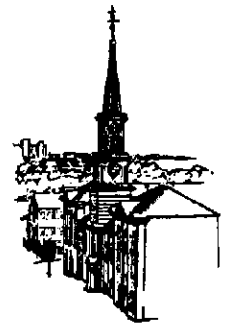


Historic Alexandria Quarterly



Summer 1998

Recollections of a Board of Architectural Review Member: Thomas Hulfish III Reflects

Thomas Hulfish III has been a member of the Board of Architectural Review (B.A.R.) for the Old and Historic Alexandria District since 1986 and has served as its chairman since 1989. His father, Thomas Hulfish, Jr., was a preservation-minded City Councilman in the 1940s. His mother, Marianne "Polly" Hulfish, was a well-known house restorer, founder of Old Alexandria Restoration, Inc. and a member of the Board of Architectural Review during the 1960s and 1970s.

Mr. Hulfish spoke of the changes in the Old and Historic Alexandria District and in the provisions of the historic district ordinance — from his tenure on the Board and since his childhood, when such issues were discussed over supper in the family's home at 200 Duke Street.

"It was controversial from the start"

The establishment of an Old Town historic district was truly a citizen-sponsored effort. People like Howard and May Joynt, Bud and Margaret Mourot, Martha Monfalcon, Carlyle Hooff, Josephine Lambert, Ward Brown and others were the real backbone of support for historic preservation here and ultimately were the most vocal in support of the historic district ordinance. In the 1940s, the National Park Service's criticism of the City's failure to adequately protect the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway focused citizen outrage over permissive commercial rezoning in adjacent historic residential areas.

Paul Delaney, representing the City's second ward on City Council, put the matter before the Council in 1946.



Thomas Hulfish III (right) with fellow BAR member Peter Smeallie, receiving a 1997 Preservation Award from the Preservation Alliance of Virginia for more than fifty years of outstanding service.

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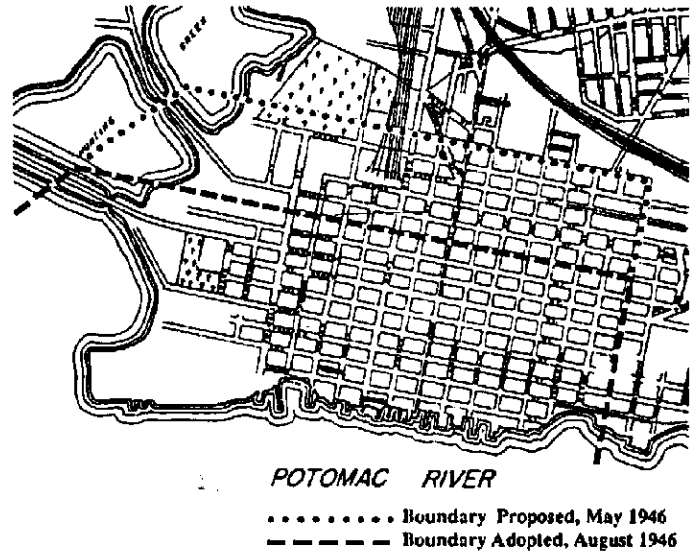
He had come back from Charleston having seen all that city had accomplished since the adoption of its pioneer 1931 "Old and Historic District" ordinance. As a result, Alexandria's proposed legislation was very closely modeled after Charleston's. The district boundaries proposed in May 1946—West Street east to the Potomac shoreline and Montgomery Street south to Hunting Creek—took in all of the historic city grid.

Delaney and Thomas Hulfish, Jr.—Mr. Hulfish's father and the councilman from the first ward—were the bill's primary supporters. "It was controversial from the start," says the younger Hulfish. On the first reading of the ordinance July 16, 1946, Council expressed unanimous support for a district. But the agreement was only in principle. Some Councilmen felt that the proposed boundaries were too extensive. On the second reading on July 23, Council voted in the affirmative six to two—still an apparent victory, but opposition was mounting, particularly from the Chamber of Commerce. On the required third and final reading August 13, the western boundary of the district was shifted five blocks east to Alfred Street, excluding about two hundred acres of Old Town. Even with this concession, the ordinance narrowly passed on a vote of four to three.

Within months of passage, the Chamber of Commerce and the Retail Merchants Association mounted a serious effort to repeal the new law, while others were charging that it was simply too broad. A coalition of citizens groups made a strong show of support for keeping the "Charleston Ordinance," an effort which won the day.

The Composition of the Board of Architectural Review

The new law established a Board of Architectural Review to evaluate and vote on the approval of demolition, new construction, and exterior alterations. As initially enacted, the Board was only authorized to review demolition permits for buildings which pre-dated 1846, that is, buildings that were at least one hundred years old when the law was enacted. The membership of the Board had been a bone of contention during the fight for adoption of the ordinance. As originally proposed, the Board would have consisted of five members—four citizen volunteers appointed by the City Council, plus the City Building Inspector. As adopted, the law called for seven members, including two architects, a licensed real estate broker, and a member of the Planning



Map of the original and proposed boundaries of the Old and Historic Alexandria District.

Commission. It was believed that the latter two would be knowledgeable about and more sympathetic to development. In 1951, the membership was amended to include one member of City Council. "This was very political from time to time," remembers Thomas Hulfish. A decade later, the Council seat was dropped in favor of having one elected citizen-member, and a third architect slot was added. This was the first time that a minimum one-year city residency was required of members. In 1967, the Board was expanded to nine seats. In a pro-preservation shift, one of the additional seats was to be held by a member elected from the Alexandria Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission. "It's remarkable how they fiddled around with the membership," says Hulfish. "They were never satisfied."

To say that Council was occasionally dissatisfied with the composition of the Board might be an understatement. In 1983, the Board approved the design of a modern-style office building at 112 South Alfred Street, next to the Morrison House Inn and across from the old Friendship Firehouse. The completed structure caused a public uproar.irate, Council dismissed the entire Board and reconstituted it with mostly new members. It was in 1983 then, that the Board took its current shape, with seven citizen-members, including two architects, each member appointed for a three-year term. It was also at this time that staff support for the Board was transferred to the Department of Planning and Zoning,

which hired an architect to provide full-time professional staff support to the Board.

Until 1984, B.A.R. decisions were enforced by the Code Enforcement Bureau. The chief building inspector acted as secretary to the Board, responsible for final sign-offs ("Certificates of Appropriateness") on B.A.R.-approved projects. This is the role that the Planning and Zoning Department's B.A.R. staff now play. For the first five years of the district, the building inspector was also a voting member of the Board. "We would never allow City staff to vote today!" says Hulfish.

The Board was very different in another respect. Today's members are considered to be objective, dedicated volunteers. In the early days, there seems to have been a somewhat different ethic regarding potential conflict of interest.

Take Don McNairy, who was the real brains behind the Routh Robbins real estate organization.... He was involved in commercial development here.... I think he felt that a position on the Board helped him get things through the City. Everybody on the Board in those days lived and worked here. Albert Smoot owned the lumber company. If you wanted to build something, you usually could get everything from him.... My mother was in business remodeling over 53 houses. Many members had specific reasons for being on the Board.

Years ago it was seen as preferable to have interested parties on the Board for balance and expertise, and particularly to represent the pro-development community. These considerations had clearly been motivations for creating seats for Planning Commission members and real estate brokers.

Today, although the Boards (a second historic district, Parker-Gray, was established in 1984 with its own Board) are composed of a group of dedicated, community-minded people, it's often much more difficult to recruit new members to fill vacancies. For one thing, they do not have the same self-interest that their early predecessors had in attending the twice-monthly meetings. There may be other reasons. "A lot of people are willing to voice an opinion and be

very open about their opinion on an issue, but they're not willing to do anything about it. They don't want to open themselves up to potential criticism." Hulfish admits that some former members passed a few sleepless nights over controversial cases.

Major changes in Board procedure and purview

The review application process and the conduct of the meetings have also changed markedly. Today, of course, the applicant completes an "Application for a Certificate of Appropriateness," supplemented by supporting graphic and textual materials which describe the proposal. The applicant must also notify neighboring property owners by mail. The application deadline is approximately a month before the public hearing, allowing City staff sufficient time to examine all of the sites and submission materials, to prepare a detailed report, and to circulate the materials to the Board members and other reviewing agencies. The project can be amended at the public hearing or deferred for further study for as long as is necessary to reach a resolution.

In contrast, forty years ago, the Board was required to meet within ten days of the receipt of an application. There was no requirement for the applicant to notify neighbors. Members received no application package, only a copy of the application itself, and they "didn't routinely visit the site" of the project. Remarkably, voting was conducted by secret ballot. If denied, the applicant could not return before the Board with the same proposal for a year, but could reappear with changes to the original submission within ninety days after a denial. In time, these procedures gradually changed and, on the whole, have become more democratic and flexible.

Undoubtedly, the most significant changes were those which defined the purview of the Board. From the beginning, the Board members' responsibility has been to review exterior architectural features subject to view from a public right-of-way or public alley ("public street, way or place"). The review of signs was not mentioned in the original ordinance, a mistake which was corrected in 1951. For years, the Board was also not allowed to consider height, mass or scale when taking decisions on construction projects! There was resistance to height limits from groups like the Chamber of Commerce, the Retail Merchants Association, and the Alexandria contractors.

The height issue came to a head in 1965, and the Lloyd House (220 North Washington Street) was the catalyst. Several years before,

Lloyd House was going to be destroyed; no one would save it. Robert New was sitting at National Airport—he was an industrialist from Denver—saw the *Alexandria Gazette* [article on the proposed demolition], cancels his flight, comes here, looks at the house, arranges to buy it, and it becomes his eastern headquarters... A few years later, he was going to put up a 15-story office building [on the site], and then everybody realized that there were no limits governing the height of buildings on Washington Street.

City staffers Tim Sweet and Ed Luckett recommended that Council consider a 77-foot height limit on Washington Street, using the newly-built office building at 300 North Washington Street as a benchmark. Developers were insisting on building to at least the height of 300 North Washington, which was a Don McNairy project. At first no Council member would even second a motion to set a limit, but the proposal passed at a subsequent meeting by a vote of three to two. The language forbidding B.A.R. review of issues of height, scale and mass was removed from the law. At the same time, however, the City Government was forging ahead with plans to raze and redevelop several economically-depressed blocks along King Street. The same 1965 "emergency ordinance" was actually meant to be pro-urban renewal, and it was quickly passed to expedite wholesale demolitions. New language allowed the Board to weigh the promotion of the "general welfare"—in terms of the city's perceived need for renewal—against the character or historical value of the old buildings. The argument that the benefits of redevelopment outweighed losses was central to the ultimate circumvention of the Board in the urban renewal approval process. As Mr. Hulfish remembers the planning of Holiday Inn (480 King Street) site,

the Board wasn't allowed to tinker with it, except for the little details on the outside. That was part of urban renewal. That was done by City Council and the Planning Commission. So evidently, they gave [the Board] the envelope; the only thing you

could do is tell them what to stick on it or not to stick on it.

As the final urban renewal block, (the Courthouse, 520 King Street), was being approved for redevelopment, City Council had other causes to revisit the issue of demolition. Since the passage of the original ordinance, B.A.R. approval of permits to demolish a structure in the historic district was only necessary if the subject property had been built before 1846. In 1975, however, the beautiful Hill House, located on Franklin Street between Washington and Columbus, was dismantled. "It was torn down virtually in 24 to 48 hours by a local real estate broker." It was only 89 years old at the time. This motivated another change in the law, namely that demolition permits were now to be required for anything over one hundred years old *at the time of the permit*. This would not have saved the Hill House, but it began to be useful for preserving neglected Victorian-era structures as well as Federal ones.

Another demolition crisis a few years later pointed out the continued deficiency of the ordinance's demolition provisions. The George A. Mushbach House (also known as the May House), at 418 North Washington Street, had been built in 1886. Modeled after Stanford White's Casino at Short Hills, New Jersey, its quirky Queen Anne/Free Classic Revival elements made the Mushbach house was a local favorite and a flamboyant standout amidst more

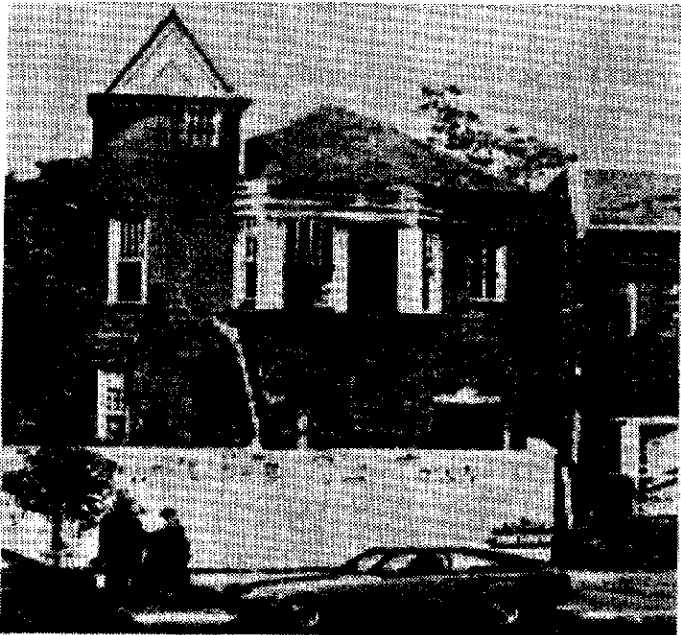


The 1798 Lloyd House at 220 North Washington Street and the 1962 office building at 300 North Washington Street. These two structures were most responsible for the setting of height limits in Old Town.

conservative homes. When the City permitted razing the residence in September 1982, the public outcry was tremendous. Nothing could be done. Another octogenarian, the Mushbach house was also not protected under the one-hundred-year rule and was demolished. This would soon change. With broad citizen support, Council amended the law in 1984 to require Board approval of the demolition of any structure in the historic district.

The ever-shifting boundary

A clear pattern emerges of constant adjustment of the historic district ordinance in reaction to events and in response to the demands of competing interest groups. This was never truer than with the fluctuating Old and Historic Alexandria District boundaries. There are presently more blocks within Old Town's historic districts than there were in 1946, but it has not been a straight path from there to here. Expansion of the Old and Historic district could better be described as two steps forward, one step back.



The Mushbach or May house at 418 North Washington was demolished to make room for outdoor picnic tables for the employees of the office building next door. Its destruction was heavily criticized (including by means of spray-painted protests on the plywood barrier shown in the photo) and led to a requirement for B.A.R. approval to demolish any structure in the historic districts.

Time and again, sections of Old Town were "gerrymandered" out of the Old and Historic District so that new construction there could avoid B.A.R. consideration of height and design. Yet, time and again, "mistakes" or excesses in just such projects caused the public to ask that these areas be returned to the district, and Council complied. The Porto Vecchio condominium on South Washington Street at Hunting Creek was one such case. The eclectic eight-story structure was constructed in 1982-1984 when the area south of the beltway was not part of the historic district. It was eventually included within the district's boundaries and "now," Hulfish says, "the Board has to approve the enclosure of all the balconies."

Other controversies

The preservation, land use, and aesthetic controversies "go way back," says Hulfish. "I can remember as a kid, the dinner table conversation—who was for something, who was against something... I know there were people in this town, in the 1960s, who didn't speak to each other because of their positions on an issue.... It's always emotionally charged."

There were plenty of opportunities to express these emotions over the years. In the 1950s, J.C. Penney leased a parcel at the south end of the Christ Church property from Carson Fifer and commenced construction of a department store on the lot (now the Ross store at 114 North Washington Street). "The parcel was said to have been originally part of the cemetery, that they built on a lot of people's bodies or they removed them. A number of people got upset and left Christ Church...at that time." In a turnabout, the church bought the lot and the former J.C. Penney store in 1997.

Preservationists sometimes had to make hard choices. Even with the best intentions, they were capable of threatening structures that were not otherwise threatened. The restoration of the universally esteemed Carlyle House had some negative side effects. The mid-eighteenth-century Georgian mansion had been hidden behind James Green's much larger Mansion House Hotel during the mid-nineteenth century. The Carlyle House is undeniably significant, but "the Mansion House had a rich Civil



Porto Vecchio at 1250 South Washington Street

War history. It's kind of like Montpelier [James Madison's home which was dramatically expanded and "Colonial Revivalized" by the DuPont family], what do you save?"

Controversy continued in the 1980s, when development capital was plentiful. The leading lights of Alexandria's land use law community appeared often before the Board and mastered the ins and outs of Old Town's development process. Others may not have been as successful. "I can remember some D.C. lawyers getting involved—which was really a farce. They would have no idea, really, what was going on. They would try to act like [the public hearing] was a courtroom. I remember an attorney coming in one evening with law books, saying, 'we have precedents here in this case,' and *that* was very interesting."

Influential players

It is difficult to identify just who have been the most important figures in local preservation. To answer the question, one would have to look back at least to the 1930s, when a real grassroots preservation movement began among the young "urban homesteaders" fixing up the dilapidated homes of Old Town... Hulfish remembers that "the locals called these people the 'Foreign Legion' because they came from outside of the City."

Certainly Paul Delaney, the Hulfishes, and the other supporters of the "Charleston Ordinance" cannot be

forgotten. With regard to helping shape legislation and representing the community interest in preservation in general, Hulfish says,

The Old Town Civic Association has been very involved. Prior to that, the Alexandria Association was somewhat influential. They were established in 1932, I believe. But you had people like the Joynts, the Mourots. But you consistently had the participation of the Old Town Civic Association. And the Historic Alexandria Foundation is sort of the newcomer in the last ten years, fifteen years, twenty years. I don't know of them having that much input before that.

Mayor Charles Beatley's tenure (1967 to 1976 and 1979 to 1985) saw the most change, based simply on the number of amendments—thirteen—to the historic district ordinance. It was also during Beatley's last years that the B.A.R. was dismissed by Council.

The present and the future

What are the Board's greatest challenges for the near future? "I think they're the same we all perceive. Protecting the streetscape. And, I think, we're really going to have to get a grip on the new building materials and systems, whatever that might mean."

"I think the B.A.R. review process is always emotionally charged, because I don't think we have a lot of people in the middle. We have a lot of people on either side. Everybody gets very emotional about their homes.... Especially when their property values are involved." It often comes down to a battle between property rights and property values. "I'm glad there's a City Council appeal process which is available to applicants or neighbors," on the very difficult cases. The Board need not be the final arbiter; redress is available. Mr. Hulfish remains philosophical. "The only thing I can bring to the Board that other people can't is that I grew up with it around the dinner table, and [so] I realize that there's a life after the B.A.R.... I view our vote as part of the process. Our stewardship is important, but we must remember we are not frozen in

time. We have a living, evolving community with deep respect for our heritage, not a static museum.”



Tim Dennée and Peter Smith, Staff of the Boards of Architectural Review, Department of Planning and Zoning, City of Alexandria, provided editorial assistance for this article.



The Current boundaries of the Old and Historic Alexandria District and the Parker-Gray District (established in 1984)

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The
Historic Alexandria Quarterly
is published by the Office of
Historic Alexandria.
(703) 838-4554
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