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Preservation
Archive
Project

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NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2011

Welcome to the fourteenth edition of the newsletter of the New York Preservation Archive Project. The mission of the New York Preservation Archive Project is to protect and raise awareness of the narratives of historic preservation in New York. Through public programs, outreach, celebration, and the creation of public access to information, the Archive Project hopes to bring these stories to light.



Anthony Wood, Laurie Beckelman, Beverly Moss Spatt, Gene Norman and David Todd; Courtesy of HDC

New Oral History Project Underway

Leading the Commission: Interviews with the Former Chairs of the LPC

By Liz McEnaney, Preservation Consultant

I took up residence in New York City about the same time that Robert Tierney was appointed the tenth chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Now, as an oral historian for the Archive Project, I have the opportunity to go back in time to understand and document the workings of past Commissions through the oral history project “Leading the Commission: Interviews with the Former Chairs of the LPC.” The purpose of this project is to record oral histories with six former Landmarks chairs: Beverly Moss Spatt; Kent Barwick; Gene Norman; Laurie Beckelman; Jennifer Raab; and Sherida Paulsen. The intent of gathering these is to document the chairs’ insights on the Commission during their term as well as their perspective on how preservation in the city has evolved since that time.

As a series, these interviews, along with Anthony C. Wood’s earlier interviews with former chairs Geoffrey Platt and Harmon Goldstone, will cover a large portion of the

LPC’s history. Through the words of the chairs, we are given a unique wide angle lens through which we can get a panoramic view of the history of the city – from urban development to politics to economic booms and busts, and more. We hear how preservation has become an integral part of the administration of the city and, as a result, has shaped the streets and neighborhoods we walk through and live in today. For New York City, “preservation” has not been associated with or resulted in stasis. Far from it. What “preservation” has contributed is an appreciation, a desire, an energy, and a plan for continuous and positive change. But, as the chairs will attest, there have been many challenges since the passage of the Landmarks Law.

In addition to providing personal accounts of the years these individuals served on the critically important and influential Landmarks Commission, these interviews also touch upon the civic and preservation experiences

of the chairs before and after their service. The transcripts, audio and video clips of these interview sessions will without doubt be instrumental resources for preservationists, historians, urbanists, and others interested in the history of New York City.

This project complements the larger work of the Archive Project and we believe it will be the first in a series of strategic oral histories aimed at building a solid collection of raw material for future historians. Our next major project (depending on funding) is to develop oral histories in concert with key preservation civic leaders from the past 45 years in order to capture information and attitudes from both within the preservation “infrastructure” (the Chairs) and from outside influences (the leadership of the nonprofit community). ■

The Landmarks Chair Oral History Project is being made possible through funding from the Robert A. and Elizabeth R. Jeffe Foundation.



Toasting 40 years of the Historic Districts Council; Courtesy of Gramercy Park Photo

Chairman's Column: Celebrating Preservation Anniversaries: Much More than a Piece of Cake!

By *Anthony C. Wood, Founder & Chair*

Recently, New York City's preservation community has been celebrating a swirl of anniversaries! Whether it is the 45th anniversary of the passage of New York's Landmarks Law, the 40th anniversary of the Historic Districts Council (HDC), Landmark West's 25th Anniversary, the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation's (GVSHIP) 30th birthday, the 25th anniversary of the New York Landmark Conservancy's Sacred Sites Program, the Murray Hill Neighborhood Association's 50th, or the 20th anniversary of NYC's oldest children's program on preservation (GVSHIP's "History and Historic Preservation"), New York preservationists have wonderfully demonstrated that anniversaries have gone far beyond merely cutting a cake.

To avoid any unnecessary controversy and to set the record straight, I have no objection to birthday cakes. In fact the cake at the recent Historic Districts Council celebration was particularly delicious! I'm a believer that every anniversary celebration should include at least one cake. Indeed I have

vague memories of a staff meeting decades ago where the merits and engineering possibilities of creating a three dimensional cake of a great landmark for some important anniversary were extensively debated. My point is that anniversaries create a special opportunity to do so much more than eat cake (even if it is in the shape of Grand Central Terminal). If we don't fully use these celebratory opportunities we are missing the boat.

Beyond cakes and wonderful parties, anniversaries provide the perfect opportunity to document the past, reflect on where we've been, imagine where we might be going, aggregate and amplify our accomplishments, and advance the mission of preservation organizations. Anniversaries are a particularly wonderful opportunity to advance the still too limited practice of documenting our own past. Kudos to Landmark West! for successfully completing its ambitious project of filming interviews with a variety of New York civic and preservation leaders who were asked for their impressions of the group's

first 25 years of work. The interviews have been edited into a compelling short video, and the longer interviews will become part of an archival collection. As part of its anniversary, the Historic Districts Council has been conducting phone interviews with many of its past leaders. Here at the Archive Project, we are using the 45th Anniversary of the landmarks law as an occasion to conduct in-depth oral histories with all the living past chairs of New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Anniversaries are a natural time to take a break from the present, think about how we got to where we are and mull over where we might need to be going. The recent Fitch Forum 2011: 45 Years of Preservation Law, provided an opportunity for some 200+ preservationists to spend a day thinking about how landmark law has developed over the last 45 years as well as what the future holds for landmarks laws in general, and New York City's law in particular. HDC's preservation conference: "Looking Forward, Looking Backward: Forty Years of

Preserving NYC Neighborhoods” offered a similar opportunity for both reflection and projection. Landmark West! used its anniversary year to engage in a formal strategy planning process.

The list goes on. This is the 20th Anniversary of GVSHIP’s children’s education program. It has served over 15,000 kids. This is also the 25th Anniversary of the New York Landmarks Conservancy’s Sacred Sites Program. In the past quarter century, the program has given away over \$6.7 million in grants, leveraging almost half a billion dollars (\$497 million to be exact) of work on historic religious properties across New York State. These are impressive numbers. Although the preservation field still lacks many of these types of hard numbers and real data, by just taking the time to stop, count, and tell the world what we’ve done, we can greatly advance our cause.

Taken seriously and developed to the fullest, anniversaries can dramatically advance preservation’s mission. They provide the perfect hook to align stars with preservation, whether it be Malcolm Gladwell at GVSHIP’s 30th, or Robert Caro et. al. at Landmark West!’s 25th. Anniversaries can be used to unveil exciting new programs such as HDC’s new “Six to Celebrate” and its new Preservation Action Fund. Landmark West! used its birthday to launch an iPhone app and fill the till, successfully raising \$500,000 to help secure its future.

There is really no excuse for not turning preservation anniversaries into occasions to advance our cause. One thing about anniversaries is that you can see them coming. You can plan for and around them. If you aren’t doing more than baking a cake for your anniversary you are losing a special opportunity to capture your history, document your achievements, celebrate your accomplishments, advance your cause, and plan your future.

In a fundamental way the Archive Project is in the anniversary business. Think of us as the Hallmark store for preservationists. Though we don’t have any great cake recipes, we can suggest lots of ways you can use your anniversary to celebrate your past and inspire your future. All we ask is that you save us a piece of cake. ■



Forest Hills Stadium, Queens: a preservation battle in danger of being forgotten?

Save Our Story!

Help NYPAP Save NYC’s Preservation History

NYPAP’s mission to save the stories of New York’s varied preservation struggles is ongoing, and we need your help. If you are aware of any current or completed preservation campaigns whose papers, photographs, or other materials do not have a designated archival home, please let us know. Victorious or not, preservation stories need to be saved for their inherent value and as templates for future action. Much can be learned from dashed hopes as well as from realized ones.

By way of example, two stories currently in the news might well provide meaningful archival records. One is the effort to save Forest Hills Stadium in Queens from demolition and subsequent new development. Another is the debate over the LPC’s possible protective designation of 790 more buildings on the Upper West Side within seven existing historic

districts, a consideration that has generated heated resistance from the Real Estate Board of New York. We urge those involved in these and other ongoing preservation battles to document their efforts for the historic record.

Because small and/or local preservation efforts do not always receive significant press coverage and may not be widely known even within preservation circles, it is especially critical that NYPAP be aware of possible archival resources through the help of interested individuals. We stand ready to help you identify preservation archives and find a proper home for them. Please remember that NYPAP’s work doesn’t just occur naturally in the course of events - we need as many eyes and ears as possible in the field to keep us alerted! Email mcoody@nypap.org or call 212-988-8379 with any leads. ■

NYPAP Events

New Series of Programs Celebrate, Educate & Inspire

Rough weather did not keep our supporters at bay for last December's annual **Bard Birthday Breakfast Benefit**, the Archive Project's most successful benefit to date! Over 100 stalwart preservationists fought the wind and the rain to celebrate what would have been Albert Bard's 144th birthday. Speaker Roberta Brandes Gratz, former Landmarks Preservation Commissioner, writer, urban critic, and preservationist, read from her new book *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs*. She discussed the book's inspiration and creation, which relied heavily on her career in preservation and her personal interviews with Jane Jacobs. In her closing remarks, Gratz noted that the ramifications of New York's transformation under Moses and Jacobs remain with us. Gratz concluded with the theory that it is impossible to reconcile these two urbanists, and that one must choose between their viewpoints. Thanks again to all those who made this Bard Breakfast such a success and for helping us meet the incredibly generous \$15,000 challenge grant from the Robert A. and Elizabeth R. Jeffe Foundation.

This past February, the Archive Project partnered with Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning & Preservation and many of the city's preservation organizations to bring you the **2011 Fitch Forum: 45 Years of Preservation Law**. Keynote speaker Jerold Kayden, of Harvard University's

Graduate School of Design, set the tone for this year's forum by calling New York's own preservation law – now 45 years old – “middle aged” and questioning its need for reform. Panelists throughout the day agreed that the law looks quite good for its age and continues to serve our community well – an achievement which Otis Pearsall called “the most remarkable success story that I can imagine” – although comments on the law's administration and legal security abound. These suggestions included more aggressive activity on the part of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, privatized oversight, adoption of neighborhood conservation districts, and the appropriate use of easements, to name a few. In addition, the conference briefly departed from its New York City focus to hear about the operation of landmark laws in Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles. These presentations from beyond our municipal boundaries especially illuminated one of the New York preservation law's more unsung successes: its proliferation across the country. In the end it was agreed that our Landmarks Law might not need wholesale reform but as preservationists we need to constantly re-evaluate its effectiveness, tweaking the law as necessary but always with care so as not to destroy the tool that has brought us so far. For more analysis and thoughts on the Forum, check out Benjamin Baccash's guest article on www.landmarks45.org.

On February 22nd, NYPAP and the Historic Districts Council co-sponsored an event entitled **The Battle for Historic Districts: Brooklyn Heights and Beyond**. This sold-out event celebrated the publication of Martin Schneider's new book, *The Battle for Brooklyn Heights*, with a viewing of Schneider's documentary on the struggle to protect New York City's first historic district and a panel discussion on the future of the city's 102 historic districts, a number that continues to grow. This panel – moderated



Roberta Gratz speaking at the 2010 Bard Birthday Breakfast Benefit; Courtesy of Kate Milford



Audience at *The Battle for Historic Districts* panel; Courtesy of Ben Baccash



Otis Pratt Pearsall participates in *The Battle for Historic Districts* panel; Courtesy of Ben Baccash



Save-the-Date card from the 2011 Fitch Forum; Courtesy of Columbia University

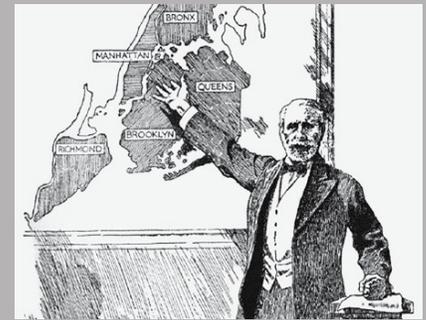


Detail from cover of the *Texas Legacy Project: Stories of Courage and Conservation*; Courtesy of Conservation History Association of Texas

by preservation consultant Seri Worden – included Brooklyn Heights protector Otis Pratt Pearsall, Landmarks Preservation Commissioner Sherida Paulsen, author and influential preservationist Jeffrey Kroessler, and Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the Historic Districts Council. In response to recent highly publicized attacks on historic districts, the panel dissected the need for more studies on the statistical benefits of preservation and more active campaigning against these assaults. The final consensus: we can not afford to be an insular community; public support is essential for the future of our historic districts.

Much was to be learned at our inspirational event **Learning from Texas: The Power of Oral Histories**, co-sponsored by the New York Restoration Project. The evening explored the innovative Texas Legacy Project, a vast series of over 200 videotaped oral histories by the Conservation History Association of Texas. These oral histories chronicle the thrilling stories of Texans who felt compelled to preserve and protect their rich natural legacy. These grassroots conservationists range from farmers to environmental attorneys, many of whom risked their reputations, their finances, and even their lives in their quests. Through the personal stories and unique voices of an array of dedicated Texas preservationists, these conservation battles come to life on

video, all of which have been archived online (www.texaslegacy.org) alongside audio, text and various other supplemental materials. In conjunction with this archive's creation, a book entitled *The Texas Legacy Project: Stories of Courage and Conservation*, was published featuring excerpts from over 60 of these oral histories. David Weisman, documentary filmmaker and co-editor of this book, joined us in a very lively discussion of this fascinating undertaking, including the project's genesis, the role and benefits of video-recorded oral histories, and the intricacies of creating user-friendly, searchable archives from raw interview materials. Weisman also guided the audience through the Texas Legacy Project website, exploring the ways in which the finished oral history material can be presented. The diverse range of non-profits, grassroots organizations and oral history specialists present during this discussion were deeply inspired by the complex and hyper-organized approach to tackling such a vast project, and listened in rapt attention to this model from Texas. Throughout the evening there were many instances in which the parallels between this project and those currently underway in New York were readily apparent. In fact, several of the audience members expressed great interest in replicating its proactive techniques. And while it might take time for the evening's lessons to take root, the project is sure to have a lasting impact on the city. ■



Etching of Andrew H. Green proposing borough consolidation; Courtesy of NYPL

Green Papers Find a Home!

Urbanist & Preservationist Finally Gets Deserved Prominence

Late last year, several public New York City archives acquired some of the recently-discovered papers of Andrew Haswell Green, the civic leader and urban planner whom Theodore Roosevelt called “the father of Greater New York City.” Active in New York from the mid-nineteenth century until his death in 1903, Green was enormously influential in the consolidation of the boroughs, the establishment of many of our city’s most cherished parks and institutions, and the foundation in 1895 of New York’s first preservation lobby, the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society. The papers include Green’s three-volume diary and some 200 letters detailing his role in creating Central Park, founding such institutions as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, overthrowing the Tweed ring, and the consolidation of Greater New York.

The papers of this astonishing figure are now available at the New York Public Library, the Museum of the City of New York, and the New-York Historical Society. Michael Miscione, Manhattan Borough Historian and long-time champion of Green, played an instrumental role in ensuring that these documents find a home in New York City. This new archival accessibility finally gives Green the prominence he deserves and will contribute immensely to the understanding of urban planning and preservation as it has developed in New York City. ■

NYPAP News

NYPAP congratulates Eric Allison, board member and founder of the graduate Historic Preservation program at Pratt Institute, on his newly-published book *Historic Preservation and the Livable City* (Wiley, 2011). This book shows the importance of preservation in the creation of livable cities, offering tools and case studies in which preservation can benefit a community when included as part of a comprehensive planning and economic strategy.

We are proud to announce that board member Amy Freitag has recently accepted the executive directorship at the New York Restoration Project. This exciting move builds on Amy's 16 years of experience in greening, conservation and historic preservation, most recently as U.S. Program Director at World Monuments Fund. Already such a vital member of our board, Amy will now have even greater opportunities to merge the worlds of historic preservation and environmental conservation.

NYPAP would like to welcome our newest intern, Adam Kaleb Poole. Adam is currently enrolled in Columbia University's Historic Preservation Program, and has been brought on board to continue our ongoing database project, which provides a clearinghouse of information on archives relevant to historic preservation in New York.

NYPAP would like to thank the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Community Trust's Windie Knowe Fund, and the Robert A. and Elizabeth R. Jeffe Foundation for their generous grants. Our work here at NYPAP could not be accomplished without their and your financial support.

Rattner Papers Saved!

Last Minute Struggle to Save Early Preservationist's Papers

The Archive Project received its first distressing notification about the endangered Selma Rattner papers early on a Thursday morning. Within days we found ourselves knee-deep in drifts of drawings, slides, newspaper clippings and upturned furniture in an abandoned office at the former Paragon Paint Factory. This early twentieth-century industrial building in Long Island City – the site of George and Selma Rattner's Paragon Paint & Varnish Corporation – was recently auctioned after being vacant for more than a decade. Suddenly, the offices in which Selma had stored many of her personal papers – a treasure trove of architectural research and documentation of preservation battles – were about to be cleaned out, and the papers casually discarded among the detritus that had accumulated in the unused factory.

Selma Rattner, who passed away in 2005, was an architectural historian, significant early preservationist, and expert on architect James Renwick, Jr. A 1977 graduate of Columbia University's Historic Preservation Program, Selma wrote her thesis on "Renwick's Design for Grace Church: Religious Doctrine and the Gothic Revival." It explores one of the architect's New York City masterpieces in the context of Gothic Revival architecture in the United States.



Paragon Paint Factory office in which the Rattner papers were found; Courtesy of NYPAP

Selma continued to study, lecture and publish on Renwick throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and therefore amassed a significant amount of primary and secondary material on the architect, much of which is archived in a special collection at Columbia University's Avery Library. But Rattner was also active in various preservation organizations, including the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the New York Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians, the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, and the Victorian Society in America, for which she served as Director from 1980 to 1989. In addition, she consulted on an array of historic preservation projects, including the restoration of the historic core of Mexico City, and the proposed reuse of Roosevelt Island's City Hospital. The papers related to these activities were unaccounted for, until now.

Lee Miller, an urban planning student at Pratt Institute, uncovered this impressive collection of archival material on a walk-through of the former Paragon Paint Factory with John Kreyev, owner of the Frying Pan and Pier 66 Maritime. Kreyev had purchased the building in an auction about six months ago, with plans to preserve the industrial character of the building, house a waterfront restaurant (the building has frontage on Anabel Basin), and provide homes for a variety of small fabricators and waterfront- and arts-based non-profits. The New Rust Exchange – Lee's non-profit that applies improvisation to workshops, art projects, and public events – was one of these. Stumbling across piles of papers that included, among other things, original drawings of Grace Church, ephemera on preservation battles for Victorian structures and research on the architecture of the West Village waterfront, Lee recognized their worth but was not exactly clear on whose property they were. But upon Kreyev's sudden death and the subsequent resale of the factory, it became apparent that the building management – unaware of the papers' worth – was planning to discard the contents of these offices in advance of the sale. Lee knew she had to take action.

She contacted Vicki Weiner, Director of Planning and Preservation at Pratt and former NYPAP board member, for help. Vicki immediately contacted the New York Preservation Archive Project, and the wheels were put in motion to rescue these papers. Matthew Coody, administrator of the New York Preservation Archive Project, gained access to the building by working closely with Lee Miller, Benjamin Wellington, and preservationist Huntley Gill, who happened to be working with the new building owners on reuse-related issues. Soon enough, Matthew was leaving the factory with a van full of Rattner's papers. Janet Parks, Curator of Drawings & Archives at Columbia's Avery Library, immediately expressed interest in these papers, and they were quickly transferred to the safety of Avery Library, joining Rattner's Renwick collection.

The ongoing loss of preservation's own past often includes the personal papers of preservation pioneers like Selma Rattner, who contributed so much to the preservation movement in New York. As a reaction to this, the Archive Project has made it one of our missions to assist in properly archiving these important papers, photographs and documents. We were delighted to help in this archival success story and would like to thank everyone who helped make this achievement possible, especially Lee Miller, Benjamin Wellington, Vicki Weiner, Huntley Gill, Gaby Rattner and the Paragon Paint Factory building management. ■

NYPAP Has Gone Digital!

In an attempt to save costs - and the environment - the NYPAP Newsletter will now be primarily sent by email.

However, we are more than happy to continue sending a printed copy to those who wish to receive it.

Please call 212-988-8379 or email mcoody@nypap.org with your choice of **printed newsletter** or **digital newsletter** so that you can continue to stay updated on all of our exciting news in the format you prefer!

The New York Preservation Archive Project is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to documenting, preserving, and celebrating the history of historic preservation in New York City. Recognizing the instructive and inspirational importance of this history to the continued health, success and growth of preservation in our city, NYPAP hopes to bring these stories to light through public programs, oral histories, and the creation of public access to information. NYPAP is devoted to celebrating neglected narratives of New York historic preservation, as well as the canon, using the archives that hold these stories.

NYPAP thanks the following supporters for their generous contributions in 2010:

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Donations can be made in the form of checks mailed to our office (174 East 80th Street, New York, NY 10075) or securely online via PayPal on our website (www.nypap.org).

As always, NYPAP welcomes any thoughts, comments and suggestions from our supporters. Please feel free to contact Matthew Coody with any remarks at mcoody@nypap.org or 212-988-8379.