

Architecture

'You Have a Friend...' Maybe

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THIS is a tale of three banks, some Intrepid Ladies, and some strange bedfellows. In Exeter, N.H., there is the Rockingham National Bank. There is also Front Street, a row of serene clapboard structures in the classic New England urban image, a genre increasingly recognized as a special treasure of the American scene.

The Rockingham National Bank bought the pre-1818, Federal style Dudley House on Front Street—the house on the far right of the row in the picture on this page. It announced plans to replace the historic house with a parking lot and a drive-in banking facility. The Exeter Banking Company had already bought and destroyed the County Building across the street.

In the meantime, the building on the left of the photo, the Sleeper House, had been declared "beyond repair" by city officials and slated to be torn down for, naturally, a gas station. The destruction of American towns of beauty or character follows a predictable pattern.

But this story has a happy ending—something we promised you last week. The Sleeper House, found structurally sound by an architectural consultant, was acquired by the Exeter Historical Society for conversion to apartments. The Dudley House, after a long and loud battle between Exeter citizens and the bank, will stay.

Exeter has saved more than a couple of old houses. What was threatened was a rare, unified street environment, a "fit ensemble," produced by art, craft, history and usage in the special terms of a particular time and place. It cannot be moved, reproduced, or replaced. The Dudley House was "the nucleus of the last architecturally significant part of Exeter," according to one protester.

The bank offered the Dudley House to anyone who would pay \$1 and cart it away. When no one came forward, the bank prepared to move the building itself. But moving the house was no answer to the proposed mutilation of the historic street. And so the town fought the bank, with a sophistication about the issues that

made its opponents look like clods, using every weapon that we listed in our little preservation blue book last week, plus a few of its own invention.

The preservationists submitted the house to the New Hampshire Review Board for Historic Preservation, which unanimously approved its nomination to the National Register. The Board also stated that it was "anxious to encourage on-site preservation."

An impressive support group was formed, led by historian Henry Bragdon and Phillips Exeter Instructor Robert H. Bates. Demonstrations were staged, with more than a hundred people picketing at a time, in snow and freezing cold. Local and Boston papers covered the issue and New York picked it up.

The group made offers to the bank of feasibility studies or purchase. Signatures were gathered and protest ads were run. Letters to the editor flooded the papers. The grace, knowledgeability and earnestness of the literary protest level equalled that of The Times of London. The Exeter Historic Commission was excoriated for inaction; the values of bankers and editors were flayed. "If progress means hot-topping one more residential parcel of land and removing a handsome and historic house from the heart of town, I am against that progress," thundered one correspondent, expressing wide community sentiment.

The bank bought a lot next to Christ Episcopal Church and began to dismantle the house for moving. The

church sought a court injunction to stop the move on the technicality of a height restriction. Shortly after, the bank capitulated. It announced that the Dudley House would remain. Preservationists were lavish with praise for the public-spirited change of heart.

But no one knows, yet, the bank's plans for its new facility, or what the Exeter Banking Company will build across the street. "When the snow melts," says an Intrepid Lady who spearheaded the protest and wishes to be nameless, "the bulldozers will begin again and the town will discover how much of its center will be given over to asphalt paving and drive-in, drive-out banking. I am afraid we all just took Exeter's beauty for granted too long." The snow is melting.

In Doylestown, Pa., there is the Girard Bank. This bank story has a faster happy ending. In 1969 the Girard Bank purchased the "Fountain House," a Bucks County landmark with its origins in the 18th century. The bank has restored the building. Last month, it opened its "Fountain House" branch, a fine example of adaptive use. The Rockingham Bank might look at the Girard job before settling its plans.

The third bank is the First Trust and Deposit Company of Syracuse, N. Y., and this episode does not have a happy ending. The bank has purchased, closed, and is about to demolish the 1892 Yates Hotel.

The Yates had turn-of-the-century substance, three good

restaurants and some intense allegiance from downtown businessmen and politicians, and anyone who liked tradition and esprit. But it also had downtown parking and room rental problems. And although it was useful and far from moribund, the bank can, and will, put up impersonal and highly profitable commercial construction in its place.

Syracuse's great consistency in the past two decades has been its will to self-destruction. Anything of real character has been sacrificed to tinplate and dubious economic gods. But, unlike Exeter, Syracuse doesn't fight. It just goes to the wake. For the Yates, it was a closing party.

"What can I say," reports a lone Intrepid Gentleman, "that won't sound sentimental? Dinner with my wife the weekend before we drove into Rochester for our wedding. The friends from New Haven who stayed at the Yates. We met them for breakfast; the Yates always featured Bed and Breakfast and it wasn't a skimpy breakfast. My parents coming in for a dinner there. An evening in The Cellar, beer and kielbasi and kraut sandwiches. Attending the installation of a new Democratic County Chairman. A solid, cherry-red place with fine carved work in the lobby." Community, in every sense.

What instead? "A couple of low-slung motor inn places."

So much for banks. Back to Intrepid Ladies. Mrs. Marcelle Hamm, an I. L. from Rhode Island, invented a few twists of her own in an in-

genious and successful battle for the Westerly Post Office.

Due largely to the efforts of another Intrepid Lady, the town of Cape May, N.J., woke up one morning last December to find itself, in toto, on the National Register. The Mayor nearly died. The City Council swooned. Real estate men had fits. They all read it in the paper. Miss Carolyn Pitts, a long-time battler for Cape May preservation, had applied for the protective designation, with another summer resident, without the knowledge of city officials. The virtually unique Victorian seaside town was promptly and properly added to the nation's Historic Sites.

"I am sorry it had to be that way," said Miss Pitts politely, in the Trenton Evening Times, explaining that she had despaired of ever getting anything on the Register at all. The city is now bargaining for revised boundaries and the preservationists are negotiating from strength. Excelsior.

Last item: strange and wonderful bedfellows. Remember Burger King, featured here as the villain in the demolition of a historic house in Madison, Wis., for a hamburger stand? Burger King now is (are?) ardent preservationists. The hamburger chain has made a substantial contribution to the restoration of the Gates of Heaven synagogue in Madison—also mentioned in this column. It has even appointed an architect in charge of environmental and ecological considerations in siting and designing hamburger stands. Excelsior, with mustard!



Federal houses of the early 19th century, Front Street, Exeter, New Hampshire
"This—or drive-in banking and blackout?"

Ben's Photo Shop