

Virginia's Most Endangered Historic Sites 2007

City of Danville



Danville General Hospital

Danville's two bedrock industries -- tobacco and textiles -- closed their doors and left the City's future uncertain. Today, Danville is at a crossroads. While the community is working hard to forge a new, diversified economic base, what hangs in the balance is Danville's very character, its architectural essence and identity that give the city distinctive charm and tell its story.

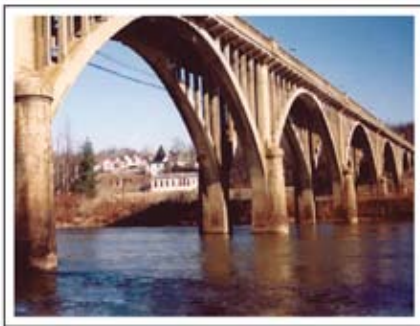
From the end of Reconstruction to the Stock Market Crash, Danville experienced more than 50 years of unparalleled prosperity based on tobacco

and textiles. That extraordinary period built much of Danville -- ornate Victorian mansions, handsome churches, lofty tobacco factories, and massive mills. These structures have formed landmarks for generations of Danville natives. Today, these irreplaceable structures and districts lure the tourist and beckon the newcomer -- as well as the well-heeled investor and restoration homeowner. Danville's government appears to recognize the value of preserving the character of its Tobacco District and Downtown. Happily, both districts currently are the focus of much City attention -- in cooperation with enthusiastic investors. Yet, the City administration sends mixed signals about preservation-as-economic-development. Its commitment appears not to extend to some of Danville's most iconic landmarks.



Long Mill

This is the third year in a row that monuments of Danville's past have appeared on APVA Preservation Virginia's list of Most Endangered Historic Sites in Virginia. In 2005, it was the Worsham Street Bridge. In 2006, it was the Schoolfield Mill District. Both still remain in jeopardy . . . and in Schoolfield, one fabulous building that was the district's gateway has been demolished to make way for the cookie cutter design of an urban chain pharmacy. This year, two additional significant sites, Danville General Hospital and Long Mill, were nominated. However, given the continuing threat to a large number of Danville's architectural treasures, this year the APVA designates the entire City of Danville to the list of Most Endangered Historic Sites in Virginia.



Worsham Bridge

Where does the threat to these great structures come from? Regrettably, the answer appears to originate with the City of Danville itself, and a pattern of what many regard as subjective application of building codes, enforced selectively on certain historic buildings. Danville needs to endorse preservation and adaptive reuse not only in the Tobacco District and Downtown but also in all of its old neighborhoods, recognizing that these historic areas hold additional promise for economic renaissance. Danville's most recognizable historic resources, irreplaceable assets of brick and stone and carved ornament -- built up over many generations -- must not be squandered

at the dawn of 21st century. Danville's historic buildings are the envy of many communities across the state, assets that will become more valuable over time -- only if the City is a caring steward, and enlightened enough to preserve, protect and reuse them.

Virginia's Northern Piedmont



Much of the primarily rolling Northern Piedmont countryside, comprised of forests and farms that have been cultivated for more than 250 years, continues to be used for agriculture. Many of the fields are bordered by historic stone walls, and many of its meandering roads are much like they were when they were laid out in the 18th century. This area is replete with the early history of our country. George Washington surveyed the area as a young man. Fauquier County was home to our first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, John Marshall. Many of the crucial battles of the Civil War were fought here. Besides historic manor houses and agricultural-related structures, the area also has many historic settlements, churches and schools of ordinary yeomen and freed African-Americans.



Simulated transmission line

While population has increased and new homes have been built in these areas, this has occurred largely in a way that respects the integrity of the historic and scenic landscape. This is not by happenstance. Local governments and citizens have for many years proactively taken steps to preserve the unique and treasured landscape as population pressures have increased. Local comprehensive plans provide for the protection of important historic, natural, and scenic resources; and agricultural and conservation zoning ordinances have been enacted to implement those plans.

Dominion Power has announced plans for a 500,000 volt transmission line through Frederick, Warren, Rappahannock, Fauquier, Culpeper, Prince William, and Loudoun counties. The transmission line would cut a 200-foot scar for 40 to 68 miles across the landscape with its cleared right-of-way. The proposed transmission towers, spaced 1,000 feet apart, would stand 12-17 stories tall and be visible for miles. The line would slash through historic districts; magnificent viewsheds; publicly held open space; a high concentration of conservation easements; and historic sites including two of John Marshall's homes, Oak Hill and his boyhood home, The Hollow. While Dominion asserts that this line is needed to supply power to northern Virginia, inadequate supporting evidence has been made public. This line is part of a 240-mile transmission



project called the Trans-Allegheny Interstate line of which the western 210 miles would be constructed by Allegheny Power. The line could perpetuate the use of technologically outdated dirty coal-fired power plants in the Ohio River Valley to lucrative markets in the northeast. Ironically, due to the prevailing winds these plants contribute significant pollution to the mid-Atlantic and northeast.

Compounding the threat, the U.S. Secretary of Energy has designated this area as a draft National Interest Electric Transmission Corridor (“NIET Corridor”), pursuant to the Energy Policy Act. If made final, this corridor could pre-empt the state process for siting transmission lines, and would allow for Federal eminent domain to site the Dominion transmission lines and other lines proposed by private companies.

Although Dominion’s “preferred route” submitted to the State Corporation Commission (SCC) would partially follow an existing transmission line, this route would not follow the existing line the entire way. It would have impacts of its own on the historic landscape with significantly taller towers and wider rights-of-way. Moreover, Dominion has also submitted to the SCC an alternate route along scenic Interstate 66, which would also affect significant historic resources. The SCC could approve one of Dominion’s route proposals, or it could instead choose a route of its own devising. Thus, the entire study area is at risk. If the area is designated a NIET Corridor, it would be at risk for Federal eminent domain for future power lines as well.

The area at risk includes:

- 13 Historic Districts on the Virginia and National Registers
- 8 Proposed Historic Districts
- 37 Historic Sites on the Virginia and National Registers.
- 13 major Civil War Battlefields, several of which are described as the most pristine in the U.S.
- More than 50,000 acres of conservation easements.
- Nearly 10,000 acres of publicly-owned open space.
- More than 100 miles of Scenic Byways.
- 13 miles of the Appalachian Trail, and 72,734 acres visible from the Trail.

Huge transmission towers and power lines will cause disinvestment in historic properties marred by such a significant visual intrusion. Already, the threat has caused a noticeable drop in interest by potential buyers in purchasing properties in the area, and consequently in property values. These lines will also diminish the enjoyment of the unique and valuable historic landscape and therefore visitation by the many national and international tourists to this region, upon which much of the region’s economy depends.

The Piedmont Environmental Council has been leading the effort to save the site. Fourteen local governments, a number of legislators, over 6000 individuals and 62 other organizations including the Civil War Preservation Trust have expressed concern and opposition. (See Cedar Creek Battlefield/Belle Grove Plantation listing.)

Cedar Creek Battlefield/Belle Grove Plantation, Frederick County

On October 19, 1864, the Battle of Cedar Creek, the Civil War's last major battle in the Shenandoah Valley, took place between the towns of Strasburg and Middletown along Cedar Creek. Union forces under General Phillip Sheridan won a decisive victory that ended the Confederacy's power in the Valley. Belle Grove, an 18th century mansion now owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, served as Sheridan's headquarters and was the scene of heavy fighting during the battle. The Cedar Creek Battlefield/Belle Grove Plantation is recognized to be of critical historical significance. This significance arises not only from the Battle of Cedar Creek, but from the fact that the area served as a hotly contested supply area for the Confederate forces and a main artery of invasion along which forces under the command of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jubal Early, John Singleton Mosby, Phil Sheridan and George Armstrong Custer struggled for domination.



Main Street, Middletown

In 2002, after years of preservation efforts by the National Trust and the Cedar Creek Battlefield Foundation, Congress created the Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park. The small town of Middletown, with a population of 1,900, relies heavily on the revenue generated by heritage tourism at Cedar Creek Battlefield and Belle Grove. Visitors help support the small shops and businesses that line the town's Main Street.

On March 13, 2007 the Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) announced its 2007 list of most endangered Civil War battlefields which included Cedar Creek Battlefield (and Belle Grove Plantation). According to a press release issued by the National Trust, the threats to these historic resources are twofold: (1) a potential devastation of the area by extensively expanded strip mining; and (2) installation of massive towers and power lines that will fundamentally alter the historic character of the area.

First, O-N Minerals proposes to dramatically expand their quarry operation from its current 58 acres to 639 acres. If this massive acreage is rezoned from rural to industrial, it will be the largest rezoning in the history of Frederick County and will result in five strip mining quarry holes on core battlefield areas. The rezoning will result in waste piles, industrial facilities and 1,400 quarry dump trucks per day (one every 60 seconds) traveling Middletown's historic Main Street. These activities will tear up critical historical and natural assets and blight an area that occupies a critical and unique place in our country's history.

The second threat to the Cedar Creek Battlefield and Belle Grove Plantation is the proposed Dominion Power and Allegheny Power 500-kilovolt electric transmission line. (See Virginia's Northern Piedmont listing)

Local and regional grassroots organizations and many Frederick County residents join the National Trust and Civil War Preservation Trust in their concern about preserving this historic site. The Frederick County Board of Supervisors is encouraged to take into consideration the adverse impact these threats will have on the environment, the local economy and the historical context of Cedar Creek Battlefield and the area's unique historic resources.

Downtown Norfolk Historic District, City of Norfolk

Downtown Norfolk is the site of the original City of Norfolk, chartered in 1736. Buildings in the Downtown Norfolk Historic District are concentrated along Granby St., which eclipsed Main St. as the heart of downtown after 1900. The District occupies the oldest continuously settled area of Norfolk and is closely associated with events and developments that have made a major contribution to the City's history as a rail, banking and maritime industrial center. Following World War II, Norfolk was one of the first cities to undergo massive "urban renewal" and wide areas of the City, including portions of downtown, were leveled. Redevelopment continued through the 1960s and 1970s. The downtown area declined in the 1970s and 1980s, but it saw a rebirth in terms of interest, activity, and new construction beginning in the 1990s. The Downtown Norfolk Historic District has served and continues to serve as a center of commercial, banking, and legal institutions in southeastern Virginia.



A current view of the Ikon Building

The City's only remaining pre-Revolutionary building, St. Paul's Church, is in the District, as well as the MacArthur Memorial, originally Norfolk's courthouse and City Hall where General Douglas MacArthur is now entombed. The District is primarily composed of turn-of-the-twentieth-century commercial buildings, but many tall buildings have been constructed in recent years. The Downtown Norfolk Historic District includes seven buildings that are individually listed and more than 75 contributing buildings.

It is development interest in downtown Norfolk that is the primary source of threat to the District. Unfortunately, as part of the new renaissance of downtown, a number of the contributing buildings in the District have been demolished. The character of downtown is declining as many new buildings are constructed, and that is particularly true where historic buildings are demolished to make way for the new.

The City has been made aware of the loss of historic buildings and the associated deterioration of historic character by public comments and letters by Norfolk Preservation Alliance and others. However, it appears that the City does not recognize the significance of the loss. In fact, three contributing buildings -- the Ikon, Decker, and Beecroft and Bull buildings -- are located on the site of a new project -- a planned hotel/convention center complex. The City purchased these three buildings (including the Ikon, which is the oldest building in the District) so that they could demolish them to make way for the complex. The Norfolk Preservation Alliance was recently informed by the Mayor of Norfolk that these three buildings will be demolished because they don't fit with the "program" for the new convention center. Documents to finalize the partnership between the City and a private developer, which will involve substantial City subsidies, are in final legal review at this time. On 6 March 2007, City Council approved an ordinance for funding that project. The three buildings could be demolished without further review or public comment.

The City owns the properties and is the primary financial partner (using public funds) in the planned hotel/convention center. The City should make a decision not to demolish the buildings, but rather to adaptively reuse them as part of the project, or to build the hotel/convention center

around/between the three buildings. If not used as part of the convention center, the buildings could be sold for private adaptive reuse.

Norfolk's historic architecture is a critical component of what makes downtown appealing. If the loss of historic buildings continues, the loss is not only of the physical reminders of Norfolk's colorful past, but the very features that make Norfolk so attractive for growth and development. There needs to be a wake-up call about how important these buildings are.

Old and Historic Fredericksburg District, City of Fredericksburg



306 Wolfe St., Fredericksburg
under demolition

The Old and Historic Fredericksburg District (HFD) is a 50-block historic district encompassing the Fredericksburg downtown business district and its immediately surrounding residential neighborhoods. Created in 1971, the HFD is best characterized by its diversity, with buildings ranging in age from the mid-18th century to the 21st century, and of numerous architectural styles. Much of the central business district is zoned Commercial Downtown.

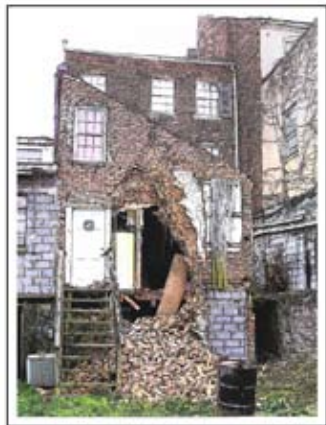
Surrounding the central business district are the oldest residential neighborhoods in Fredericksburg. These neighborhoods are a mixture of owner-occupied, single family homes, rental houses, some larger homes subdivided into apartments, as well as some apartment buildings and a few condominiums. Housing stock ranges from the affluent homes of Fredericksburg's earliest wealthy residents to the nearby working class neighborhoods. Overall, the Fredericksburg historic district is a desirable location, and vacancy, either in commercial or residential properties, is not an issue.

In the last 40 years, the City of Fredericksburg has been able to capitalize on its super abundance of historic resources, creating a large and diverse historic district that has been extremely successful. However, it is Fredericksburg's recent history and the very success of that historic district that now paradoxically is threatening the downtown area. The vibrant historic district has had a tremendous positive impact on property values downtown, a double-edged sword. Increased property values have not prompted the major landholders to invest more in their properties. Rather, vacant lots have become more valuable as investments than lots with buildings in advanced stages of disrepair. Demolition has become an economically lucrative option that the protection afforded by the historic district seems incapable of stopping.

All of the HFD is theoretically afforded the protection of overlay, historic district zoning. Any changes or modifications to buildings within the HFD visible from a public right-of-way must be reviewed by the City's Architectural Review Board (ARB). Recently, City Council passed changes to the historic district ordinance to make appeals of ARB decisions more complex and more expensive. These most recent changes will have the effect of making ARB review less user-friendly.

In 2005, the City of Fredericksburg hired an independent engineering firm to assess build-

ings in the downtown. The study, presented to the City in May of 2006, identified 68 buildings with condition issues. Acting on the report, city officials contacted the owners of three Tier 1 properties, those deemed to have the most serious structural damage or defects, directing that the properties be stabilized or razed. Two of these properties were razed within a few months. The third was being prepared for demolition as of the date of the HFD nomination to the Most Endangered Historic Sites list.



719 Caroline St.,
Fredericksburg

In addition to these buildings, two working class houses were razed the summer of 2006 when the new owner began rehabilitation work, only to find that the buildings did not have proper foundations; these structures were razed without review by the ARB.

In January of 2007, City Council overturned a decision by the ARB not to grant a Certificate of Appropriateness for the demolition of another working class home that lacked proper foundations. While the house is still standing, its owners have submitted preliminary plans for a new house on the lot that is completely out of scale from the remaining working class houses in this block. A City elected official, quoted in *The Free Lance-Star*, noted that, “Some of these buildings were basically working-class housing . . . They were not intended to last an extended period of time.”

Most recently, the ARB, with very little discussion, approved the demolition of a group of WWII-era apartment complexes. The ARB approved their demolition to make way for a 6-story, 69-unit condominium complex. If built, this structure will grossly exceed the Floor Area Ratio as specified by code. (There is precedent for this, as a 100-room, 4-story hotel approved by the ARB a year ago also exceeds the FAR.)

Another property, 1200 Prince Edward Street is also endangered. The structure was built in 1898 as the dormitory of the Assembly Home & School. Although gutted by fire in 2003, it was still deemed a contributing structure in the HFD in 2005 by the U.S. Department of the Interior, in considering an application for Federal tax credits for the adaptive reuse of the property. The owner proposed replacing the 17 apartments with four luxury condominiums, a plan endorsed by the ARB, which even sent two resolutions to City Council expressing support. Yet the City Council used a recently enacted spot blight ordinance to deny the application for adaptive reuse, responding to complaints of a few neighbors, seemingly in an effort to force its demolition. Now the property is for sale.

Fredericksburg seems to have lost its respect for the collective whole of the historic district, instead looking at individual properties and making decisions in a piecemeal and arbitrary fashion. ARB decisions have become so inconsistent as to be incomprehensible, and would most likely fail any court challenge brought on the basis of capriciousness.

Park Buildings, City of Roanoke

The City of Roanoke owns four historically and architecturally significant park buildings that as a result of underutilization and neglect, are suffering deterioration. Buena Vista, Mountain View,



Buena Vista

Villa Heights and a small brick house in Washington Park are visually prominent landmarks, important for their historical associations with people and events, as well as for their individual designs and quality of construction. Buena Vista, a Greek Revival mansion erected in 1849 for George P. Tayloe, with a substantial addition made in 1889, was the first site architecturally surveyed within the City of Roanoke, and among the first to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, in 1974. Mountain View, built in 1907 for newspaper magnate Junius Fishburn, is perhaps the region’s largest and finest example of the Georgian Revival style. Among the city’s oldest surviving dwellings is Villa Heights, a splendid example of the Classical Revival style,

dating to the 1830s. The small brick house in Washington Park is a locally important brick house dating to the mid-nineteenth century.

Suffering from long-term deferred maintenance, these buildings are at risk. The City of Roanoke Parks and Recreation Department’s Master Plan calls for divesting itself of three of the four buildings (Mountain View is the exception), and Parks and Recreation staff are actively pursuing that directive. The fact that the buildings are not located in Roanoke’s most desirable locations compounds the problem of finding suitable new owners and uses.



Mountain View

On a positive note, according to an article in the Roanoke Times, the City government announced in April (after the nomination of the park buildings to the endangered historic sites list) that it intends to pay the full cost of roof repair for Mountain View as the initial phase of a full restoration. Mayor Nelson Harris stated, according to the article, that the roof repair would be “a significant step in making sure we don’t lose this home to time.”

Fort Monroe/Old Point Comfort, Hampton



Fort Monroe/Old Point Comfort

Fort Monroe, a 570 acre active military installation, will be vacated and abandoned by the U.S. Army in 2011 under the 2005 BRAC procedures. Losing its federal shield, the future disposition is threatened by the potential commercial value of this finger of land at the harbor’s entrance. With magnificent views in all directions, it is a magnet for developers. Future use and zoning is undetermined at this critical time and open to potential abuse with devastating and irreparable harm to the national interest.

The peninsula at the juncture of Hampton Roads harbor and the Chesapeake Bay was named Point Comfort by the Jamestown colonists. Fort Monroe was constructed between 1817 and 1834, with Lt. Robert E. Lee one of the supervising engineers. It is the largest stone fort ever built by the U. S. Laborers and craftsmen included free blacks, slaves and military convicts. In 1824, the first military service school, the Artillery School of Practice, was established here by Secretary of War John Calhoun. It survived until 1946.

This historic treasure known as Freedom Fortress is essential to the story of the Civil War, and the end of slavery in America. In May 1861, a few weeks after Virginia seceded, three African American slaves sought and found their own freedom behind Union lines at Fort Monroe. The U.S. Army (Gen. Ben Butler) sheltered them as “contraband of war”, attracting ten thousand more run-away slaves as workers and eventually soldiers. These actions led irresistibly almost twenty months later to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

During the War, the fort was the northern anchor for the Union’s blockade forces, and the launching point for all attacks to Southern coastal defenses. Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, was imprisoned at Ft. Monroe for two years after Appomattox. Including the four-star command headquarters since World War II, Fort Monroe/Old Point Comfort has been strategic public land for almost four centuries.

Many individuals and organizations have spelled out the impending threats to this extraordinary national treasure, under both the Section 106 scoping meeting and the NEPA scoping process. Fort Monroe may be the community’s last chance to set aside existing open space, centrally located, for public use instead of more waterfront residential development. The City of Hampton tried to gain complete control of all this resort quality waterfront property to benefit the city economy. The preliminary planning (summer 2006) guided by the City of Hampton proposed three scenarios, identified by different levels of new residential development, adding up to 2000 new housing units on historic Fort Monroe.

Virginia has reversionary rights to most of the land but there are no effective state protections in place. The powerful new Fort Monroe Federal Area Development Authority, created by Virginia this year, must not allow this treasure to be lost. There is intense pressure to “compromise” by selling off developable parts of the 570 acres and leaving the oldest part alone. The Citizens for a Fort Monroe National Park (CFMNP) have called for the creation of a self sustaining national park to protect all 570 acres and realize its historic, scenic, recreational and economic potential. This and other options to protect this national historic treasure deserve fair consideration.

Grandma Moses House/Yount-Gochenour House, Augusta County

The Yount-Gochenour House, historically called the Grange (circa 1819), is located on a small tract of land that fronts US Route 11 in Augusta County. Nearby, the Grandma Moses House or Mt. Airy (circa 1830) sits in the middle of the County’s Mill Place Industrial Park on a 20 acre tract. Although the Yount-Gochenour House is more impressive architecturally, Mt. Airy has the greatest claim to fame. In 1901 Anna Mary Robertson and Thomas Moses, a New York farm couple, bought the house and surrounding farmland for \$6,000. Years earlier the couple came to Augusta County on their honeymoon and decided to stay there. They lived in the county a total of 18 years before returning to New York to care for Thomas’ parents. Anna



Grandma Moses House

later became internationally known as the folk artist “Grandma Moses.” She painted about 40 rural scenes from her years in Augusta County including one of Mt. Airy.

The County of Augusta owns both houses. The Yount-Gochenour House land is zoned commercial; the Grandma Moses House tract is zoned industrial. The fate of the two houses rests with the seven-person Board of Supervisors. Ironically the immediate threat to the two houses comes from the Board itself.

For the past few years the houses have been under the care of the Shenandoah Valley Rural Heritage Foundation (SVRHF), a non-profit group, which had entered into an agreement with the County to research and restore the buildings. The group was formed after a previous Board of Supervisors suggested demolition of the houses. The task of raising several hundred thousand dollars without the support of the County government and with only a small group of dedicated workers became overwhelming. SVRHF requested a termination of their agreement with the County in late 2006. It was this agreement termination that put the houses in their current precarious situation.

Although both houses are structurally sound with much of the period interior woodwork intact, on 10 January 2007 one member of the Board made a motion to demolish the two houses citing the burden on the County taxpayers to restore the buildings. The motion was seconded. However, the motion was tabled and two weeks later following strong public support for the structures’ preservation, the motion was set aside in favor of a motion to appoint a committee with the mission “to explore options for the future uses and/or the demolition” of Mt. Airy and the Yount-Gochenour House and bring back a set of ranked recommendations to the Board of Supervisors by October 24, 2007.

The Grandma Moses and the Yount-Gochenour houses represent the rural agricultural heritage of Augusta County and the Shenandoah Valley, a heritage that is rapidly disappearing. For that reason if for no other, they deserve to be protected. However, there are those on the Augusta County Board of Supervisors who feel enough time has been wasted on the houses and that they should be taken down so that some real progress can be made with the land.

Greenfield, Botetourt County



Greenfield

Greenfield was a domestic site, the base of a vast plantation in the 18th and early-mid 19th centuries. The site was the first home in the region of the Preston family, perhaps southwestern Virginia’s most prominent and powerful family during this time period.

Although it does not have national, state or local designation, Greenfield, located in Botetourt County, is likely eligible in spite of the loss of the manor house in the mid-20th century to fire. The site and two surviving structures are very significant for their early log architecture with near perfect physical integrity. Extant slave quarters (and indeed, early plantation house dependencies) with such integrity are extremely rare. Moreover the structures are highly significant for the historical association with African-American ethnic history (e.g., slavery), as well as the association with the Preston family.

Greenfield is within Botetourt County's Greenfield Industrial site and zoned M1- Industrial. The buildings are vacant and have not been maintained for more than a decade. The structures are threatened from long-term neglect. Already a dramatic toll in the form of physical deterioration has taken place. The fact that the land is in an industrial park and the parcel is zoned industrial does not bode well.

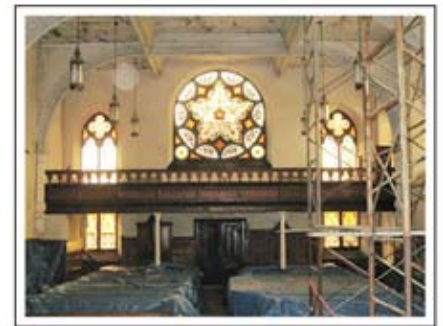
To date, only the Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation has shown any interest in preserving the site, although a few private citizens have expressed concern. Because Botetourt County is outside of the Roanoke Valley, the Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation holds little sway over the issue. There are currently no known commitments of any kind to preserve Greenfield.

The site needs a protective zoning ordinance and the structures need to be stabilized. Rather than rehabilitated for modern use, the structures should be preserved as artifacts and opened to the public with interpretive signage and marketed to attract heritage tourism.

St. Francis de Sales, Powhatan County

Upon the withdrawal of federal troops at the official end of Reconstruction and the adoption of "Jim Crow" laws, the equal rights African Americans gained after the Civil War were taken away. While select black colleges and universities were being established, support for the elementary and high school system for African Americans was failing. At this time, early equal rights pioneer Katharine Drexel devoted her life and fortune to developing a school system of her own - a system with standards at least equal to any other school system in existence. Katharine started spending her inheritance, an estimated \$25,000,000 fortune, building an educational system for citizens placed at a growing disadvantage by the laws of their own country. In 1889, St. Francis de Sales was opened. It was the first of 55 schools Katharine Drexel built for African-Americans. For 70 years it provided a high level education, opportunity and dignity to many citizens who would not have received these rights. In addition, Saint Katherine Drexel (declared a saint in 2000 by Pope John Paul II) opened ten schools for Native Americans.

Today, the 75,000 square foot St. Francis de Sales building rests on a 25 acre parcel overlooking the James River in Powhatan County. The building, with its size, bell tower and Baroque Greek Revival, 3-story chapel, has a commanding presence. The craftsmanship and detail are remarkable. Because of a lack of funding, awareness and support over the years, over 50 historic buildings that once stood on the property were lost forever. The St. Francis de Sales building is all that remains of a unique American story of courage, determination, leadership and success.



St. Francis de Sales

The Sisters of The Blessed Sacrament, the order founded by Saint Katherine, still owns this property, as well as the 2265 acres which surround it. On December 17, 2006, 1000 acres of the property were signed into a conservation easement. Another 1000 acre easement is planned.

However, the cost of building upkeep for an order of nuns with few resources is prohibitive.

In over 30 years the St. Francis de Sales building has been largely untouched, with the exception of necessary repairs. No new construction or mechanical upgrades to the structure have been made since the early 1950s and today, the building is not utilized. There are areas where water is entering the structure, deteriorating walls and creating structural stress.

Katharine's Foundation, a non-profit 501(C)(3) community organization, nominated St. Francis de Sales to the Most Endangered Historic Sites list. The Foundation was formed to develop awareness, organize support for a stabilization campaign, and develop a solution for this failing American landmark.

Historic Wooden Windows, Statewide



Building without the character-defining element, historic wooden windows

Historic wooden windows are destroyed daily in lieu of new, inferior windows. Savvy salesmen convince owners and architectural review board members that replacement windows are superior to historic wooden windows when the truth is, in many cases, historic windows have lasted over 100 years. With some maintenance, these historic windows can be airtight, weather resistant, and can last another 100 years -- longer than any new wooden window or vinyl clad window.

Historic wooden windows are character-defining elements of historic buildings, the “eyes” of historic structures. They are important details and contribute to the significance of the whole building. Historic wooden windows are indicators of craftsmanship. If cared for, they can last a very long time and function better than modern “replacement” windows.

Because historic wooden windows are made of slow growth wood with rings that are close together, they weather much better than those modern windows made of fast growth wood. Wooden windows can be repaired and reglazed, cords restrung, localized deterioration consolidated, and weatherstripping installed. They can work as well as they did when new. The restoration/rehabilitation message is that windows can be saved. The remodeling message is that they must be replaced. In the world of historic preservation, it is important to “repair rather than replace” superior historic materials and character-defining elements.

Documentation is available that disproves the window salesmen, but their advertising is significantly more effective than the average preservation media campaign. Broad-based education of the public is needed. Hands-on demonstrations and workshops should be offered to educate citizens about proper repair of historic wooden windows. For homeowners actually doing the work, contractors desiring to learn more about proper window repair, or members of architectural review boards, hands-on participation in a repair demonstration can provide for more informed decisions about window repair versus replacement. So it takes citizen effort and involvement to serve as the voice of the historic building that cannot speak for itself.

***Site descriptions are based on the nominations that were submitted.
They do not appear in this program in ranked order.***