

Preservation Is Never Done

From National Pickle Week to National Hog Calling Week, special weeks of all persuasions have their calculated value or appeal — elsewhere. But one such week that we seriously endorse and gladly publicize is National Historic Preservation Week, which ends today. The occasion is worth noting because historic preservation in 1980 has reached a kind of watershed, a point where a hard-won and spectacular success is being threatened by austerity and complacency.

It's just about 20 years since those little ladies in tennis shoes raised the national historic consciousness by throwing themselves in the paths of bulldozers and so helped architects and planners realize that this country was treating its artifacts from the past as if they were all equally disposable. The definitive consciousness-raiser, in every town and city, proved to be the discovery that the sacrifice to "progress" of some handsome or eccentric old structure was really a loss of a sense of identity and place. The discovery was usually followed by the founding of a group to preserve the local heritage.

Federal law, from the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 to the Tax Reform Act of 1976, then encouraged conservation of the nation's tectonic environment. Through the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the importance of this heritage has been stressed. The Department of Interior's National Regis-

ter of Historic Places, coordinated through state preservation officers, has become an invaluable inventory and is backed by the superb records of the Historic American Building and Engineering Surveys.

Handsome old buildings, revitalized historic districts and recycled structures now serve everything from housing to commerce. They also provide profitable spinoffs that range from the retention of unique architecture to instruction in the favorable economics of rehabilitation. Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace has become the much-admired model.

It is tempting to conclude that the preservation battle has been won, but no such struggle is ever over. A questionable reorganization of the Federal effort has ignored the timeless truth that when something works, it is best to leave it alone. The White House has called for a drastic 55 percent reduction in the Interior Department's Preservation Fund as well as a freeze on this year's disbursements. That could cripple a program that does much to help revitalize older cities.

Historic Preservation is more than saving old buildings. It is the mark of a country come of age. Until the arguments for quality, beauty and cultural heritage are understood as well as the economic and energy advantages of preservation, we will underestimate the full value received. To undercut the preservation movement now would be a serious mistake.