

Town of New Paltz Historic Preservation Commission: Interview Q&A's by John Orfitelli, Commission Chair

- **Describe to us the benefits of having a Historic Preservation Commission in a town like New Paltz.**

As with many communities in our area, New Paltz has a rich history that dates back to the first settlers, the local Indian tribes such as the Lenape, through to the formation of the hamlets and Village by the Huguenots, and finally to our current Town and Village. As people developed the land, built homes, farms, schools, and shops, they created a unique imprint, a character that really makes the area quite interesting as reflected in the style and architecture of the homes and buildings they created. The Historic Preservation Commission was established to protect and manage the legacy that these individuals left behind so that future generations can see and experience what they accomplished.

- **What are the steps required to designate a property as “historic”?**

The designation process is really quite simple..

1. A property owner can submit a nomination form to the Commission via postal mail or e-mail.. the form can be obtained from our website townofnewpaltz.org and downloaded..
2. The Commission invites the property owner to one of our monthly meetings to learn first-hand about what makes their property special. The property owner may be asked to supply additional materials such as photos and letters that they possess or that can be obtained from the Elting Memorial Library.

The Haviland-Heidgerd Historical Collection at the library is considered the best genealogical and local history collection in the Mid-Hudson Valley. It's a repository for primary source material and published works relating to the Hudson Valley with emphasis on the town and village of New Paltz.

3. This material, along with any records that may already exist as part of our data base, the Interactive On-Line Map, would comprise the completed nomination to be voted on by the Commission.

The approved nomination is then recorded with the County Clerk's office. Finally, the Interactive On-Line Map data base is updated to include the nomination and associated data.

- **What can community members do to see if their property is eligible?**

To be eligible properties must possess a special character, historical significance, or provide aesthetic value to the community. The nomination form is a questionnaire that allows property owners to specify these attributes and through the Commission review process, determines if a landmark designation is warranted.

- **Explain to us in detail the kind of work the HPC does.**

The Historic Preservation Commission serves to preserve and protect our historic assets through three basic tasks, namely,

- a) first, is to designate properties as local historic landmarks and recommend the creation of historic districts,
- b) second, is to review changes to local landmarks submitted through the building permit process and to issue a Certificate of Appropriateness which allows the property owner to proceed with the changes
- c) and third, is to inform the community about our designated properties and historic districts.. and solicit their support.

Much of the historic information that we collect through the designation process is obtained from families that have photos, maps, letters, and first hand memories of their grandparents telling them stories about how it was 'in their day'. So an important aspect of the Commission is to provide the means for the community to share this information.. and today the best mechanism to share information is the Internet.. so we've placed a significant emphasis on the creation of an Interactive On-line Map and Data Base that allows easy access to the data we've collected and allows folks to submit their own personal photos, stories, and recollections. It's a 'living document' that is continually updated.

- **What are some of the challenges the HPC faces in attempting to preserve Historic New Paltz?**

Frankly, our most significant challenge is having the resources both in labor and dollars to get things done. The Commission is comprised of five volunteers who live in the Town and meet once a month. Our ability to designate properties, oversee changes, and maintain the Interactive On-Line Map data base is really limited by what this small group of individuals can accomplish. We have secured matching State grants almost every year since the Commission was created in 2002 which have allowed us to accomplish a great deal through our work with consultants such as Neil Larson of Larson-Fisher Associates and the former Center for Research, Regional Education, and Outreach (CRREO) now the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz.

- **How can a community member become involved in the HPC?**

Anyone interested in serving on the Commission or helping can simply contact any one of the Commissioners. Contact information is on our website page. TownofNewPaltz.org or attend our regular meeting held on third Wednesday of each month.

- **What do you feel is the most beneficial thing about digitizing historic information?**

For information to be shared on the Internet it must be digitized... and sharing information about our past.. our historic records, everything that comprises our legacy, will help preserve it.

The Internet is now part of the fabric of our society.. we are embracing this technology through our Interactive On-Line Map that allows everyone to learn about our rich history and contribute by sharing their own personal recollections and stories.

The creation of social networking has demonstrated the power of this form of communication.. so we look forward to utilizing Facebook, to allow more participation and open discussion of topics that will further help to preserve and protect our historic assets.

- **How does the HPC differ from local historians?**

The Historic Preservation Commission is a Certified Local Government body that was created by the Town in 2002 by Municipal Code (Town Code 140-118) to 'protect the community's significant historic, architectural, and cultural resources.' One aspect of being designated as a CLG is that we have access to grants available from the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). These matching grants have been utilized to fund a great deal of the research and development over the past ten years. I feel it's safe to say that without the grant money we would not have been able to create the On-Line Map data and environment.

- **CLG Program**

The Certified Local Government Program is a preservation partnership between local, state and national governments focused on promoting historic preservation at the grass roots level. The program is jointly administered by the National Park Service (NPS) and the State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs) in each state, with each local community working through a certification process to become recognized as a Certified Local Government (CLG). CLGs then become an active partner in the Federal Historic Preservation Program and the opportunities it provides.

Why become a CLG? There are many reasons but the key reason is the access certification provides to the expert technical advice of the State Offices as well as the NPS. Partnerships with the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions, Preserve America, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the National Main Street Center are also networks that CLGs have an opportunity to tap into. Of course, access to Federal funding is another benefit, making certified communities able to access the portion of Federal funds set aside by each SHPO for just CLGs annually. Being a CLG also shows your community's commitment to keeping what is significant from the past for future generations. As a certified town, city, or county seeking other opportunities, it becomes easy to demonstrate a readiness to take on a preservation project and be successful.

- **Can you give the definition of a Hamlet and explain how these boundaries were determined?**

A hamlet is a small community located within a town. To be recognized as a hamlet, it must have basic public facilities for education, administration and social gatherings (such as schools, churches and post offices). Privately owned businesses and trade buildings also make up a hamlet. For example, blacksmith shops, gristmills, wagon maker's shops, general stores, hotels and produce markets. Also, buildings that connect the community to important transportation routes, train stations and trolley stops, are also vital to recognizing an area as a hamlet.

- **Give a brief explanation of each hamlet and a significant historic structure within them.**

There were ten hamlets within Town of New Paltz including Put Corners which was actually never officially recognized as a hamlet, however, Put Corners was an active community nestled between the Village of New Paltz and the Hamlet of Ohioville. The area was named by Napoleon Purdy, a transplant from Putnam County (where the name originated).

A brief history of each Hamlet was written by Matt Thorenz, a Research Assistant at SUNY in 2010 and can be viewed on our Interactive On-Line Map along with data on those properties within each hamlet obtained from our survey work and research from prior grants.

More Q&A from the HPC Brochure, 'Protecting Our Past for the Future'

- **What are the Historic Preservation Commissions?**

The Historic Preservation Commissions of the Village and Town were created by Municipal Codes (Village Code Chapter 9; Town Code 140-118) to protect the community's significant historic, architectural, and cultural resources. These volunteer commissions are charged with designating historic landmarks, recommending the creation of historic districts, and reviewing all proposed exterior changes to designated properties.

- **What is a historic district?**

A historic district is a group of properties designated for its special character, historical significance, or aesthetic value. A district may contain a variety of styles or periods but must represent a distinct area of the community. All properties in a historic district need not be historic, yet all are regulated by the designation.

- **What does designation mean to owners?**

Ownership of designated properties, or ownership of property within a designated historic district, requires owners to act as responsible stewards of our community's irreplaceable cultural heritage. To accomplish this, owners are required to obtain prior approval from the appropriate Commission before making exterior alterations or major landscape changes to ensure that the changes do not negatively affect the historic character of the property or district. However, designation does not freeze a property or district in time. Alterations and new construction can continue, but Commission review is required to protect the historic integrity of the property or district.

- **What changes require Commission prior approval?**

Except for maintenance activity, all exterior work on historic district properties or designated historic landmarks – including permanent alterations in landscaping and any change in exterior colors – requires Commission review. Exterior work includes changes to existing structures as well as the construction of new structures on the property.

- **Are there changes that would not require Commission prior approval?**

Commission approval is not required for ordinary maintenance and repair of the exterior, or for interior alterations that do not affect the exterior. Approval of paint colors is required only if color changes are proposed.

- **How can I get prior approval for changes to my property?**

Contact the appropriate Historic Preservation Commission or Building Department early in your planning to determine if your project requires a Certificate of Appropriateness. If it does, complete an application for the Commission's review. A public hearing is necessary when the proposed changes require a building permit.

- **My contemporary home is in a historic district. Does review also apply to me?**

Yes. Exterior changes, including major landscape changes, to all properties in historic districts are subject to review to protect the overall character of the district.

- **Can the Commission require me to make repairs and maintain my property?**

The law requires that designated properties be kept in good repair to prevent "demolition by neglect." This regulation is similar to the legal requirement that all buildings in the community be maintained in safe condition. When you need to make repairs, please contact the Building Inspector or the Historic Preservation Commission as early as possible for advice about historic preservation and other municipal requirements.

- **Can the Commission require me to restore my building to the way it looked when it was new?**

No. All aspects of a property's history are considered important, not just the earliest. The Commission reviews proposed changes only to prevent alterations that would adversely affect the property's historic integrity.

- **Can a designated building ever be demolished?**

An owner may apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness to demolish a building if it is not possible to earn a reasonable return without the proposed action. This stringent process requires that the owner prove the claim conclusively, regardless of whether that return is the most profitable return possible.