



LOVE YOUR HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

by Pieter N. Roos, Executive Director, Newport Restoration Foundation

In these days of governmental over-regulation how can I ask you to love a government commission? Well, I can, and you should. The Historic District Commission (HDC) has been in existence for about 40 years in Newport and has made a crucial difference. It is a body about which many have griped and complained from time to time (including me); yet I will maintain to my last that it is one of the most important commissions in Newport. It regulates the way historic structures look, whether you can modify or restore them, and how the job should be done. I know what you're thinking; too much control over personal property; to which I say, a guard dog isn't always the friendliest of beasts, but I feel safer with one around.

Without the HDC there would have been no official guidance for preservation and perhaps more importantly nobody to prevent demolition. Newport is the last remnant of the wooden cities of 18th century America. Nearly 400 structures in the city predate 1800, arguably more than anywhere else in the U.S. That is a national treasure, indeed our World Heritage nomination contends that it is an international one.

Think about what the Point, indeed all of Newport, would look like right now if the Historic District Commission had never existed:

- The Travers Block on Bellevue would probably be gone
- Through hundreds of small decisions, the character of whole streets and neighborhoods would have been compromised. Property values would be significantly lower.
- Indeed it is fair to say that without HDC protection probably 25-30% of the buildings that we know on the Point would have been demolished. (In fact if that had come to pass there might be no Point and no *Green Light* to read.)

For those of you who were around here in the 50s and early 60s, both the Hill and the Point had major potential to be razed. Behind the sad facades they also had a wealth of amazing buildings. Individuals with real vision saw to it that preservation occurred through Operation Clapboard, through private efforts, and later through NRF. Some of those same people also had the vision to push for a body that would protect both the buildings that had been restored and those that had yet to see any improvement. The HDC was the result. Towns and cities that never created such a commission are all around us, places with great historic resources that were not protected with such diligence; New Bedford is probably a pretty good example. I imagine that most readers on the Point would rather live here, than there.

Neither the federal nor state government can do a great deal to enforce protection of our priceless legacy. That work is left up to us. Our volunteer HDC does that hard job and they should all get a hearty round of applause for it. Along with an excellent city planner and historic planner in the city administration, this is how historic Newport is protected. Support them, through large actions and small; they made our city what it is today.

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