

JUNE 2020

## Whose History Is It? The Democratization of Preservation

by Harris M. Steinberg, FAIA, and Dominique M. Hawkins, FAIA

*Harris Steinberg resides along the park in West Mt. Airy and enjoys walks in the Wissahickon. Trained as an architect, he directs the Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation at Drexel University. He recently served as chair of the Mayor's Task Force on Historic Preservation in Philadelphia.*

*Dominique Hawkins founded Preservation Design Partnership in 1995 and is a member of the Philadelphia Historical Commission, chairing its Architectural Committee serving on its Financial Hardship Committee. She recently served as vice chair of the Mayor's Task Force on Historic Preservation in Philadelphia.*

The peaceful protests sweeping the country in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder at the hands of the Minneapolis police, followed by some painful looting of business districts and civil unrest across America, brings the question of identity and history into sharp relief. Americans from all walks of life are expressing outrage at the structural racism that has dominated American life, laws, letters, commerce, and policy since the first slave ship arrived at Virginia's shores in 1619. It appears that this might be the moment for substantive cultural change.

Have we reached a tipping point?

We see early indications of this in the Kenney administration's swift removal of the polarizing Frank Rizzo statute at Paine Plaza and in the Commonwealth of Virginia's decision to remove the offensive statue of Robert E. Lee from Monument Avenue in Richmond. Countless conversations in the media and across the Internet rightly ask the question, whose history is it that we preserve and celebrate?

Over the course of Western civilization, history has been written by the victors – those cultures that have dominated through brute force, discriminatory laws and capital accumulation. The powerful Civil Rights movement in the United States of the 1950s and 60s aimed to break this pattern for good and establish a more just and pluralistic America;

this was backed by landmark legislation and enforcement. The movement was widened and deepened by the quest for women's, gay, lesbian and transgender rights.

But we live in polarizing times and the old tropes of white male supremacy have resurfaced, demonstrating that the embers of hate and prejudice are hard to extinguish.

Philadelphia, a city with a deep but checkered past, was founded on the principle of individual freedom. And yet, while the Germantown Friends Meeting famously objected to slavery in 1688, the scourge of racism persisted in Philadelphia. We are painfully aware that William Penn himself was a slave owner and that George Washington brought slaves to Philadelphia when it was the capital of the nation. The tragic murder of African American rights activist Octavius Catto in 1871 is another stain on Philadelphia's tormented history of race relations.

Which brings us to the topic of historic preservation and that which we seek to preserve and why.

The Philadelphia Historical Commission is the formal regulatory agency that decides what buildings, sites, and objects qualify for protection. Governed by the City Charter and established by City Council in 1955, the Commission administers the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, which comprises more than 10,000 protected resources, including those found in 16 historic districts across the city.

The preservation movement has been called elitist and discriminatory over the years – the province of a white, educated, wealthy majority protecting its history at the expense of a wider definition of the past.

To a large extent, this is true.

Mayor Kenney convened the Philadelphia Task Force on Historic Preservation in April 2017 and charged the group with coming up with actionable recommendations that could balance preservation and new construction in the wake of the proposed Jewelers' Row development, which had become something of a cause célèbre for preservationists across the city.

In the course of our work, it became clear to the 33 volunteers from across the city that preservation was not working for the vast majority of Philadelphians. Indeed, the preponderance of the buildings, sites, and objects on the Register are touchstones for the white, majority culture, while places that matter to large swaths of the citizenry are largely unrepresented.

Our cause then becomes the democratization of preservation, and our recommendations focus on ways that we could welcome and encourage the full spectrum of Philadelphians to participate in celebrating and protecting our collective and individual stories.

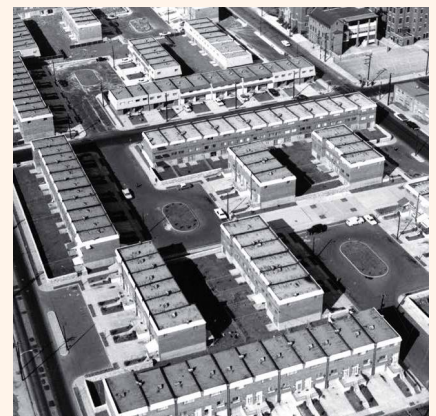
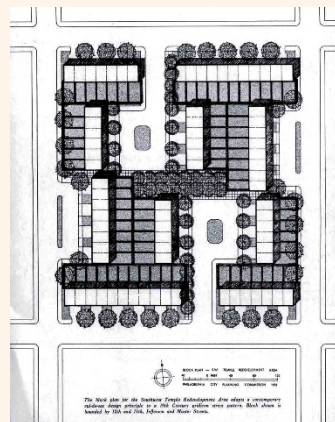
As we saw with the removal of the Rizzo statue, events can quickly overturn the status quo. What better time than now to dedicate ourselves to making the preservation tent as road and wide as possible – encouraging the entire citizenry of Philadelphia to participate in the creation and establishment of a Register of Historic Places that is a true reflection of this city's imperfect past, so all of our stories can be told.

We must be as interested in the culture and history of the neighborhoods of North Philadelphia as we are in those of Society Hill. The fullness of our humanity demands nothing less.

The world is rapidly changing. We have the opportunity to change for the better.

Are we up for the challenge?

YORKTOWN. This Philadelphia neighborhood, lying south of the Temple University main campus, is one of the important but unrecognized landmarks of black history in Philadelphia. Built in 1959-69, the planned community was open to home buyers of all races and became a model for the growing Civil Rights Movement. The plan was by Penn-trained architects Herman Hassinger and Gerald Schwam, working with developer Norman Denny, who updated the classic Philadelphia rowhouse by adding garages and backyards and by grouping the new homes around quiet cul-de-sacs, each with a small park. This design brought the amenities of contemporary suburban life into the city, and special financing enabled African Americans, who were often refused bank mortgages, to become homeowners.



Patrick Henry Place; Rev. William Gray (right) with residents, 1969; plan, 1958; first construction, 1961

[Image credit: Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia](#)