers of his Pennsylvania hometown, “a rich Colonial past overlaid with the more recent history of coal mining.” Nocito remains fascinated by the aesthetics of layers: “decomposing surfaces that look like they’re peeling away, old patinas, and lacquers that look like they’ve been worked over by time.” Architectural historian Dwight Young’s love of elegant design leads him to his current collecting passion, ocean-liner memorabilia. Architect Greg Kinsman says, “Gay men I know who have preservation interests and values similar to mine have a strong concern for visual aesthetics.”