

“Preservation was a Fight!”: An Oral History of Historic Preservation and Progressive Reform in the Annapolis City Government

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The story of historic preservation in Annapolis parallels the story of urban renewal in the city in interesting ways. Block Development programs and funding secured for the city from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) supported urban renewal at the town center along upper West Street, but it also allowed the city’s Urban Renewal Authority to throw financial support behind preservation projects. The State of Maryland’s purchase of the “Bicentennial Buildings” in Annapolis is a key example. Historic preservation presented the city with a reasonable alternative to urban renewal, and the same people were backing both efforts: 1) creating a plan for the future of the city and creating new offices in city government that could usher in real changes in the way the city was run, and 2) inventing the tools necessary to ensure that future development in the “old town” of Annapolis was appropriate and retained the historical values that would make it a viable place for living and doing business... certain kinds of business, and certain styles of living. Historic Annapolis, Inc. can be seen as one of several civic organizations appearing during the 1950s and 1960s, all of which were promoting this kind of smart development, which followed progressive reform in government. In a sense, that is what historic preservation is: smart development, but the move towards planning the future of the city was only partly a matter of preservation. Today I want to discuss the twinning of these movements, the struggle for progressive reform in city government and the struggle to establish historic preservation as a priority for the city.

In September of 2002, the Historic Annapolis Foundation (HAF) initiated a research project to record oral histories of the historic preservation movement in the City of Annapolis. HAF received support for this project from the Maryland Historic Trust, and the memories and experiences of nearly twenty individuals who witnessed the growth of this movement were recorded as a result [20 interviews, 35 hours of digital sound recordings, 1000 transcribed pages]. In this oral history project HAF sought to balance interviews with former leaders in its own organization, HAF's opponents and critics, members of the city government including former mayors, council members, and planners, local activists and members of civic associations, and representatives of the state and county governments. This paper draws on this oral history research to relate successes in historic preservation in Annapolis with progressive change in city government during the 1960s and 70s. Important changes in the way the Annapolis city government operated – from a traditional system rooted in machine politics and patronage to an increasingly transparent, progressive government – are the context in which preservation was established in Annapolis. Preservation was a fight, but it was one among many fights going on in the city during this period.

Post-war urban renewal and progressive city planning throughout the United States entailed a dramatic engagement with place and the history of places. Federal funding and new forms of authority imbued planners with tremendous power to re-designate places, in a sense redrawing the maps of American cities. Perhaps appropriately, historic preservation gained ground during this period with an approach to places that complemented progressive urban planning and existing rationales for urban renewal. Urban renewal saw dozens of capital projects in Annapolis, which brought millions of dollars from outside of the city. A portion of this money was channeled from the city's Urban Renewal Authority into projects proposed by agents within the preservation movement. What they showed was that historic preservation was an alternative to redevelopment that could also arrest decline, and advocates for preservation attained a great deal of influence in city hall as this movement was embraced as a means to revitalize the town's economy at its center. This was particularly so starting with Roger Moyer's administration from 1965-1973.

The City of Annapolis was forced to make critical decisions in the post-war years to maintain its livability and economic vitality, especially during the 1960s when so many American cities faced decline. It was during this period that progressive initiatives truly changed the face of the city. Annapolis passed a comprehensive zoning code, implemented its first master plan, hired a city planner, and established an Urban Renewal Authority. Moyer set up an Urban Renewal Authority and got the city recertified to receive funding from HUD during his first year as mayor. During this same period, the historic preservation movement attracted a base of support among progressive-minded politicians, activists and civic leaders, but also among the residents of the city. This presentation uses several vivid episodes to explore the connections between historic preservation as a movement and broader progressive reforms in city government.

Historic preservation provided an important and intelligent alternative to renewal, but also shares in the dilemmas that have resulted from both endeavors. Critics of urban renewal have shown that an inordinate amount of decision-making power was left to municipalities where implementing renewal and redevelopment was concerned.¹ These critics agree that vast monies were thrown at cities for the purposes of renewal but aside from procedural guidelines, spending decisions were made locally. Cities were required to develop a workable plan for renewal and establish an authority to apply for and receive funds. For many small cities, this was the first impetus to develop consistent city-wide zoning or master plans for the future development of their community. Nationally-organized and funded urban renewal seems to be the secret ally of local historic preservation where preservationists are well-organized and have at least as much influence as developers, as was the case in Annapolis once Roger Moyer was in office.

For example, during the 1950s, Historic Annapolis, Inc., raised money to purchase and renovate Shiplap House, on Pinkney Street, which was a relatively modest project and provided the organization with a headquarters. During the 1960s, Historic Annapolis raised money to save and renovate the William Paca House. The scale of these different accomplishments reflects the groundswell of support for preservation projects

that developed over the 1960s and 70s, but broader change in the political climate of the city as well. Something that Roger Moyer said during an interview in 2002: “St. Claire Wright said many times that Historic Annapolis accomplished more in the eight years I was mayor than in any other period. That makes me feel awfully good.”ⁱⁱ

Moyer was first elected alderman in 1961; four years later he was mayor, and he held that office from 1965-1973. He described his election to the city council in this way:

When I worked at the [county] recreation department, I was jerked around on a major project by the local politicians. I was in a quandary because I couldn't get an answer on it. I was young and wearing my heart on my sleeve. A local judge, a venerable old judge, an honorable, decent man, called me aside and said, “Son, you're the victim of Anne Arundel County politics. They're just playing games with you.” I said, “Well, I've lived here all my life. Maybe I can get some votes, too.” So I decided to run for alderman. I was twenty-six years old and I won.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There was at that time a circle of Annapolis residents who worked to get, as one interviewee put it, “decent Aldermen on the ticket”, but, they explained, it was difficult for anyone to get on the ballot if they were not party members, Democrat or Republican. In other words, it was hard to introduce anyone who was not already integrated into the local political scene. This group of progressives included lawyer Harvey Poe, who moved to Annapolis during the 1940s, and was responsible for an early draft of Annapolis' first master plan and was part author in its historic preservation zoning; also architect Jim Burch, banker Kent Mulligan, who served on the State Legislature, and lawyer Jim Rouse, and others. Harvey Poe organized the **Annapolis Residents' Association**, which passed its bylaws and was incorporated in 1959. When the city started working on its first master plan, they began with a planning document that Harvey Poe's organization produced.

Also important were developer and hotelier Paul Pearson, Jack Clifford, Richard McClelland, and of course St. Claire Wright. When interviewed in 2002, Roger Moyer actually referred to these people as his “shadow government”. Moyer realized that he had been backed in his run for Mayor by this circle of progressive intellectuals, many of which became trusted advisors once he was in office. He said:

I ran against an old political machine for mayor the first time and I won. One of the first calls I got was from Dr. Harvey Poe... He said, "Look there Pip, you did something that we could never do. You beat the old political machine, but you're going to need help running the government. Remember, your existence to this point has been almost tribal. You lived in Eastport with your buddies and all. You can't bring *them* in here to run the government. We've got to get people who are better educated than you"—not that I had a bad education—"but better educated than you and brighter than you to help you run the government." I said, "I think you're right. I welcome the help."... One thing I could promise them, was that, "You'll be in a political vacuum. I'll take all the political heat. You just tell me the direction to go in and I'll make sure there are five votes on the council for it." And it worked real well.^{iv}

We have a form of government in the city they call a weak mayor form of government. *It's not weak*. You're the chief executive plus you sit on the legislative body and you have a vote. You have both the carrot and the stick. If you keep four votes on the council and yourself, that's five votes. You have dictatorial powers. In the last six and a half years I was in office, I never lost a vote. ... When you have that and you have good people guiding you and making the plans for your professionals [meaning the city staff], you can get an awful lot of good things done.^v

Stuart Christhilf, a local obstetrician, was another important guide and advisor of Roger Moyer. It was Dr. Christhilf who introduced Moyer to St. Claire Wright. Moyer tells it this way:

I met St. Claire in 1961. I was making fun of the little old ladies in tennis shoes in a local nightspot. I was young and stupid; I guess you might say arrogant, also. A very renowned doctor here, Dr. Stuart Christhilf, came inside and said, "You're a young man with a decent education. You were raised here. You ought to be ashamed of yourself talking like that. *They're saving our city.*" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well, I'll take you to meet somebody who's involved in it." He took me to meet St. Claire Wright, and what a lesson.^{vi}

This raises a very important issue in terms of the political climate in Annapolis during the 1960s. In a kind of second suffrage, women were getting involved in high-stakes local politics, a domain that had been exclusively masculine. This provoked hostility from the city's established politicians and sometimes reprisals. To an extent Annapolis politics was like a *poker game*, a masculine sphere, where wives and families were excluded.

Another example of this came from Harvey Poe and his wife Josephine, who between them described how the Annapolis Residents' Association would meet in their home, or Harvey Poe met with others who were working towards progressive change in the city, wives were not only excluded but banished to a separate part of the house from where men sat in meeting.

What started happening in the 1960s was that the women began more and more to be involved in local politics. They stopped letting men do the talking and demanded access to what had been a scene of male dominance. St. Claire Wright and Pringle Symonds attended city council meetings and spoke on their own behalf, rather than putting up someone who could speak as their proxy. Ellen Moyer was a part of this change as well, and so was Peg Wallace, who passed away early this spring. Pringle Symonds, who some would call Mrs. Wright's lieutenant, though this doesn't really do her justice, was appointed to be the chair of the Historic District Commission when it was formed in 1969. She was the only woman on the 5-member commission, which also included city council member Arthur Ellington.

In 2003 I interviewed Jack Carr, who was the first planning director for Annapolis, and he said "The most powerful man in the city government at that time was a former mayor who was then an Alderman. His name was Arthur Ellington. Arthur Ellington really ran the city." Ellington was on the Annapolis city council from 1941-1969, and he was mayor from 1953-1961^{vii}. He was a *notorious* opponent to historic preservation. "...just plain hostile," is how Carr described him, "he didn't really like the idea of planning at all."^{viii} Ellington was appointed to the first Historic Preservation Commission when the city's preservation ordinance was passed in 1969, as a means to sabotage the enterprise from many peoples' point of view.

Here's how Roger Moyer characterized Ellington's position on the city council when Moyer was the new mayor:

[Arthur Ellington] put his arm around me at the city council. He said, "Boy, I'm going to do you a favor. I'm going to let you resign from being mayor and let you be head of the garbage crew. Then you'll have some power. Right now, you've got the responsibility and I've got the power. I'm running the city."

Moyer added that “Six months later [he] beat him on a key vote and he told [Moyer he had] learned faster than any young man he’d ever seen.”

Symonds, Mrs. Wrights’ close friend and her political twin as far as the city council was concerned, was appointed to chair the new Historic District Commission. During an interview in 2003, she said that she was probably put there because she would be nice, and do what she was told. She was *not* nice. She challenged Ellington directly and reined him in. Ellington, who had put his arm around Roger Moyer’s shoulder when he was a new mayor and told him “I run this town”! He was not allowed to overrun the HDC; he was essentially put to pasture there.

“Street Committee Tonight...”

Just as women were demanding access to the political process and making inroads there, Roger Moyer brought expertise into the areas of city government that were *most hostile* towards expertise and change.

For instance, Jesse Nalle, the city’s second city planner who was hired by Moyer in 1965, related the following story when I interviewed him at his home in Rhode Island.^{ix}

American Oil Company had a twenty-five-year lease [from the city of Annapolis] on that gasoline station with underground tanks. You probably never even saw it. It was a pain in the ass. They were lubricating cars right down there and filling gas up. People were pulling in and off. It was very, very busy and it was an eyesore. It was the only public restrooms and they were terrible.

The word got out that the lease was up to be renewed and everybody got wild. AMOCO said, “We’ll design you a colonial gas station.” They did, with a straight face. “We’ll give you very clean restrooms.” I supported, publicly, not renewing the lease. Historic Annapolis was bitterly opposed to renewing the lease.

They had what they called a “street committee” in those days. The city council sat, not as city council, but as the street committee. That permitted them to deny access to reporters and to the public. The street committee, during my entire period—ask people about it. Ask Jack Carr about the street committee, a very, very dangerous part of the city [government]... They had hugely a working vote. [It was] very hard to push through anything if the street committee didn’t want it.

MP: So this is one committee of the city council?

No, it was *all of them*. They didn't pick a couple people. All the city aldermen sat. They called themselves the street committee. Theoretically, it was to deal with streets. They called it a committee, not the city council, because if they were acting as the city council, a reporter could say, 'We gotta come.' [The preservationists would be present also – they attended every city council meeting.] These committee meetings, the city engineer and the treasurer and the city attorney came. I wasn't invited. I was suspect.

The city council's suspicions might have been due to Nalle's predecessor, Jack Carr, who was seen as working too closely with preservationists and activists, it might have come from Nalle's "expert" status (the city government was notoriously anti-expert in its dispositions, as Arthur Libby noted in his thesis on the politics of preservation in Annapolis). It might have come from Nalle's status as an outsider. Clearly, it was all of these things. Nalle's exclusion from the Street Committee meetings had a profound basis. He continues:

That evening, as I was heading for home, Moyer said, "Street committee tonight. See if you can stay in your office late." He went to street committee. He said, "You know, Nalle's turned out to be a pretty good guy. He's our city planner and he knows about these things. I think we ought to invite him in here for this one meeting to hear his views on this."

Sure enough, in my office, the phone rang and it was Pip. He said, "Come on over." I'm counting on Pip. I walked in there and some people smiled and some people looked angry. I was brief... I knew what they wanted. Essentially what I said was, "Gentlemen, tonight you will decide whether, for the rest of history, there's a gasoline station in the middle of our historic downtown. That decision is going to be made by you tonight. I think you should do the right thing." The motion to renew the lease failed by one vote.

...Moyer grinned from ear to ear. He clapped me on the back as we left and he said, "You earned your pay."

When Moyer was an alderman he also got Mrs. Wright, Pringle Symonds, and Jerry Lapidés, a local businessman who supported preservation, in to see the Street Committee, which was very rare. This was over the Market House. Lapidés felt prepared to speak to the Street Committee, to Mr. Ellington and Mayor Griscomb, but

he was simply shocked by what he encountered. He asked Mrs. Wright and Mrs. Symonds, “Do they treat you this way all the time?”^x

To conclude, these narratives of progressive change within the Annapolis city government imply, and sometimes explicitly detail the way City Hall worked before these changes came about. Many interviews included narratives of the local political tradition that progressive reformers overcame: not quite machine politics as is seen in Baltimore during the early twentieth century, but something very much like it. It was a patronage system, and oral narratives reveal exactly how power operated in the city before there was *any* sun shining on local government. They also describe how the weight of these traditions were lifted through the combined effort of civic action, and progressive action from within in local, county and state governments.

ⁱ Martin Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964; Ashley A. Foard and Hilbert Fefferman, “Federal Urban Renewal Legislation”, in *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy*, edited by J. Q. Wilson, pp. 71-127, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966; James Robert Sauners and Renae Nadine Shackelford, *Urban Renewal and the End of Black Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co.; David Schuyler, *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1940-1980*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press.

ⁱⁱ Interview with Roger Moyer, October 11, 2002, Matthew Palus, interviewer, On file, Historic Annapolis Foundation, 196 Prince George Street, Annapolis, Maryland.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moyer, *Ibid.*

^{iv} Moyer, *ibid.*

^v Moyer, *ibid.*

^{vi} Moyer, *ibid.*

^{vii} Jean B. Russo, “Annapolis City Elections”, January 1988. MS on file, Historic Annapolis Foundation, 196 Prince George Street, Annapolis, Maryland.

^{viii} Interview with Jack Ladd Carr III, January 15, 2003, Matthew Palus, Interviewer. On file, Historic Annapolis Foundation, 196 Prince George Street, Annapolis, Maryland.

^{ix} Interview with Jesse Nalle, April 1, 2003, Matthew Palus, Interviewer. On file, Historic Annapolis Foundation, 196 Prince George Street, Annapolis, Maryland.

^x Interview with Mary Pringle Symonds, April 30, 2003, On file, Historic Annapolis Foundation, 196 Prince George Street, Annapolis, Maryland.