

Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

Countryside Conservation – Uniontown
Carroll County Times article for 29 July 1990
By Joe Getty

I was recently asked to give a presentation at a statewide conference entitled Conserving the Countryside. The seminar was sponsored by the Maryland Environmental Trust and included a number of nonprofit organizations and state agencies involved with planning, environmental conservation and historic preservation as cosponsors.

The focus of my panel was to investigate how rural villages can develop historic preservation programs to preserve their heritage. Villages face a number of problems in enacting techniques for their protection. In many cases, citizens are concerned not only about the protection of the architecture within the community, but also about the surrounding countryside that provides the historic setting of the village.

The history of preservation efforts in Uniontown provides an interesting case study because of the relative success that has been achieved by the citizens of the community over a period of twenty years. The salient point of Uniontown’s preservation program is that several interdisciplinary techniques have been used and have resulted in a comprehensive preservation effort.

It is common practice that someone working in frigid weather will use layers of clothing to protect their body from the cold. This serves as an appropriate analogy for rural village protection programs because the most effective communities use a layering of techniques from the historic preservation, environmental conservation and planning and zoning fields to create a comprehensive approach to the local citizens’ concerns.

Uniontown is in the Piedmont region of Maryland where the surrounding landscape consists of rolling topography containing a traditional family farm economy. Like the rest of Carroll County, it is facing greatly increasing development pressures from the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan corridor.

Founded in 1809, Uniontown consists of about 85 buildings most of which date from the 19th century. Like many central Maryland small towns, it has a linear plan. The Main Street was once part of an early turnpike road between Baltimore and Hagerstown.

In addition, Uniontown retains many traditional features typical of a 19th century community, such as a local post office in the general store, small specialty shops, a neighborhood school and two churches.

Moreover, those who know the village says that not only are the buildings and sense of place preserved, but also the community spirit. Even though it is a small village, there is a Community Association that is active in sponsoring beautification projects and community events.

The architecture is representative of the central Maryland vernacular styles with strong Pennsylvania German roots. Many of the buildings along the main street are two-story, gabled roof structures of log or brick construction.

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Uniontown's preservation activities began in 1971 when a local resident, Maud Haines, wanted to donate the mid-19th century Uniontown Academy as a community building and museum. A small group, Historic Uniontown, Inc. was formed, received a federal grant through the Maryland Historical Trust and restored the building. Thus we have the application of our first historic preservation technique: traditional building restoration through acquisition and bricks-and-mortar restoration by a private, nonprofit organization.

In 1974, one of the first historic preservation easements in the state was donated to the Maryland Historical Trust on the Uniontown residence known as the Weaver-Fox House. The house was built in 1874 by Dr. Jacob J. Weaver and the easement to protect the exterior and interior architectural features was donated by his granddaughter, Miss Grace Fox. This is the second example in our layering of techniques: a historic preservation easement donated by a private individual to a state agency.

In the early 1970s, the residents became concerned by a proposal by the State Highway Administration to cut down the street trees that run along the Main Street of the village. The residents approached the county planner, who suggested a historic district ordinance to protect the exterior of the houses as well as the landscape features along the Main Street.

Thus the primary impetus for creating a locally zoned historic district was an environmental concern with the preservation of the street trees. This landscape feature, however, has always contributed to the scenic ambience of the community. The Carroll County government amended its zoning ordinance to provide for historic districts and the architecture of the Uniontown has been protected through the activities of the Historic District Commission for almost 20 years. Technique number 4 is a local historic district ordinance established in the county zoning code to protect a non-incorporated village.

Historic Uniontown, Inc., continues to be involved in community education projects and in 1982 accepted the donation of a second property, the Old Uniontown Bank built in 1907. This contribution was made by the Taneytown Bank and Trust Company. The major event of the Historic Uniontown is a Christmas house tour that raises funds to maintain both museum properties. Community education projects and special events by a nonprofit organization are the 5th technique used in Uniontown.

Another community education project was completed in 1983 with the publication of a house-by-house historic survey prepared by Joe Getty. Uniontown, Maryland – A Walking Tour was the first comprehensive look at the community’s history and architecture. This product represents technique number 6: cultural resources surveys and their publication as a community education resource.

As a result of the survey, the village was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. Listing of a community on the National Register means that its cultural significance will be considered in the planning of federally funded or federally approved projects. This designation as an official historic district by listing on the National Register of Historic Places is technique number 7.

Like many historic preservation projects in small villages, much of the early focus was on protecting the architecture and streetscape. Protecting the broader environment of the village by conserving the countryside soon became an issue because of the need to preserve the scenic setting of the community.

Fortunately, the Carroll County government took an aggressive stance towards agricultural land preservation. In 1978, the county instituted a new zoning plan to initiate its efforts to preserve farmland and encourage the retention of farming as a viable part of the local economy. Agricultural zoning, which allows one new unit per 20 acres with a minimum lot size of one acre, was designated on 63% of the county or 188,000 acres. Technique number 8 is local zoning designations to support the agricultural land use and to reinforce the traditional views to and from the village of Uniontown.

In 1979, the Maryland State Agricultural Land Preservation Program was created and Carroll County has been the statewide leader in the purchase of development rights. Since 1980, 123 farms totaling 16,521 acres have been permanently preserved through the purchase of development rights, which is believed to be the largest program of its type in the nation. While this is an agricultural land preservation program, its use to purchase development rights on the farms around Uniontown has contributed to the long-term historic preservation objectives of the community.

The success of the Carroll County program has been featured in a national publication *Saving America’s Countryside*. The local government has initiated a county incentive program that provides 10% additional funds to the farmers who sell their development rights. An illustration published in *Saving America’s Countryside* illustrates the benefit to Uniontown and shows that much of the surrounding countryside is currently protected by voluntary agricultural districts or permanently protected by agricultural easements. One key to the future of Uniontown’s historic preservation efforts is securing easements on additional acreage that would protect the vistas to and from the village.

Also critical to the future are the efforts of private and public historic preservation initiatives covering a broader portion of the west-central part of the county. A private nonprofit organization, NEWCAP (New Windsor Community Action Project) is analyzing the environmental and cultural resources of an 8000 acre study area encompassing Uniontown and also the towns of New Windsor and Union Bridge. NEWCAP is embracing the philosophy of *Saving America’s Countryside* in taking an interdisciplinary approach to conservation activities within their region. The county planning office is also working to document the area’s resources and is performing a national model for water resources analysis and protection.

In Carroll County, our success stories have become models for communities throughout Maryland. They document that programs for conserving our countryside need to incorporate an interdisciplinary approach and use a variety of conservation techniques. We must first look behind us, and come to an understanding of our past, our heritage, and determine what we need to preserve. Then using common sense and community activism from the public and private sectors, we must put together the best combination of techniques from the historic preservation, environmental protection, agricultural land preservation, scenic roads and rivers legislation, rural planning and zoning, land protection devices such as easement programs and land trusts, and other allied fields to secure the preservation of the best of our heritage.