

Chapter 7: Historic Preservation

7.0 Accomplishments since 2007

Since the adoption of the 2007 Comprehensive Plan Update, the County has saved over 111 resources through the development review process. The County has also studied the broadening of the concept of preservation to include historic landscapes. Educational brochures and lectures have been created, distributed, and presented to increase public awareness of the importance of historic preservation. A Residential Curatorship program has been implemented.

New Castle County continues to develop additional guidelines for the preservation and rehabilitation of historic resources. New Castle County utilizes a Historic Preservation Grant through the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to complete user manuals and to further document historical research. New Castle County continues to partner with SHPO and the Center for Historic Architecture and Design (CHAD) at the University of Delaware in developing a complete inventory of historic resources for preservation and documentation.

Over the past several years, the County has encouraged property owners with historic properties to seek a historic overlay rezoning. It has been successful in getting a number of land owners to do so.

7.1 Introduction

New Castle County's significance in the nation's history is well documented. Once a settlement of the Lenape Indians, New Castle County was settled by European immigrants beginning in the 1600s. The Town of New Castle was one of the nation's earliest settlements and the meeting place of the Colonial Assemblies. Many locations in New Castle County were stops on the "Underground Railroad," which was the path to freedom for many slaves. New Castle County is the home of the Ardens, utopian communities begun in 1900, and the first non-native American site listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural property. Also found here are structures connected with the mushroom industry, the exuberant "peach houses," scientific laboratories where discoveries were made that helped to shape the 20th and 21st centuries and the world-renowned Winterthur Museum. Maintaining these and other connections with the past helps to guide us into the future.

New Castle County Code Chapter 40, Article 15

"The preservation and protection of buildings, structures, sites, objects, districts, and landscape features of historic, architectural, cultural, archeological, educational, and aesthetic merit are critical to the character of the County. The preservation of these historic resources promotes the health, prosperity, and welfare of all citizens of the County and enhances the quality of life for all."

Buildings and landscapes are often those links to the past that document lives, events, styles and cultural evolution. New Castle County, through its obligation to plan for and oversee the use of property, considers measures to encourage preservation of these historic properties to be a significant responsibility. It is in the public's interest to protect and encourage the preservation of structures, objects, and sites that reflect shared heritage. Moreover, the preservation of structures, sites, and objects that have been part of the County's landscape for generations is essential to establishing a sustainable development pattern and maintaining livable communities. Historic and prehistoric resources are non-renewable; their use and reuse is recycling. Many are located in areas that are easily accessible to large numbers of the population and do not require extensive driving to be enjoyed. Finally, their contribution to a sense of place and a human scale is incalculable.

All development plans and demolition permits are reviewed by the New Castle County Land Use Department to determine whether any structures, sites, or objects on the property may be significant, as defined in the County Code. If a potentially significant resource may be affected by a plan or permit, or if an applicant wishes to make changes to a Historic Zoning Overlay District, the application is referred to the Historic Review Board, a panel of nine citizen volunteers. The Board determines whether resources are significant and, if so, works with applicants to encourage preservation of the affected resources while helping the applicant reach his or her development goal. In the case of changes to Historic Zoning Overlay Districts, changes are reviewed against the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties and the *New Castle County Historic and Cultural Resource Design Guidelines*.

The Historic Review Board may recommend to County Council properties to be protected by Historic Zoning Overlays. When exterior changes are proposed for historically zoned properties or for neighboring properties, these changes are reviewed by the Historic Review Board in light of the standards and guidelines mentioned above. During this review the Historic Review Board evaluates changes proposed for lands adjacent to historically significant properties.

Development pressure will continue to grow. This pressure has heightened the vulnerability of many historic resources resulting in the demolition of numerous structures over the last several years. New initiatives that take into account the County's need to accommodate new residents are needed to reverse or slow this trend. Preservation and progress need not be incompatible. Through adaptive reuse, properties can be put to profitable and efficient new uses, while preserving historic features and settings. The County, State, and Nation have recognized the value of cultural resources through such programs as the National Register of Historic Places, Historic Zoning Overlay Districts, and tax incentives. Additional incentives to promote the preservation and rehabilitation of existing structures, both residential and non-residential, can diminish the pressure to demolish currently unused structures and ease the demands on infrastructure that new construction entails.

Public education is key to the preservation of historic resources in New Castle County. Meetings of the Historic Review Board, which are conducted on a bimonthly basis, are open to the public. The hearings offer County residents the opportunity to learn about the history of resources and to offer comments; business meetings offer residents the chance to see the Board work through the decision-making process. The County publishes informational booklets such as “Historic Zoning Districts” to increase awareness of the historic resources present in the County and the benefits of historic preservation.

7.2 Policy & Recommendations

Goals:

- 1. Preserve the County’s significant historic and prehistoric resources for the benefit of current and future residents.**

Once historic and prehistoric resources are lost, either intentionally or through neglect, they are impossible to ever get back. It is important to preserve these resources in a sustainable manner so future generations can enjoy and learn from them without being burdened by impractical maintenance challenges and their associated costs.

- 2. Promote the value and significance of the County’s historic and heritage resources.**

Many resources are damaged or destroyed by persons who are not knowledgeable of their importance. In order for the residents, businesses, and property owners in the County to become aware of, and respect the need to preserve these resources, promotion of their importance is necessary.

Objectives:

- 1. Continue to work with property owners to preserve endangered historic properties.**

Technical and or financial assistance often makes the difference between a successful restoration or rehabilitation and one that never gets off the ground. The County can demonstrate leadership in preservation by promoting and encouraging these projects through such assistance to those who are interested and willing to carry them out.

- 2. Broaden the concept of historic resource preservation in the County Code to include landscapes and context.**

The practice of preserving a single structure, a small group of buildings, or a narrowly defined archaeological site is no longer common practice because it fails to fulfill one of the primary purposes of preservation, which is education. Many resources cannot be properly understood without their surrounding landscape or other context and the educational value of the site is consequently diminished. Therefore, the historic surroundings of resources should be

considered when they are reviewed by the Department of Land Use in the land development process.

3. Continue the promotion of educational programs for the public, business, and development communities regarding the history, prehistory, and architectural history of the County, and the process and benefits of historic preservation.

Just as government provides for the education of children in public schools, the County has the opportunity to maintain and improve quality of life for its residents by offering educational lectures, written materials, and activities to the public. Knowledge of the community's history, prehistory, and historic architecture, i.e. knowing about the place where one lives, is vital to one's sense of identity, sense of belonging, and sense of place. The value of historic preservation becomes clear when seen as an environmental, economic, and cultural issue. In turn, people experience increased pride in the places where they live and work and strengthen commitments to the community.

Strategies:

1. Develop an outreach program to educate the public regarding the preservation of historic resources in New Castle County.
2. Explore creating a grant or loan program to assist the owners of historically significant properties in maintaining the structural integrity and historic character of their structures.
3. Explore strengthening the development incentives for preserving and rehabilitating historic structures possibly by allowing greater density in new subdivisions in which a historic house is preserved on a sensitively sized parcel.
4. Explore ways to define and incorporate greater protections for historic landscapes and contexts.
5. Set the example of careful preservation for residents, property owners, and developers by working to develop uses for historic properties owned by the County and by partnering with vocational high schools and college preservation trades programs.
6. Educate the public regarding the adaptive reuse provisions of the County Code.
7. Continue to enhance the historic preservation review process for greater efficiency and effectiveness.
8. Explore potential incentives to encourage historic preservation.
9. Create additional legislation to protect against "demolition by neglect".
10. Inventory and survey abandoned/neglected properties with potential historic significance.

