

The need for historic preservation in Eastchester
by
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The town of Eastchester which includes the villages of Tuckahoe and Bronxville has one of the richest and oldest histories in America. Records in the town archives dating back to 1665 are the envy of municipalities across America. What is unknown to many is that the town is blessed by with many homes that are both historically and architecturally significant.

Architecture is history frozen in time. Once an edifice is destroyed a community loses a part of its identity. Unfortunately over the decades homes have been demolished and neither the town nor the village governments have been able to prevent their demise. Three years ago the Oyster Bar on the corner of White Plains Road and Orchard Street, an inn that dated back to 1872, was the last edifice to suffer such a fate. The Eastchester Historical Society, members of town government, and citizens of the community do not want to lose our historic and architectural treasures.

At the beginning of 2006 an initial meeting of the historic preservation committee was held at the community room at Eastchester Town Hall. Eighteen people from 13 neighborhood associations attended the meeting, including a member of the Eastchester Town Board and the Eastchester Planning Board. The meeting was chaired by Mike Fix, President of the Eastchester Historical Society and myself. The goal of the committee is to preserve the historic integrity and character of Eastchester. The committee wishes to prevent the further demolition of homes that have historic or architectural significance.

Over the past year progress has been made. The community has been surveyed and 14 historic sites in Eastchester have been identified that were built between 1760 and 1876. Maria Bonasia from the architectural board of review has photographed these homes and put together an attractive calendar that the Eastchester Historical Society hopes to distribute for 2008. Each site has been researched and a documented history of each site has been written. But what has transpired in the last year is only a beginning.

More work must be done to get the various civic associations to become more involved with preserving the architectural and historic heritage. The village of Bronxville has done the most to inform their citizens about the rich history of their homes and neighborhoods. In 1998 the present and former village historians, Eloise Morgan and Mary Huber, working with many contributing authors put together a masterful book, *Building a Suburban Village, Bronxville, New York, 1898-1998*, that not only celebrates the village's centennial year but also describes the development of neighborhoods and the significance of the many beautiful homes in their village.

Recognizing and educating the public about the important sites is only a start to historic preservation. There are many options open to municipalities committed to historic preservation. Establishing historic districts throughout the town is not realistic for two

reasons. First, historic homes are scattered throughout the neighborhoods. There does not seem to be any cluster of historic homes in one particular area. Secondly, historic districts can be very restrictive. The right to make minor alterations that change the character of the neighborhood or to put on addition can be restricted.

What seems more practical is to get some kind of landmark ordinance legislation passed that prevents the demolition of homes that have historic and architectural significance. An historic review board can be set up similar to the architectural board of review that would make recommendations about whether people could or could not demolish homes of historic or architectural significance. The village of Scarsdale has such a board and they have had some success in preventing the demolition of historic sites.

Ken Jackson, former head of the New York Historical Society and author of the pioneering book, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, has predicted that it is inevitable that communities in southern Westchester will get more developed. That does not mean that communities will be forced to give up their historic and architectural treasures. Volunteers are needed to work hard at first educating the public to the treasures that it already exist. Then with public support legislation can be passed to prevent unknowing people from destroying sites that need to be preserved.

Presently, any contractor can buy a site, demolish it, and build new dwellings to replace them. Let the Oyster Bart be the last historic dwelling to be demolished.