

Architecture

Barbarism Notes From All Over

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE following are not cool thoughts for hot weather, but there is no season on man's inhumanity to his environment.

Most of these notes are from an excellent publication called Preservation News put out monthly for its members by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 748 Jackson Place, N. W., Washington, D. C. I am beginning to think that if this brisk and intelligent paper were compulsory reading for administrators, editors, and that amorphous group called community leaders everywhere, there might be a sudden blossoming of civilized thought and action in the nation. Scrap the culture centers, gentlemen, and see what the country's culture is really about, and what is being done to it.

Item one, somewhat abridged for brevity, is as it appears in the current Preservation News.

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"The Madison County (Ohio) Historical Society has filed a suit seeking \$250,000 in damages against nine persons accused of illegally razing a historic church slated for restoration. The Historical Society had recently purchased the property. The 108-year-old Jonathan Alder Universalist Church in London, Ohio, was bulldozed to rubble May 5 by a wrecking firm under orders of owners of adjacent property.

"It is claimed in the suit that the owners of the adjacent property, Mr. and Mrs. Alex S. Dombey, contracted for demolition of the church without informing the Society. The Dombeyes have claimed some interest in the Society's property. The debris was taken to the Dombeyes' property as fill."

Ready for item number two? We hope you haven't lost your cool. This happened last year in Santa Fe, but bears repeating, from Preservation News, for the record.

"A sudden Sunday afternoon urban renewal demoli-

tion ended extensive efforts of the Old Santa Fe Association to preserve the Curry House in the Barrio de Anasco, Santa Fe, New Mexico. The bulldozer's irreparable action destroyed in 45 minutes a building that had been nominated for the National Register of historic sites."

It seems that the house was part of an urban renewal project and had been the cause of dispute between historians and the renewal authorities since 1966. Under the National Historic Preservation Act of that year, places of state and local significance became eligible for national registration as landmarks along with nationally important sites.

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Through one of those classic bureaucratic mixups, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (in charge of urban renewal) informed Santa Fe that the Department of Interior (in charge of the National Register) considered the part of the western barrio that contained the house unworthy of designation. Immediately following, on a Friday, Interior notified HUD by phone and Santa Fe by mail that this was not so, and that the area was to be nominated for registration. The Old Santa Fe Association sought and got its clarification by phone on that Friday.

On Saturday, the Santa Fe Urban Renewal Agency moved out the tenants of the Curry House. On Sunday, "The bulldozer obliterated the house and its history into unsalvageable rubble." On Monday, the letter arrived stating that the house was included in the nominated section for the National Register.

No demolition permit had been obtained by the agency. The danger of a planned picketing protest was cited as justification, a danger that apparently became terribly clear very suddenly on that particular Saturday.

But then, weekends are a favorite time for historic demolition. It is worth the overtime rates. The razing of New



Associated Press

End of a courthouse at Williamsport, Pa.—the real cultural explosion

York's Brokaw house was started on a Saturday and enough damage had been done by Monday to make preservation an academic question.

In Mechanicville, New York, urban renewal decreed the demolition of a fine, but abused, Greek Revival cobblestone house that was about the only historical and architectural ornament in the area. The New York State Council on the Arts, the Hudson River Valley Commission and the National Trust argued for preservation. The renewal authorities became increasingly impatient at each postponement. A church next to the landmark had been promised the site as a parking lot.

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Finally, an agreement was reached with the purchase of the building by the Mechanicville Historical Society. Negotiations were under way to have the church keep the building *in situ*, or, failing that, to get Federal funds that are available for moving a historic structure.

Evidently urban renewal agencies everywhere reach the point of no return on Saturdays. On a Saturday, and we quote from an article by Professor Bernd Foerster in the Troy Times-Union, "The urban renewal director dispatched his letter to the president of the Mechanicville Historical Society. It contained the notification that the house would be torn

down the following Monday morning. Because of the weekend, it was impossible to contact officials in New York or Washington. Demolition started early on Monday."

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We don't know what day of the week the demolition of the Lycoming County Courthouse in Williamsport, Pa., shown on this page, took place. But it hardly matters when or even where, since you can almost hear these Victorian monuments tumbling regularly across the country. It is axiomatic with local authorities that they must go. The process is called progress, with a straight face, even though the usual cheesily commercial and cheerlessly second-rate replacements are depressingly conclusive evidence of the lowering of the country's cultural line.

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For the kind of progress we are making in these matters we offer again the testimony of the current Preservation News. "The Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation has received a \$45,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Highways, in cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Roads, to record historically important buildings lying in the path of a proposed highway," it reports.

"It is extremely gratifying," said Foundation President Charles C. Arensberg, "to be able to work in cooperation

with the Pennsylvania Department of Highways instead of being on opposite sides."

Well, cooperation is how you see it. Let us assume generously that this is a road located with maximum sensitivity, even though "it became apparent that many old buildings were destined to be torn down for the highway." A few flags at half mast for macadam massacre might be more honestly appropriate than this gentlemen's agreement to file history and environment in the archives and then sweep the rubble under the rug.

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But we have our preservation tokens. In Washington, the 1856 Renwick Gallery (the first Corcoran Gallery and later the U. S. Court of Claims) is nearing the end of its \$1,870,000 restoration. It has been done with painstaking care, to the casting of intricate ornament in molds made from the originals.

According to Preservation News, "the fidelity of the work has attracted not only experts and tourists, but birds as well—they roost in the eaves and stain the restored ornamentation." There are no funds for bird-proofing and no amount of importuning the Federal Government can get them. How about a grant to record the deterioration of the Renwick Gallery? Saturday and Sunday are just like any other day to the birds.