

# Coupeville, Wash. The Saga of a Historic District

BY LES STANWOOD  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT BROWN

On October 13, 1931, the first legally established historic district in the United States was created in Charleston, S.C. Since that time, historic districts have been established in more than 800 communities in the U.S., and most states now have passed legislation allowing such districts.

A historic district is a geographically definable area that contains a concentration of architecturally and historically significant buildings, objects or sites. There are two types of historic districts, federal and local. One involves a listing in the National Register of Historic Places; the other is a district created and controlled by a city or town.

National Register listing enables many owners of commercial and income-producing properties in the area to claim tax benefits for certified rehabilitation and also offers protection to buildings slated for demolition or alteration due to federally funded projects.

But listing in the Register does not put design controls on a district's development. Only local historic districts authorized by state statute and enacted by local ordinance can control changes to exterior architectural features that are visible from the street.

Districts are administered by elected or appointed bodies that exercise varying degrees of control over changes in the districts, including new construction and demolition. Regulations vary widely: Some districts impose general restrictions on demolition, major exterior repair and new construction; others issue detailed regulations governing such matters as the number of windowpanes per sash and the color

of exterior paint. Some commissions are legally empowered to block changes, while others can only issue advice and recommendations.

In recent years, historic districting has become a controversial and complex issue, the focus of philosophical arguments and legal disputes. Proponents not only credit districts with protecting areas of historic and architectural significance but also with helping to chart future growth, check encroaching blight, stimulate new investments in old neighborhoods.

Although constitutional questions have been settled in favor of districts, opponents contend that historic districts are elitist, unconstitutional and often arbitrarily administered by commissioners who are more concerned with rights of buildings than with rights of people. Commission members, opponents contend, are often not qualified to pass judgments on what are frequently complex, subjective decisions. With this issue, Historic Preservation begins a series of occasional articles about historic districts in the United States—Editor.

Coupeville, Wash., is a quiet, seaside village on Whidbey Island, 80 miles by car and ferry from Seattle. The tiny community (population 962) bills itself as "the place where Puget Sound settlement began." It was at Coupeville in 1792 that white men from English explorer George Vancouver's ship *Discovery* first made contact with the Skagit Indians.

On the surface, Coupeville is a placid, well-preserved 19th-century seaport—a town that grew stubbornly despite Indian troubles and the usual frontier privations and that prospered as a farming community and commercial port.

But beneath the historic and peaceful mantle, controversy has simmered. For the past eight years the community has been bickering over a historic district ordinance that once had been anticipated with enthusiasm. Those favoring the ordinance believe that the past can best be preserved with the assistance of a seven-member Historic Review Board, which oversees exterior renovation of all structures within the historic district that are visible from the street. Those opposed to the plan contend that it is just "another layer of



Historian Jimmie Jean Cook helped to create Coupeville's historic district, but she questions the latest ordinance—outgrowth of years of disagreement between merchants and preservationists. "I'm not sure it's a compromise at all," she says. "It has no teeth."

government that interferes with the rights of individual owners."

One thing is certain: In the past 15 years many communities around the nation have wrestled with the same problems that Coupeville encountered in writing its historic district ordinance.

It was in the early 1970s that the state Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation first approached Coupeville residents with the idea of designating much of the area as historic. "Coupeville was one of the largest, most legitimate historic resources in the region," says David Hansen, chief of the state office. "It was no accident that we went after it early in our program."

By 1972 much of central Whidbey, some 22 square miles, was placed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Central Whidbey Historic Preservation District, as it was called, contained 91 historic structures and sites, including the original donation land claims of the 1850s and 51 buildings from Coupeville's boom years, 1875-1890.

The state also urged the community to adopt a local ordinance permitting review of charges on a case-by-case basis. Back then, few people in Coupeville would have predicted that the creation of a historic district would give rise to such bitter fighting. In fact, at the time, local developers and preservationists joined together in an unaccustomed alliance, praising the plan as a way to revitalize the town. Local businesses even placed large signs in their store windows proclaiming their support.

In retrospect, it seems that the two groups had different interpretations of the word "revitalize." Local historian Jimmie Jean Cook, who assembled the research that led to the historic district designation, recalls the responses of the two groups. "The business people were excited," she says, "because they saw a chance to have a theme. The lesson of Leavenworth [a Washington town that found profit in a Bavarian

Village facade] was fresh in everyone's mind those days, and they hoped that a Victorian theme would do the same for Coupeville."

The preservationists saw revitalization differently. For decades scores of Victorian buildings had been slowly falling apart. A few had been summarily torn down. Many local residents saw the creation of a historic district and protective ordinances as the only way to protect the remaining buildings against the tide of "progress" that threatened the area.

Part of the threat came from the growing recognition of Whidbey Island as a popular retirement spot where land was readily available and inexpensive. Second homes and condominiums were being built all over the island; in fact, the population has doubled in the past 10 years. One group of developers even wanted to build a retirement community on 60 acres of land within Coupeville.

The City Council turned down their proposal, but it frightened the community. "People felt that that type of development just shouldn't happen here," recalls Town Planner Carol Delahanty.

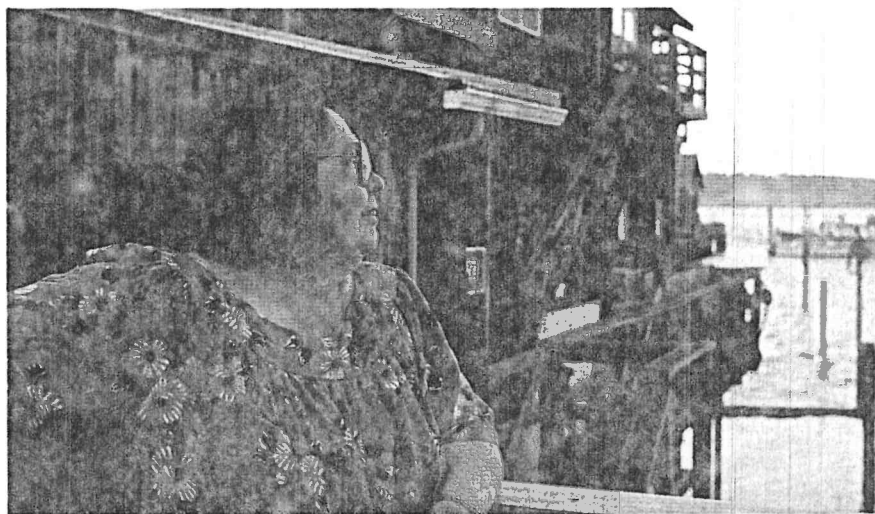
So Coupeville set off on the road to preservation with high hopes, firm resolve—and differing opinions about what should be done. In 1965, a three-block section along the waterfront had

been declared the primary historic zone, a designation that provided little protection. In 1972, however, the city adopted guidelines for new construction and fashioned a preliminary historic preservation ordinance to be administered by a Historic Preservation Advisory Commission, which consisted of members of the town Planning Commission.

The commission was to review "all applications for building permits affecting buildings and/or sites of significant historic value as identified upon the Official Map." It was to act in an advisory capacity and do so within 30 days.

Soon after the commission was formed, however, there were outcries that it was operating unfairly, that decisions were being made arbitrarily and that the ordinance was too vague. There was even a legal challenge from preservationists who claimed that the commission had failed to consider and conform to the ordinance in issuing a building permit for a new bookstore in the heart of the historic district. The problem, some thought, was that commission members had little or no background in design and preservation.

"It is extremely important that an ordinance require the commission's members to have some preservation experience," says Stephen Dennis, assistant general counsel for preserva-

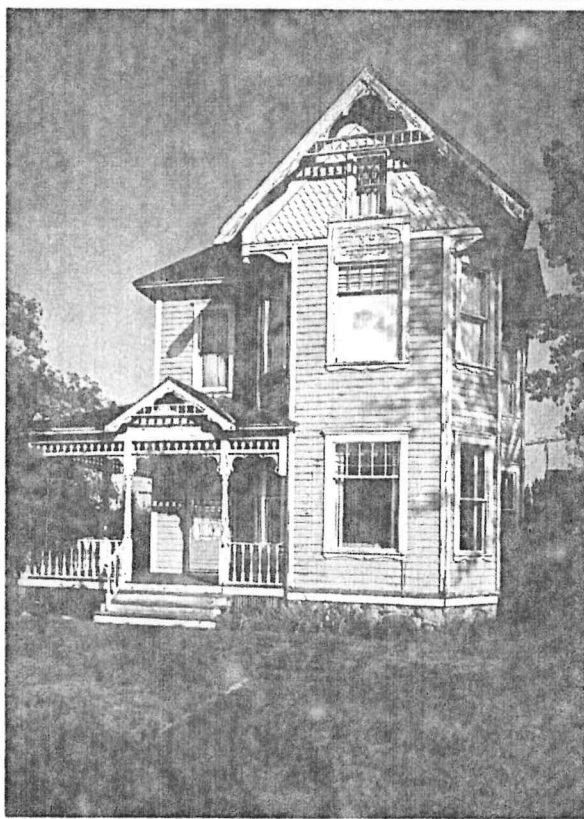
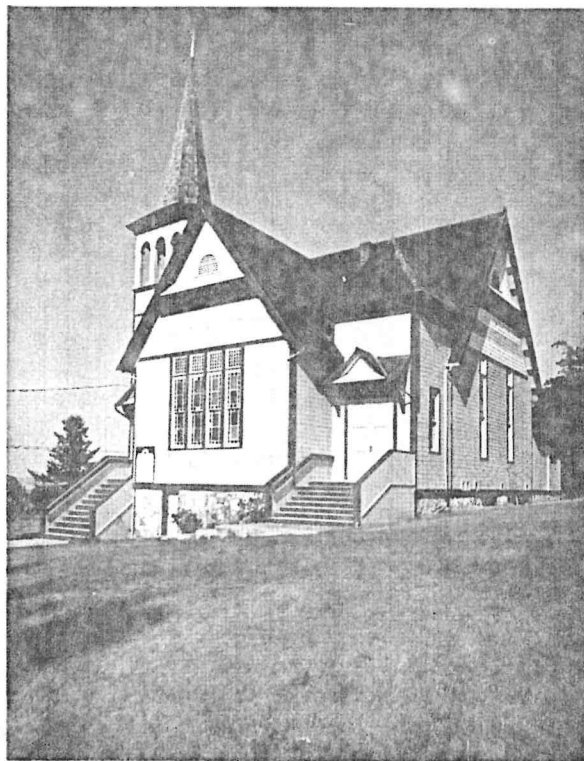


"I used to think that the historic district was a good idea," says waterfront merchant Betty McPhee. "Now I feel like we have given away our rights. We'd have been better off using the existing building codes and some common sense."



In 1886 county Treasurer Ernest E. Watson built his home to overlook Coupeville's bustling waterfront. Like many houses in the historic district, it is eclectic in style rather than purely Victorian. A rear extension, porches and several windows were later additions. Despite modifications, the original ship-lap siding, gabled dormer windows and mansard roof have been preserved.





Recent restoration of the 1889 Congregational Church (top) included repairing the fish-scale shingles and painting the facade in its original colors. The 1881 Francis LeSourd House (above) departs from conventional Victorian design by combining cross-lattice trim, an irregular shape and a gabled roof.

tion law at the National Trust. "This is not a game for amateurs. A commission needs to have guidelines, and its members need to be carefully and thoughtfully appointed. It helps if some members have a real knowledge of local architectural history."

In 1978, at the urging of preservationists, Coupeville amended the ordinance to provide for a seven-member Historic Review Board, to be appointed by the mayor. The board was to create "sound, equitable and comprehensive guidelines" for issuing building permits for demolition, moving, remodeling, additions, restorations, new structures and other changes. The board comprises an architect, an interior designer, an artist, two preservationists, a housewife and a dentist.

At first, the community was solidly behind the ordinance, the guidelines and the HRB. But as the meaning of the regulations became clear, they became a source of controversy and discord. Some residents plainly balked at, as one put it, "being dictated to by a bunch of architects and decorators." Instead of images of fine old Victorian houses with gingerbread trim, the historic district guidelines brought to mind the specter of red tape, paperwork and what some people described as the "burden of conforming to antiquarian design."

Residents were displeased that they had to seek permission for even the smallest changes or improvements to their homes. Edith and John Ryan were asked to return four times with plans for adding a room to the back of their 1950s ranch house, a non-historic structure located in the primary historic zone. "Everybody, when they buy a place, has a dream of what they want the place to look like," Mrs. Ryan told the City Council at one of a dozen public meetings spawned by the controversy. John Ryan told the same meeting: "I object to people telling me what I can do with my own place."

The Ryans found support for their views among some City Council members, including Betty McPhee, a water-

front merchant who had been among the district's most ardent supporters in its early years.

"I used to think that the historic district was a good idea," Mrs. McPhee says. "Now I feel like we have given away our rights. We'd have been better off using the existing building codes and some common sense." (Mrs. McPhee had been advised by the HRB that a proposed aluminum storage shed that she wanted to build near her store would not be in keeping with district design guidelines.)

What particularly irked Mrs. McPhee, the Ryans and many others were the numerous guidelines used to judge the remodeling and construction within the district. Eleven pages of suggestions, covering everything from external materials and paint color to window design and roof pitch confronted anyone who wanted to have work done within the historic zone. Opponents felt that the guidelines were far too stringent.

"That is one of the many ironies of our situation," says Carol Delahanty. "Before we set up the Historic Review Board, the community felt that decisions were being made too arbitrarily,

that we needed more specific guidelines. So we formulated precise, understandable and accessible guidelines, and now some residents complain that they're too strict."

Coupeville's design guidelines were drawn from the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Historic Preservation Projects*. These guidelines recommend, among other things, "against resurfacing of . . . buildings with material that was . . . unavailable when the building was constructed" and "against repainting with colors that cannot be documented through research . . . to be appropriate to the building and the neighborhood."

Application of the guidelines precipitated several bitter exchanges in the community. The local school district, for example, ran into problems because it consulted the HRB *after* ordering the wrong brick for its new gymnasium. The phone company was advised that it had chosen yellow trim that was not sufficiently muted for a historic town. Another flap. (The school was allowed to keep the less expensive, albeit "incorrect" brick. The phone company apologized and repainted with a lighter shade of yellow.)

Individuals were affected, too. A barber asked for permission to put up an illuminated barber pole. After much discussion—and some bad press for historic preservation—he was permitted to display a flat sign with a painting of a barber pole. "If there has been any preservation done here," Betty McPhee says, "it was no thanks to those regulations. We did this ourselves. Private people, private money. We didn't fix things up because we had to, we fixed things up because we wanted to. The historic ordinance just got in the way."

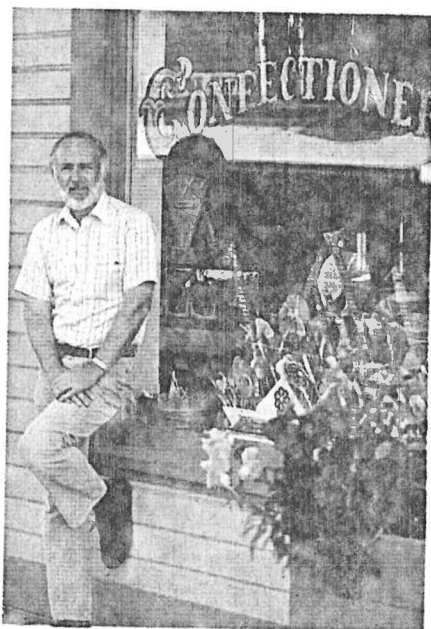
Some local businessmen now say that, far from encouraging economic progress, as they had hoped it would, the historic district drove business away. "They would rather go to a city where they don't have to be reviewed on everything they do," says former

City Council member Del Bennett. Preservationists maintain that no data support this contention.

Records do show that although there were many private restoration efforts in Coupeville, in six years only three people applied to the state for grants or loans for rehabilitation. One project was turned down, and two other projects were approved, but the owners lost interest and scrapped the plans before they received any money. "Like many rural areas, Coupeville is a bit suspicious of government grants and aids," says David Hansen. "Perhaps we should have pushed a little harder for some successful grants in Coupeville early on."

Carol Delahanty says she still wants to encourage residents to take advantage of tax abatements for the rehabilitation of historic buildings under the Tax Reform Act of 1976 and the new Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981.

Despite the historic district dilemma in Coupeville, preservation proponents have managed to hold their own. Demands for dissolution of the district and repeal of the ordinance have been matched by warnings that such actions could have dire consequences. As one proponent said: "If



"There was a lot of red tape, and I guess I got cold feet," says former Mayor Jack McPherson, recalling his successful application for state restoration funds, which he decided not to use. Unaided, McPherson restored the 1890 Glenwood Hotel, including its candy store.



"The review board doesn't want to cause anyone undue burden or surprise anyone," says Town Planner Carol Delahanty. "We encourage people to come in as soon as they draw up their plans."

we don't stop them, they'll put condominiums and Victorian hot-dog stands on every corner!"

Port Commissioner Ron Van Dyk put it somewhat more emphatically. "There's nothing to draw people here except that it's a pretty place," he warned at a recent hearing. Van Dyk, who lives in a 100-year-old Victorian house, admits that preservation is costly and time consuming. But he feels that its value for a small town like Coupeville cannot be overestimated, and that merchants and developers pushing for the repeal of the ordinance are "biting the history that feeds them."

As for charges that the laws are restrictive, planner Delahanty emphasizes that the historic preservation process in Coupeville is designed to be "positive rather than negative. Those half-dozen cases often cited as arguments against the system were the result of misunderstandings and gross exaggerations.

"We don't want to cause anyone undue burden. We don't want to surprise anyone. That's why we encourage people to come in as soon as they draw up their plans. The HRB tries to make positive suggestions without adversely affecting the surrounding area."

As a case in point she cites the Gillespie House, which was moved to a new lot that had a steep slope. "We sat down with the owner and came up with an authentic design that also conformed to the new lot. He got the advantages of a symposium on design for free, and he was pleased with the results."

Delahanty agrees that preservation can be bothersome. But she feels that Coupeville has already benefited from it. The annual arts and crafts festival, for example, has been drawing steadily larger crowds, attracted by the town's history and architecture.

Last summer, after years of public hearings and ordinance proposals, the historic preservation controversy came to a head. At a City Council meeting

considering a report on the town's preservation problems, Betty McPhee proposed that the city junk the ordinance, the guidelines and the HRB. "Let's clean the slate and start over," she said.

Instead, the council passed a "final" ordinance early in 1981 that it hopes will satisfy all members of the community.

The ordinance shrinks the "primary" historic zone and exempts all houses built after 1900 from many design requirements. It also changes the Historic Review Board to a less powerful Historic Advisory Committee and emphasizes that the body is supposed to make suggestions, not dictate policy.

Hollace Perry, co-owner of a small gift shop on the waterfront, feels that the plan is a good compromise. Perry was head of the city Planning Commission and has long been a supporter of historic preservation. But she feels that the early ordinance might have given rise to a few abuses. "I think we have found a mature approach to the problem," Perry says. "We still have strong enough regulations so that the town can be steered in the right direction."



Gift-shop owner Hollace Perry is pleased with Coupeville's revised historic district ordinance. "I think we have found a mature approach to the problem. We still have strong enough regulations so that the town can be steered in the right direction."

Historian Jimmie Jean Cook has less confidence in the new plan. "I'm not sure it's a compromise at all," she says. "It has no teeth."

Delahanty is philosophical. "Coupeville is a conservative city, and many residents believe that zoning is not a legitimate function of government. A lot of misinformation was circulated by a few loud and influential people. Perhaps the review process should have been a more open forum—after all, there is nothing wrong with arguing as long as it isn't one-sided."

Dave Hansen agrees, adding that "another possible reason for the ordinance's failure was that Coupeville was the first town in Washington to enact a historic district ordinance. Since that time, we have learned a lot, especially how important it is for the community to understand the ordinance's purpose and then to back it 100 percent.

Does Coupeville's experience with historic districts mean that they are in trouble, that a trend is developing to weaken design controls in districts across the country? Hardly, says Frank Gilbert, assistant general counsel at the National Trust. "There will always be some opposition to historic districting at the local level, particularly while the concept is still relatively new.

"But generally speaking, historic zoning is working. Since 1965 we've seen a tremendous increase in the number of preservation commissions in cities and towns throughout the United States. But there is more to historic preservation than just passing a law; the real test is in the day-to-day administration of that law. Those commissions that are most successful realize that their success depends on the thoughtful and careful administration of their ordinances."

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