A Passion to Preserve

Fellows, Will

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Greg Kinsman

Greg Kinsman is an architect who lives in the Shenandoah Valley and is currently employed by a preservation organization in Washington, D.C. In his job he helps private owners of historic buildings and farms figure out how to preserve them. (All persons in this narrative have been given pseudonyms at the subject’s request.)

I GREW UP ON SEVERAL FARMS in northeast Ohio in the 1950s and 1960s. My father would buy a farm and make improvements to it, then sell it and move on to another farm. In addition to the farmhouses in which we lived, my parents would buy, fix up, and sell other houses, some from the mid- to late-1800s. My brother, sister, and I were the slave labor to help with the grunt work on weekends. But I enjoyed going into those old houses and hauling out the junk, cleaning things up, painting. Sometimes I’d find little treasures, antiques or old newspapers or books. My sister and brother, both younger than I, were often too busy with sports and Scouting to be of much help, but I had the time. I often went to auctions with my parents and was always wondering, what’s our next adventure?

One of the oldest of these investment properties was from the 1840s or 1850s, a big Greek Revival house on a large corner lot in the county seat. There were lots of houses from the 1820s through the 1850s in the area and a lot more from after the Civil War. I was aware of these things as a child and was fascinated with the older farmhouses and the older sections of the cities and some of the smaller towns in the area. I loved to draw designs of individual houses or little cities. Sometimes I would draw real houses, sometimes imaginary ones.

After undergraduate architecture school in Cleveland, it was on to Boston. While attending night classes at Boston Architectural Center, I worked as the office boy in a major firm that had a great interest in finding new uses for old buildings. They restored the exterior of Faneuil Hall Marketplace and did a massive restoration of the Hotel Vendome in the Back Bay. A large French Second Empire building, it had been one of Boston’s luxury hotels in the late nineteenth century and had survived hard times in the mid-twentieth century. Though I was not yet an architect, I got involved in building the design model for an addition to replace a portion of the hotel that had collapsed as the result of a horrific fire.

From Boston I moved to Maine, where a small firm had hired me to be their draftsman. We worked in a grand old ice baron’s house along the
Kennebec River. But before long I was back in Ohio for graduate study in preservation at Ohio State. I got a lot of summer contract work through the Ohio Historical Society, doing architectural inventory surveys. I would travel around and photograph buildings, write up the architectural descriptions, then do research on them in the county courthouses. I documented hundreds of buildings this way. Some of the projects were the result of some stupid freeway going through, so I had to do the inventory work on several different corridors while someone else did the archaeology. One project was for a proposed power plant site along the Ohio River. It was disconcerting to be preparing what felt like postmortem reports on old buildings that were not yet dead.

After graduate school I was a regional historic preservation officer in a rural area of north-central Ohio. It was wonderful working in those seven counties. I did lots of inventory work and National Register work, focusing on the county seats, trying to get the major centers documented, but I was also struck by the incredibly beautiful farms throughout the counties. Like a circuit preacher I did a lot of public speaking: Rather than tearing everything down, why don’t we think about keeping some things? Identify them and figure out if they have intrinsic value, then figure out if they can be rehabilitated, and then try to do it.

I went to work for the National Park Service, then got into private-sector practice in San Francisco, then moved back east to begin my current job. I had friends in the Shenandoah Valley and was interested in finding a home here. I fell in love with a mid-nineteenth-century Greek Revival house in the downtown historic district of this small town. The house was move-in-able, but the kitchen and bathrooms needed redoing, and the interior finishes and features have needed a lot of work. I’ve tried to locate the best-skilled people to do it.

I’ve always had a sense of being somewhat apart and, because of that, being able to evaluate what things mean and if something has lasting value and is worth keeping. How intelligent was the design, what sort of materials were used, and what was the quality of the handwork that went into making the thing? I want all three of these elements to be at a high level. And then there’s the sense of history, the documentary aspect of an old building or object being a witness to a particular time or a series of times and having some story to tell.

Many of my friends are gay men who are devoted architectural preservationists, or they’re antique collectors of some sort, or both. I don’t know whether it’s looking back and trying to recapture something, or just appreciating something that’s survived. The crowd I run with in town, we’ve been talking about starting a special twelve-step program that I have termed
Antique and Art Collectors Anonymous. We’re all fetished about something. I collect bronzes, one of my friends loves silver, and another is a fan of original paint finishes. A good friend here in the valley loves to buy total wrecks of cars, junk-pile things, and restore them. He is absolutely meticulous. He also does houses.

Gay men I know who have preservation interests and values similar to mine have a strong concern for visual aesthetics. Think of the “bachelor” artists moving into neglected urban neighborhoods, finding the abandoned or disused buildings, and creating something beautiful out of them. San Francisco is one of the key places where gay guys have been doing this. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a “tart, fluff, and flip” routine out there. You would buy a dog of a house, tart it and fluff it, then flip it, sell it for a profit, and move on to the next one. Lots of guys were doing that, including some of my old friends.

There are lots of gay men who fall in love with houses. Among some of my friends, taking on an old house and carrying it forward really means something. A friend of mine in Cleveland is a real hands-on guy who’s been taking on dogs of properties in older neighborhoods, inner-city areas that were more or less forgotten. He’s the urban type. My friends Mike and Jim here in the valley are the rural type, buying and restoring dogs of abandoned houses way out in the sticks, houses that no one has lived in for decades. The reality of what gay men do with old buildings is finally being acknowledged by the mainstream preservation movement: the real doers of the movement are not just little old ladies in tennis shoes but also gay men in 501s.

In the fall of 1998 my friend Timothy and I made an appointment to see a house that we had been curious about for some time after seeing an ad in the local real-estate magazine. It was on a country road on the way to Mike and Jim’s eighteenth-century stone houses south of here. The exterior was rather plain, and the place looked a little tired, but the interior was absolutely astounding, with late Georgian/Federal woodwork that was just incredible. It was a typical five-bay, center-hall, two-and-a-half-story, gable-roofed house with end chimneys and a handsome cornice. Inside were incredible paneled fireplace walls and a massive staircase that went all the way to the third floor.

The house was built about 1801 for a Scots-Irish Presbyterian widow, and its last owner was also a widow. It was an extremely well built house with solid brick walls. Though it was very restrained on the outside, the lady who built it obviously wanted a very stylish place inside. Timothy and I went to see it as more of a lark than a real-estate venture, and we both fell in love with it. But I was being cautious and rational because of the economics. They were asking $225,000, and the house needed a lot of work.
We spent much of that autumn examining the house and its seven-acre grounds, which included the eighteenth-century, two-story stone springhouse, the slave kitchen and quarters, the remains of the boxwood hedges, and the slave cemetery at the back of the property. Mike and Jim fell in love with the place, but Jim was already working on his third house. He said, “This one’s for you, Greg.” When I would bring in my contractor friends, they would roll their eyes. They could see only the expenses and the effort.

With the help of an appraiser we made an offer around Thanksgiving that was well below the asking price. It was accepted. In exploring the contingencies we determined that the water was not potable, the septic system was a big mystery, the slate roof was failing, the electrical system needed work, and the heating system was laughed at by our contractor. So there was much more that we would have to deal with. We withdrew our offer in January 1999, and through that winter we went around and around on what our next offer would be.

On Easter Sunday I decided to drive by the house. Coming down the road, I was shocked to see sky where I should have seen the roof of the house. There had been a fire. It was so horrible, I couldn’t look at it; I had to keep going. I got back home and just sat, stunned. Timothy came out from Washington the next weekend and wanted to drive by the place. I told him I would never go down that road again. I was so emotionally wrapped up in that house, imagining it, thinking about designs—how to do the various rooms, the systems, what to do with the outbuildings. It was as if the building had become a person, a man with whom I was infatuated, and now he was dead and badly mutilated. I knew every part of him, but I never realized a relationship with him. I’ll sometimes wake up at night walking through the rooms of that house, seeing every detail. My lost place that I never really had.

I have lots of photographs of the place, but I can’t look at them. I’m going to give them to the county historical society. The last widow who lived there was an active amateur genealogist, so there’s a file cabinet filled with her stuff, including thick files on the house. The property was one of those early grants at the beginning of European settlement. The house was noted in the National Register as having one of the most significant wood interiors in the county, incredibly well preserved. The woodwork was highly and finely carved, and it had been gently handled through its entire life.

One of those almost-virgin survivors that had come down to us, the house had been carefully preserved by the ladies who had owned it. The 1950s widow did very little to it, a new kitchen and bathroom in a small wing that she added on, electrical wiring, and a heating system. Timothy heard that the fire was caused by an electrical malfunction. Later the story in some circles in the area was that a disgruntled relative started the fire. I don’t
know the true story. The autumn before the fire, a back door at the house was repeatedly kicked in. The real-estate agents were hardly concerned, but it seems to me now that someone was sending prospective buyers a message: “Danger! Don’t come here!”

For a while I felt an incredible sense of failure for not taking on the house and carrying it forward. It had survived almost two hundred years, and the work that we were going to do should have carried it through at least another century. But I might be dead if I had been living in the house at the time of the fire. So there were conflicted feelings of guilt, remorse, regret, and relief. I felt anger too. Anger at myself and anger at the absentee owner, who had spent nothing on the property in the years since the widow had died and left it to him. And anger at the real-estate people who did nothing to secure the house. If they had really wanted to sell that property, they could have advertised it in the Washington Post or some of the preservation periodicals, and it would have been snapped up right away, probably at the asking price.

Don’t go looking for a beautiful old house unless you’re ready to move quickly. I was trying to be cautious and rational about it, because it was a big chunk of change for me: I offered $170,000 but figured that at least $100,000 more would have to go into it right away, unless I was willing to camp in it and do things gradually. Camping indoors is how Mike and Jim do many of their properties, but they have more fortitude than I. My method is to think through the project in terms of the design and systems, work with the contractors in problem solving, and then my major job is to write out the checks. To be truthful, gardening is the most satisfying work for me, because I can see the beginning and the end of a project in the same day.

When I was in high school, I worked on genealogy, tried to get the facts of my family down as best I could determine them. I talked with my grandmother and uncles and aunts, asking them who was what to whom. I wrote to various places, gathering data, and tried to put it all together. My great-grandfather was a rather successful dairy farmer in Ohio and Pennsylvania from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth. There’s an old photograph of his family, he and his wife standing in front of their beautiful brick Federal-period house of two and a half stories, with center hall, five bays. My great-grandfather once lived in a fine house just like the lost house I almost rescued.