A Passion to Preserve
Fellows, Will

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Fellows, Will.
A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture.
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Larry Reed

Larry Reed was born in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in 1939. After serving as a naval officer during the Vietnam War, he returned to Wisconsin and immersed himself in theater as a graduate student, playwright, actor, teacher, and eventually as a preservationist.

TWO PASSIONS OF MINE, theater and history, have been intertwined in my life for a long time. In 1971 I was completing graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, writing a dissertation on how American playwrights have made dramatic use of American history. Meeting Michael Saternus at the Pirate Ship, a gay bar in Madison, was the beginning of a very serendipitous sea change in my life. Michael was an architect, but especially a restoration architect and architectural historian. He introduced me to an aspect of history that I had not been much aware of: the buildings and structures from the past that surround us, and how they can enlighten us, improve our quality of life, and help us to understand who we are and where we came from.

When I met Michael, he had just purchased the Cooksville Congregational Church and had started to restore its exterior. Michael’s association with Cooksville began in the 1960s, when he and Bill Wartmann were restoring a historic house several miles east of the village. Before I met Michael, I had never heard of Cooksville. In 1973 we moved into a rental house near the village. I was teaching playwriting and theater history at Beloit College and writing a one-woman stage play based on the diaries and letters of Fanny Kemble, a British-American actress of the mid-nineteenth century. We moved into the House Next Door in 1980. All the while, especially on weekends, we worked on the church restoration.

When I first saw the Van Buren House across the street from the church, it was a sad sight: long-abandoned, a gray ghost. But Michael and I were busy on the church and didn’t pay too much attention to it. We planned to turn the basement of the church into our residence and restore the upstairs nave. Then the light bulbs lit up in our little heads: rather than live in the church basement, here was a house just across the street—tiny, cute, manageable looking. Marvin Raney called it a little duckling of a house; I think he meant ugly duckling. It was in very bad shape, no paint on it, vegetation growing wild, a real eyesore. More than that, it looked like it was going to fall down. But it was a duckling with possibilities: it could be turned into a swan if you gave it a little attention. Marvin Raney and Chester Holway helped Michael get in touch with the woman who owned it, who was living in California, and in 1976 she sold the house to us for seven thousand dollars. A lot
of the local reaction was that we were taking on an impossible task. Some people said we were crazy to bother with such a simple little house that was falling apart and should be bulldozed.

So we had two restoration projects going across the street from each other, the church and the house. We spent most of the effort on the house. Under Michael's guidance I was becoming an amateur preservationist and amateur architectural historian. Then suddenly I found myself becoming a professional preservationist when I was hired in 1980 by the state historical society to be its local preservation coordinator. For seventeen years, until I retired, it was my job to preach preservation throughout Wisconsin, to arouse communities' interest in their past, and to assist their preservation efforts.

Michael Saternus was an audacious visionary when it came to old buildings. He led a lot of us, happily, down the primrose path to preservation. “There’s never a building that you can’t rehabilitate, no matter how bad the shape it’s in,” he would say. “There’s always enough there that you can preserve it and rehabilitate it.” Looking back I think that’s true, basically, but at the time it was my ignorance and naiveté and innocence, soon lost, that led me into the partnership on the Van Buren House. But having seen Michael work on the church for five years, I had every confidence; he had the vision, and he was a damn hard worker. Especially on weekends he loved to work on the church and the house, much to my frustration sometimes. It seemed that Michael would rather be working on the house than doing almost anything except going to opera in Chicago.

It took us ten years to rehabilitate this house. We pulled the whole thing apart, numbered everything, then put it back together. Neither of us wanted to live in a museum, but our guiding principle was to save as much of the original house as possible, knowing we were going to add a modern addition. I pulled nails out of old boards so they could be sanded and refinished. I cleaned the old mortar off hundreds of old Cooksville bricks so Michael could use them to build the new fireplace. We built our relationship while we were rebuilding this house. Working side by side, sharing in the vision and the planning, sometimes complaining and sometimes making mistakes, it mortared and nailed our relationship together. The house turned out beautifully and so did the relationship, though, of course, each had its flaws and weaknesses here and there.

As I became more skillful at what I was doing, Michael trusted my judgment a little bit more. We talked about the design, where to put the bathrooms and the bookshelves, what kinds of furnishings. I was the one who decorated the house—chose the paint colors and did the painting, decided where to place the furniture and the antiques, where to hang the pictures—but always with Michael's okay. In a partnership one person has to
lead in some areas and the other person in other areas. If you’re lucky, things work out without too many arguments. I think our biggest disagreement about the Van Buren House had to do with the location of the washer and dryer. I won out on that one.

Michael worked on many other restoration projects besides the church and the Van Buren House, some for pay and some not. He was an artist, and in architecture he was creating art that was permanent and useful. Michael was practical, so architecture was the perfect form for his creativity. I don’t know how he learned to think of architecture as music in wood and concrete, how to make it useful and beautiful at the same time, but he had those skills. His love for historical architecture had to do with his love of the old, the craftsmanship, the fine details. He could read historic buildings and understand them, appreciate their styles and how they were put together, why they had this kind of molding and that kind of reveal. He was a collector of antiques, artifacts as well as buildings, and he truly appreciated them.

After more than twenty years working on preservation and restoration in Cooksville, Michael died in 1990. It was a great loss. The village needed somebody to take the lead in carrying on its preservation traditions, which extend back through the whole twentieth century. If you’re interested in something, people will turn to you, depend on you, and give you the mantle and all the materials that go with it. And so the mantle was dropped on me.

A lot has been done in Cooksville, but much remains to be done. I see myself continuing the tradition, preserving the architecture and the great wealth of historical materials that have been passed down to me: photographs, artworks, speeches, letters, genealogical research, diaries, recipes, and other things that record the history of the area and of Cooksville in particular. A lot of this material was gathered together and passed on by people I didn’t even know. Who donated it to Susan Porter, or to Ralph Warner in the 1920s, or to Marvin Raney in the 1950s? People were giving material to Michael in the 1970s, and they’re still giving things to me now. Many of them are descendants of the early settlers who came here from New England, New York, and the British Isles in the mid-1800s. It all needs to be put in some kind of order to create an accessible and useful Cooksville archive, maybe housed in my house or church. An exhibit of some of the more interesting material would be a good project, and I’ve thought about creating a publication of some kind to give a picture of life in Cooksville over the last 150 years.

Until now it has just been assumed that somebody would pick up the ball as the keeper of Cooksville history. It was left casually to the goodwill of history buffs and lovers of Cooksville. The times are such now that we have to be a little more formal. In 1999 we formed the Historic Cooksville Trust, to help private property owners preserve and restore the historic buildings
and the natural setting. With the pressures of development, the mobility of our society, and the new technologies, you have to create formal structures to deal with change—make sure that it’s the kind of change you want and exert some control over it. With the Trust’s assistance, rather than leaving it up to God knows who is going to follow in our footsteps, all of us in Cooksville will be more confident that the traditions will carry on.

In 1996 I finally finished the restoration of the church interior, a long haul from 1971. I have no particular heirs that I want to pass the Van Buren House and the Cooksville Congregational Church on to. I might be willing to have the Historic Cooksville Trust take charge of these properties, if not as owner perhaps as holder of preservation easements on them, so that no awful changes can be made. For those of us who want somebody watching over things in Cooksville when we’re no longer here, the Trust could help preserve the buildings, the archives, and the artifacts. We have lost properties because individuals made the wrong decisions: the last blacksmith shop was demolished before we had an ordinance to protect historic buildings. Things like that could happen again. Even though we have laws on the books in the township to protect Cooksville, they’re not foolproof. And there are historic properties in the outlying areas of the township that are not protected by ordinance, so there’s still work to be done.

I feel a real responsibility to Cooksville because it has been so good to me. But more than that, it’s just a human responsibility to preserve and understand and celebrate our history. If we don’t, we’re not much different from the lowest animal, just grunting our way through life, then gone. The past gives us a sense of what life is all about; it helps us gain a vision of the future. Without that sense of the past I think we become a little less human, a little more ruthless. Even Cooksville, this one little flyspeck on the map of the world, can teach us something about human nature and the human condition and what keeps us going. You can’t live in Cooksville without feeling a sense of history, consciously or not. The past is accessible in this village in a way it isn’t in many other places. That’s what preservation is all about.
Generations of Gentlemen Keep Cooksville, Wisconsin