

The Old Post Office and Historic Preservation In Washington, D.C.

Of the many old buildings that exist on Pennsylvania Avenue today, the Richardsonian Romanesque Old Post Office may be the most contentious, but also the most influential on the D.C. area. Over the course of 110 years, the building has survived critics who argue that it was architecturally outdated, inefficient in its use of space, and most importantly demolition attempts in the 1930s and 1970s. The 1970s demolition attempt proved especially significant; it sparked the “Don’t Tear It Down Movement,” which fought for the preservation of the Old Post Office. After its success, the movement changed its name to the District of Columbia Preservation League to reflect a larger preservation mission than just the Old Post Office. As such, the Old Post Office and the movement to preserve it sparked the historic preservation movement that exists in Washington today.

On June 25, 1890, President Benjamin Harrison signed an act which authorized the purchase of “certain parcels of real estate embraced in square 323 as an eligible site for the city post office.”¹ Much deliberation was given to the design of the building, but it became clear that the public wanted a large clocktower to be a part of the structure. The building was viewed by the public “as unique and monumental, and as such it should have a landmark clock tower visible from as many parts of the city as possible.”² The building was designed by Willoughby J. Edbrooke and plans for it were finalized at the end of 1891. The original act passed by congress allowed the building to reach a height of 8 stories, but Edbrooke’s plans only designated uses for the first three floors and the basement which would be dedicated to postal activities. The use of

¹ Gail Karesh Kassan, “The Old Post Office Building in Washington, D.C.: Its Past, Present, and Future,” *Records of the Colombia Historical Society*, 1971-1972, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40067789.pdf>

² “The Old Post Office Building in Washington, D.C.: Its Past, Present and Future”

the remaining floors was not designated in the original plans.³ The fact that the building was made bigger than its original purpose intended shows how grand the public wanted it to be and would help to explain later preservation attempts to fight its destruction.

In spite of the building's aesthetic appeal, however, the building was seen as flawed and outdated almost from its opening. It was extremely cramped inside, did not offer any room for operations expansion, and the popularization of neoclassicism during the Chicago World's Fair of 1900 turned popular sentiment away from the post office's Richardsonian Romanesque style. That member of a senatorial planning committee had served on the World's Fair advisory board only undermined the post office's design further.⁴ This helps to demonstrate why the post office was susceptible to destruction, but also that future preservationists would recognize historic value over practicality when campaigning to save buildings.

In 1901, Senator James McMillan called on the Senate Parks Committee to generate a plan for the "largely commercial notoriously freewheeling area that encompassed the post office building."⁵ This committee proposed the Federal Triangle, a complex that would hold government offices. These plans included the demolition of several buildings along Pennsylvania Avenue that did not align with the architects' neo-classical vision. The architects envisioned a design in which "the curved facades of several buildings would form a grand circle of symmetrical archways."⁶ However, the post office building no longer fit into this new plan, and as it had sat vacant since 1914 due to the postal service moving to a more practical building near

³ "The Old Post Office Building in Washington, D.C.: Its Past, Present, and Future"

⁴ "The Old Post Office Building in Washington, D.C.: Its Past, Present, and Future"

⁵ Andre Shashaty, "Sweet Victory-At Last," *Historic Preservation*, February, 1984, www.american.illiad.oclc.org/illiad/pdf/332157.pdf

⁶ "Sweet Victory-At Last"

Union Station, it was set for demolition. However, the Federal Triangle project moved slowly, so the post office building sat vacant and mostly abandoned from 1914 until the early 1930s.

In 1934, congress declared its opposition to demolishing the post office due to the Great Depression, thus sparing the post office its first demolition attempt. This was in spite of congress releasing a statement that said “the building was very wasteful as to space, perhaps one of the most uneconomical buildings used by the government in the entire country.”⁷ The Great Depression turned public sentiment against demolition of any building that was still functional, even if it was inefficient, as demolition would have been seen as a waste of resources. Thus, congress responded to public pressure by canceling demolition plans and sparing the post office from its first demolition attempt.

Progress continued on the Federal Triangle project, but it was accelerated in the late 1960s and early 1970s to improve Pennsylvania Avenue’s appearance. This made demolition on the post office building a possibility again. At one point, a compromise was considered in which the tower of the building would remain while the rest of the building would be torn down and incorporated into another building.⁸ This, however, was not accepted by local preservationists, who expressed concerns over the changing city landscape and disregard for historic structures that was prevalent among developers at the time.

Pennsylvania Avenue was not the only part of the district that was facing destructionist trends. The rise of the automobile meant district and federal officials were looking for ways to improve the road system. One such proposal included building a bridge over the Potomac that would connect I66 to I95. “Washington was ripe for the carving. Whole blocks torched in the ’68 riots stood empty. Schools were a mess, streets were unsafe... In the eyes of the congressmen,

⁷ “The Old Post Office Building in Washington, D.C.: Its Past, Present, and Future”

⁸ “The Old Post Office Building in Washington, D.C.: Its Past, Present and Future”

the city was expendable.”⁹ Although reluctant to support this plan, which became known as the Three Sisters Bridge Plan, the D.C. city council approved it to secure funds for the Metrorail system. When construction was supposed to begin on the bridge, however, students from Georgetown took over the island which were supposed to hold the bride pillars. This resulted in days of violent protests that attracted news coverage. As such, D.C. residents became very opposed to the project and voted 85% against it in a referendum held later that year.¹⁰ This protest action and strong referendum result showed a new awareness among district residents for historic preservation, and helps explain how the historic preservation movement was established.

The Three Sisters proposal was only a brief example of the destructionist trend that was sweeping the district in 1970s. As one resident stated, “inventory of outstanding historic landmarks is becoming a casualty list”¹¹ and the Washington Post wrote that a “little bronze plaque is as easily bulldozed as granite columns or marble entablatures.”¹² These quotes show that designating a building as a landmark did not always guarantee its protection and that district residents were becoming more aware of the importance of historic preservation which further explains how the historic preservation movement was started.

The increased public awareness toward historic preservation also had a great effect on the Old Post Office. Although there had been earlier historic preservation efforts, there was no formal organization dedicated to historic preservation in D.C. To remedy this, an organization was started by television writer and produce Alison Ownings. To give the group a common goal,

⁹ Harry Jaffe, “The Insane Highway Plan That Would Have Bulldozed D.C.’s Most Charming Neighborhoods,” October 21, 2015, www.washingtonian.com/2015/10/21/the-insane-highway-plan-that-would-have-bulldozed-washington-dcs-most-charming-neighborhoods/

¹⁰ “The Insane Highway Plan That Would Have Bulldozed D.C.’s Most Charming Neighborhoods”

¹¹ Jeremy W. Dutra, “You Can’t Tear It Down: The Origins of the D.C. Historic Preservation Act,” *Georgetown University Law Center*, 2002

¹² “You Can’t Tear It Down: The Origins of the D.C. Historic Preservation Act”

they focused on the fate of the Old Post Office and preventing its destruction. On April 19, 1971, this group organized a march from the National Trust Headquarters to the Old Post Office. During the protest, “marchers joined an enthusiastic crowd of about 250 placard-carrying preservationist, historians, planners, architects, and local residents, some of who wore black arm bands. ‘We don’t want ivory towers-save the whole post office!’ they proclaimed, urging that the building be spared and that it be converted to new uses to serve the community.”¹³ The ivory towers line was a reference to the plan that would have only saved the tower, which indicates that preservation activists were stepping up their role and demands. Also, this march gained a lot of press attention, which turned the D.C. elite toward preservation efforts.

As the Don’t Tear It Down movement to preserve the Old Post Office gained momentum, more people joined its ranks. These included Francis Lethbridge, chairman of the Joint Committee on Landmarks, and Nancy Hanks, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Lethbridge was quoted as saying that there is “an awful lot of academic classicism but damn few Romanesque Revival buildings like the Post Office”¹⁴ and Hanks presented “a plan for adapting the Old Post Office for joint use by both government and private business.”¹⁵ In 1973, the Old Post Office was added to the National Register of Historic Place. In 1975, the National Capital Planning Commission voted to reverse a previous plan to demolish the building. “In 1977, preservations achieved final victory in the long battle to save the Old Post Office when Congress approved the rehabilitation of the land mark and authorized \$18 million for renovations.”¹⁶

Today, the Don’t Tear It Down movement exists as the D.C. Preservation League, changing their name to reflect a larger mission. Their actives include fighting to designate

¹³ D.C. Preservation League. “A Brief History,” *Washington, D.C.*, Unpublished Manuscript

¹⁴ “You Can’t Tear It Down: The Origins of the D.C. Preservation Act”

¹⁵ “You Can’t Tear It Down: The Origins of the D.C. Preservation Act”

¹⁶ “You Can’t Tear It Down: The Origins of the D.C. Historic Preservation Act”

neighborhoods as historic districts, publishing the famous list of Washington’s Most Endangered Places which “became an important media event for the organization,”¹⁷ running education programs, fighting development that threatens historic buildings, and continuing “to preserve Washington’s sense of place and to save many of the unique features that define the capital city.”¹⁸

Thanks to the efforts of Don’t Tear It Down and DCPL, the Old Post Office building continues to grace Pennsylvania Avenue. From 1977-1983, the GSA took control of the building and renovated it to serve as an office space and retail center and upon its reopening in 1983 renamed it the Nancy Hanks Center.¹⁹ Today, the Old Post Office is under a 60-year lease to the Trump Organization who have turned the building into a luxury hotel. Due to regulations, the Trumps have made virtually no changes to the exterior of the building and all changes to the interior must go through a very rigorous process to ensure the historic value of the building is maintained.²⁰ As such, the Old Post Office remains what started the preservation movement in Washington and its legacy can be seen in the strong presence of the DCPL today.

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¹⁷ “A Brief History”

¹⁸ “A Brief History”

¹⁹ “Old Post Office, Washington, D.C.” *General Services Administration*, 2017, www.gsa.gov/historic-buildings/old-post-office-washington-dc#history

²⁰ Jonathan O’Connell, “Donald and Ivanka Trump Unveiling Latest Plans for the Old Post Office” September 9, 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/business/capitalbusiness/donald-and-ivanka-trump-unveiling-latest-plans-for-old-post-office-tuesday/2013/09/09/b6339490-1970-11e3-82ef-a059e54c49d0_story.html?utm_term=.828a5a039806

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