

# A Historic Compact Betrayed

Does the Reagan Administration consider the American heritage expendable? Its proposed reduction in the Historic Preservation Fund, from \$35 million to \$5 million, would not cut fat. It would cut out the heart of the national preservation program — and sever its lifeline by giving the token \$5 million to the National Trust for Historic Preservation rather than to state preservation offices.

The National Trust is a Congressionally chartered, nonprofit private group. But this is one case where turning to the private sector would not get the job done. The trust could not assume the states' present job of protecting important old buildings and sites from demolition. There are many more such sites than the likes of Mount Vernon — fine old local courthouses, train stations, streets and neighborhoods.

For 20 years state offices have processed applications for a National Register of Historic Sites and Buildings, and administered the Historic Preservation Fund to help save and profitably recycle worthy properties. These efforts have encouraged respect for older architectural resources and let them play a part in revitalization. About three-quarters of all construc-

tion in the United States this year will contain some element of preservation and conversion. That progress is now jeopardized for nickels and dimes.

And funding is not the only obstacle to preservation. Organizational troubles began in the Carter Administration, with the abolition of the National Preservation Advisory Council and the later merger of offices that dealt with natural conservation, landmark preservation and the National Register in one awkward agency in the Interior Department. The Reagan Administration has now abolished even that agency. Some of its functions are to be reassigned, but the National Register is meanwhile in limbo. If the state offices are also reduced, a national attempt to preserve worthy structures will soon be dismantled.

Saving money cannot be the explanation for such cultural callousness. Whatever the motive, however, the price is plain. A compact among generations is being violated. There is no law of supply and demand for real estate and parking lots that justifies bulldozing the national patrimony. Once gone, it is lost. State volunteers and local cake sales cannot replace such an effort. Surely a modest Federal role is still possible.