



In York, preservationists fear a new wave of destruction of historic buildings

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York, PA - When York's City Market was erected in 1878, Baltimore shipbuilders had to be brought into town to hoist its massive trusses into position.

Architects lauded the building's innovative design -- a mix of Victorian and Gothic created by noted York architect J.A. Dempwolf -- and it was featured in American Architect and Building News shortly before its opening.

The building's vaulted interior was said to resemble a cathedral, but the size was even grander. With two additions that would later be added, City Market measured 50,000 square-feet, dwarfing Central Market's 35,000.

Today, all that remains on its Duke and Princess street site is a parking lot.

York's City Market fell prey to a period in the 1960s that preservationists say was marked by large-scale destruction of the city's historic architecture. The neighboring York Collegiate Institute, another Dempwolf building and predecessor to York College, was demolished around the same time in 1962.

It was a powerful reality check for York residents, said Scott Butcher, president of the board of directors for Historic York and vice president of J.D. B. Engineering in Springettsbury Township. In the years that followed, preservationists began to mobilize, creating legally recognized nonprofits and boards to give voice and power to preservation efforts.

Decades have passed and the destruction has slowed. But now preservationists worry that other historic buildings in York could be at risk.

The city's Historical Architectural Review Board,

which advises York City Council on changes to historic properties, was formed in 1972. When another city treasure, the Billmeyer House, was on the chopping block later that decade, city residents fought back. They saved the building, founding the preservation nonprofit Historic York and creating case law that aided preservation nationwide in the process, Butcher said.


The protections offered by HARB and Historic York remain in place, and in the last 40 to 50 years people have learned more about historic architecture, Butcher said. But preservation efforts have another foe in 2011: the economy.

In a down economy, some owners struggle to maintain or repair historic buildings. From the potential demolition of Trinity United Methodist Church to the proposed closing of the city's two oldest fire stations, it's a critical period for York, Butcher said.

"Everybody agrees that we'd like to save these buildings, but sometimes the cost of doing so is just too much for the building owner to bear," he said.

York City Council President Genevieve Ray has been involved in York's historic preservation since the 1970s and served seven years in Cincinnati as the

city's first urban conservator. The objective has always been to save buildings, but HARB and council should be making it as simple as possible for the owner, she said.

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York's downtown post office on South George Street was commissioned by Congress in 1912 as a memorial to the Continental Congress being held in York. Post office officials recently announced that the building was for sale, raising concerns among the city's architecture preservationists. (Daily Record/Sunday News -- File)

For example, Ray said, in a poor housing market, investing in your current property could make better financial sense than attempting to sell and start over. Tax credits are available, and more education could encourage people to invest in their properties, Ray said.

But Trinity United Methodist Church was issued an order to demolish or repair from the city after structural issues were found in the 114-year-old church sanctuary. Church officials say the building's dwindling congregation cannot afford the necessary \$400,000 in repairs. Local preservationists are talking with church leadership but haven't found a solution.

"They need to find someone to step up and say 'Hey,'" Butcher said. "But it's not like there's a lot of grant money flowing for preservation right now."

Financial strain proved fatal for the City Market. In the early 1960s, suburban grocery stores were stealing the market's customer base, and market vendors had dwindled as a result. When an offer came from Gulf Oil Corporation to buy a portion of the market's lot, shareholders jumped, said historical researcher June Lloyd.

The York Gazette and Daily reported in 1962 that more than 400 people signed a petition to save the market, but almost none showed up to a meeting of the Zoning Board of Adjustment -- which actually denied a request to put a gas station on the site. During a subsequent court case challenging that decision, an arbitrator ruled that the market stood in "one of the least attractive downtown areas with

diminishing property values" and cleared the way for the gas station to be built.

By 1963, the building was reduced to rubble, Lloyd said.

At the time, the demolition was seen as progress, said Carol Woodbury, a then city resident who went on to be a founding member of Historic York and later president.

"That was a whole flurry of, 'Let's get rid of these dumb old buildings and make York beautiful again,'" Woodbury said. "They were old and outdated."

York's leaders were embracing a movement to promote York as colonial, even putting up colonial-style signage, she said. But in reality, a lot of the architecture in the city is Victorian era.

"An awful lot of things were seen as progress, that in hindsight we shouldn't have done," Woodbury said. "That happens in every age."

The demolition was a prime example of what can happen when officials lack imagination, said Richard Bono, a former member of HARB, who served 18 years on the board.

History is cyclical, and City Market is a great example. Fresh foods and markets are back in vogue, but market owners in the 1960s weren't looking into the future, Bono said.

"How far have we fallen?" he said. "If we hadn't taken them down and had been more patient, we would

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have had a local structure for local food."

Joan Burgasser, a city resident who has twice served on HARB including one stint in the 1970s, said the Duke Street corridor was never the same after the demolition. What was once a growing hub has made news most recently for the growth of halfway houses in the neighborhood and accusations of an illegal massage parlor operating across the street.

Given the recent proposal for the city Department of Fire/Rescue Services to leave its historic fire station on Duke and King streets, the city could be headed for another period of destruction, Burgasser said.

It really depends on the direction of the city administration and city council, she said. Council will make final approval or denial of HARB recommendations.

"Who knows what they might decide to do?" she said. "Who knows what they could get tied into?"

Craig Horowitz, a former HARB member who served 15 years on the board, cautioned that not every building can be saved. HARB is charged with assessing a building solely on its historical and architectural merits, but council must consider the financial side.

In a case like that of Trinity Church, that's not an easy decision, Horowitz said.

"As a preservationist, I would love to see them repair the roof," he said. "As a practical means, I don't know who has the money to do that."

Ray said she has worked with church leaders to facilitate a meeting with some members of HARB and Historic York. Nothing has been decided, but it's important that the group is communicating.

"The safety of people is paramount," Ray said. "But now that there's not a chance of 4 feet of snow on the roof, that may gain us a little bit of time."

HARB and council must agree to grant a demolition permit for Trinity before work could move forward, but just as a court decision cleared the path for City Market's demolition, a lawsuit could lead to a decision that overrules both bodies. Unlike the 1960s, however, the presence and expertise of

bodies like HARB and Historic York have created the potential for a much stronger courtroom argument for the preservation of many buildings, Horowitz said.

People have won on both sides of the argument, but the best candidates have presented the most convincing plans for a building to replace the one being demolished. That's part of what made City Market so difficult to lose, Horowitz said.

"There's always tradeoffs and you have to have some degree of compromise," he said. "If a city is going to be a living breathing place and not a museum like Williamsburg, things will change and things are going to happen. You just have to be sensitive to the surroundings."

Buildings in jeopardy?

Trinity United Methodist Church -- The East King Street church, built in 1897, was issued an order to demolish by the city after an engineer found structural problems with the roof trusses in the church sanctuary. The Rev. Mark Webb, superintendent for the York-area UMC congregations, announced earlier this month that the repairs, estimated to be \$400,000, would not be affordable, and a community center has been proposed on the property. Webb could not be reached for additional comment.

Rex/Laurel Fire Station -- City fire chief Steven Buffington has recommended closing the 133-year-old station in favor of building a new one at Duke

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and Princess streets (once the site of City Market). The city has proposed selling the building, but several million dollars in repairs are needed to restore damaged windows and other historical features at the Rex/Laurel. The station is currently one of the oldest continuously operating fire stations in the United States.

York Post Office -- Officials at the 99-year-old South George Street post office recently listed the building for sale. The post office was originally commissioned by Congress in 1912 as a memorial to the Continental Congress being held in York. A second \$1 million appropriation was made in 1940 to expand and complete the facility.

City officials considered the post office as a new city hall but found that renovating the interior of the neo-classical building with two story columns and marble façade would be too expensive.

Other 1960s destruction

The York Collegiate Institute was built in 1886 at College Avenue and Duke Street in York after the school's previous building was destroyed by fire in 1885. Architects J.A. and Reinhardt Dempwolf designed the new four-story building in a Romanesque/Gothic style with earth-toned stonework. A six-story tower stood over the center of the institute, and the front doors opened into a granite great hall.

Growing enrollment at the school, which would later become York College, prompted officials to relocate to the school's current campus on Country Club Road in Spring Garden Township. The former YCI building was sold and demolished in February of 1962.

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