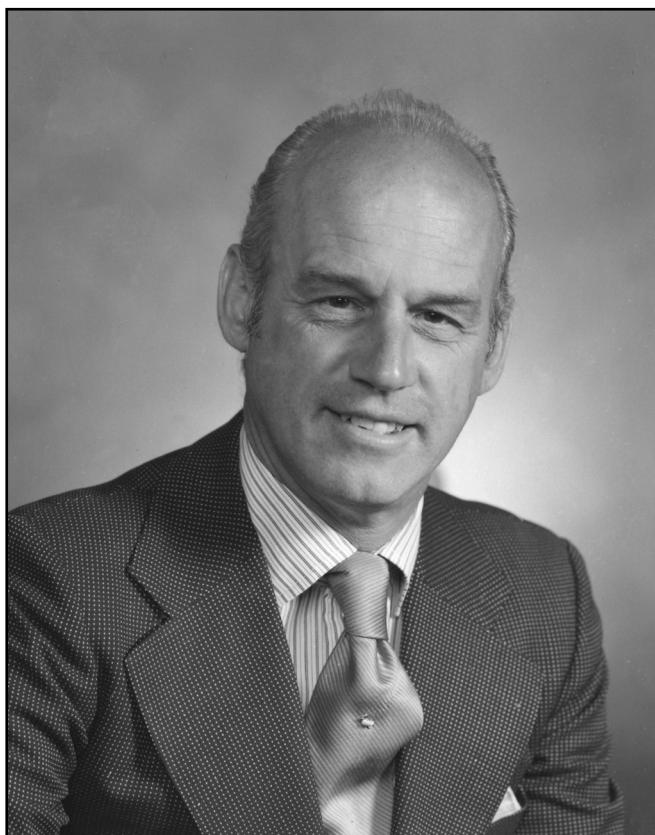

JAMES BIDDLE



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NO HISTORY of the historic preservation movement in the United States could be written without the significant presence of James Biddle. He emerged on the national scene as president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation when the Trust was about twenty years old and still essentially a Washington organization. With imagination and a zeal for the subject that were both power forces in him, Biddle pushed forward, turning the National Trust over twelve fruitful years into an institution with a voice respected throughout the country.

He belongs to that period when the preservation movement was new and emotional, reacting to a building boom that threatened America's architectural patrimony. Many important buildings, both architectural and historic sites, fell before the machines of what was termed "progress." Indeed, the National Trust was chartered by President Truman in the Oval Office, with the noise of bulldozers gutting the White House nearby reverberating loudly in the background. The Trust was meant to be a private right hand of the National Park Service, an organization that could take quick action when the government was bound by red tape. Its founding had been inspired by the near loss of Hampton Mansion near Baltimore, which was rescued by the Park Service.

Biddle had begun his professional career as a curator in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Wing, a 1925 creation of early-day preservationists and antiquarians who sought not to detour "progress" but to withdraw from the mainstream what they considered the best the past had left. Rising to director of the American Wing, Biddle gained what might be called a national voice in his involvements beyond the museum. He took a leading role in the rescue of Olana, the exotic nineteenth-century Hudson River estate of the painter Frederick Church. In agreeing to advise on the Kennedy renovation and refurnishing of the White House he urged that the work be given a scholarly context and museum organization, which in fact did happen, and in this he was joined not only by Mrs. Kennedy but also by H. F. du Pont, founder of the Winterthur Museum in Delaware, together with a representative group of the most active collectors and restorers in the United States.

To the National Trust "Jimmy" Biddle, as he was universally known, brought an enthusiasm nourished by success and national involvement. He was thirty-eight years old when he moved to Washington, and married at that time to Louisa Copeland Biddle, daughter of Lammot du Pont Copeland, president of the DuPont Company, and Mrs. Copeland, who was very much involved in historic preservation and interpretation, notably through Gunston Hall in Virginia. With easy access to the sort of people who offered the warmest support to the Trust, Biddle began his job. "Off and flying," as reported *Time* magazine, "Biddle injected

the national conscience into a battle over Hawaii's Diamond Head," when a developer drew very close to obtaining rezoning for an apartment complex on the volcano's seaward side. "There is a place for high-rise development," Biddle thundered, "but must it be on the slopes of your greatest monument?" He made his case, and popular opinion followed him.

A generation of preservationists looks back not only admiringly but affectionately on Biddle's years with the Trust. "Jimmy Biddle was supportive of innovation," wrote the architect Russell V. Keune. "If you had a good idea, he got behind it and did not interfere with its implementation. He was always generous and helpful." In support of a rising popular favor for historic preservation, federal funds began to appear. Biddle, meanwhile, aggressively sought private funds with great success. Membership rose to more than 150,000 during his twelve years as president, from about 20,000 when he took over. The press, never much interested in historic matters before, covered Trust crusades nationwide. Preservation entered the culture with a force it had not known before. Biddle presided over a flexible organization, and if eventually it became more institutionalized than suited one of his particular free style, he broadened the Trust's mission and gave it a panache that was one of its richest assets. Moreover, he not only brought under its protective wings historic properties such as Lyndhurst on the Hudson and eighteenth-century Cliveden in Philadelphia, but also created strong national programs in the form of seminars that educated the public and spread the message.

I had already left the staff of the National Trust when Jimmy Biddle began his tenure there. Remaining always nearby and involved, I recall those years of his as productive and dynamic. Jimmy left the Trust in 1980. As it was with all of us from that time, we stayed in touch. While he served in various capacities after leaving the Trust, he turned his real interest through the 1980s and 1990s to the perpetuation of his family home, Andalusia, which he rightly considered one of the finest architectural monuments of the early republic. Occupying the Gothic cottage on the grounds, he enhanced the house, raised money, and established the Andalusia Foundation, which his son, James, manages today.

He transferred his admirable energy and creativity to Andalusia. I recall his absorption in planning an artificial ruin that would serve to organize aesthetically the family burying ground, and his delight when he acquired a Stuart Washington to hang in one of the rooms. To recall him is to sense the excitement he felt for the past and what it left behind. Both an art historian who loved objects, and a historian to whom people of the past seemed very real, he absorbed in his field of

interest not only his immediate personal interests but all of the American past. It seems to me that Andalusia became for him a microcosm of the broader picture. For that reason he was able to give it all the fervor he had given to his public life.

Jimmy Biddle shines bright in an aspect of the American culture that before his appearance could barely have been called a field. Today its reach is extensive. With others at that crucial time he urged on historic preservation and put it before the nation, himself the premier symbol, the genteel activist.

Elected 1972

WILLIAM J. MURTAGH

Former Vice President

National Trust for Historic Preservation

and first Keeper

National Register of Historic Places