

# ***Program to Save Historic Sites Urged in Report to White House***

**By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE**

The problem of the nation's disappearing heritage reached the White House yesterday with a report to President Johnson that proposed the first national plan for preserving historic sites.

The report contained strong recommendations for comprehensive Government action, including legislation and financial aid to retain and rehabilitate historic buildings and districts. Some of the recommendations are already being framed as bills to be introduced in Congress.

In a parallel move that reflects the rising crisis in the field of preservation, similar legislation is being prepared for the New York Legislature in Albany.

The national report was made under the auspices of the United States Conference of Mayors with a grant from the Ford Foundation. Members of the report committee include representatives of Federal, state and city governments and leading preservation groups. Writers of the ambitious and elaborately illustrated document, which starts with a requiem for the past and ends with specific proposals for the future, range from Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson, who contributed the introduction, to the historian Walter Muir Whitehill, head of the the Boston Atheneum, one of the most respected repositories of the nation's past. It also in-

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# Program of Legislation and Financial Aid to Save Historic Sites Is Urged in Report to White House

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cludes texts by two city planners, Carl Feiss and Christopher Tunnard.

Simultaneously with the release of the report, Senator Edmund S. Muskie, Democrat of Maine, and Representative William B. Widnall, Republican of New Jersey, two of the committee members, announced that they would introduce legislation based on its recommendations.

In New York, similar and even stronger conclusions were reached recently at a conference sponsored by the New York State Council on the Arts that dealt with legislative proposals on the same subject. State Senator Whitney North Seymour Jr. and Assemblyman S. William Green, both Manhattan Republicans, are working on bills based on conference proposals.

Among the most significant points of their bills will be providing state aid to local governments for renovating and rehabilitating accredited, publicly owned landmark structures. They will also propose creating a temporary commission to study the effects of real estate taxation on land use planning and preservation, as well as on the quality of new building.

## 'Wave of Interest' Found

The sudden surge of official activity. Federal and state, aimed at legal protection and financial assistance for the country's monuments and historic areas, is the culmination of a growing national concern with architectural and natural beauty and the physical environment. In the words of the national report, "What has been a groundswell has become a great wave of interest and support."

Success in turning that interest into tangible results will be measured by the amount and kind of legislation passed and the money appropriated to make preservation programs possible. Most programs are now completely reliant on private philanthropy or municipalities, which are particularly hard-pressed for money.

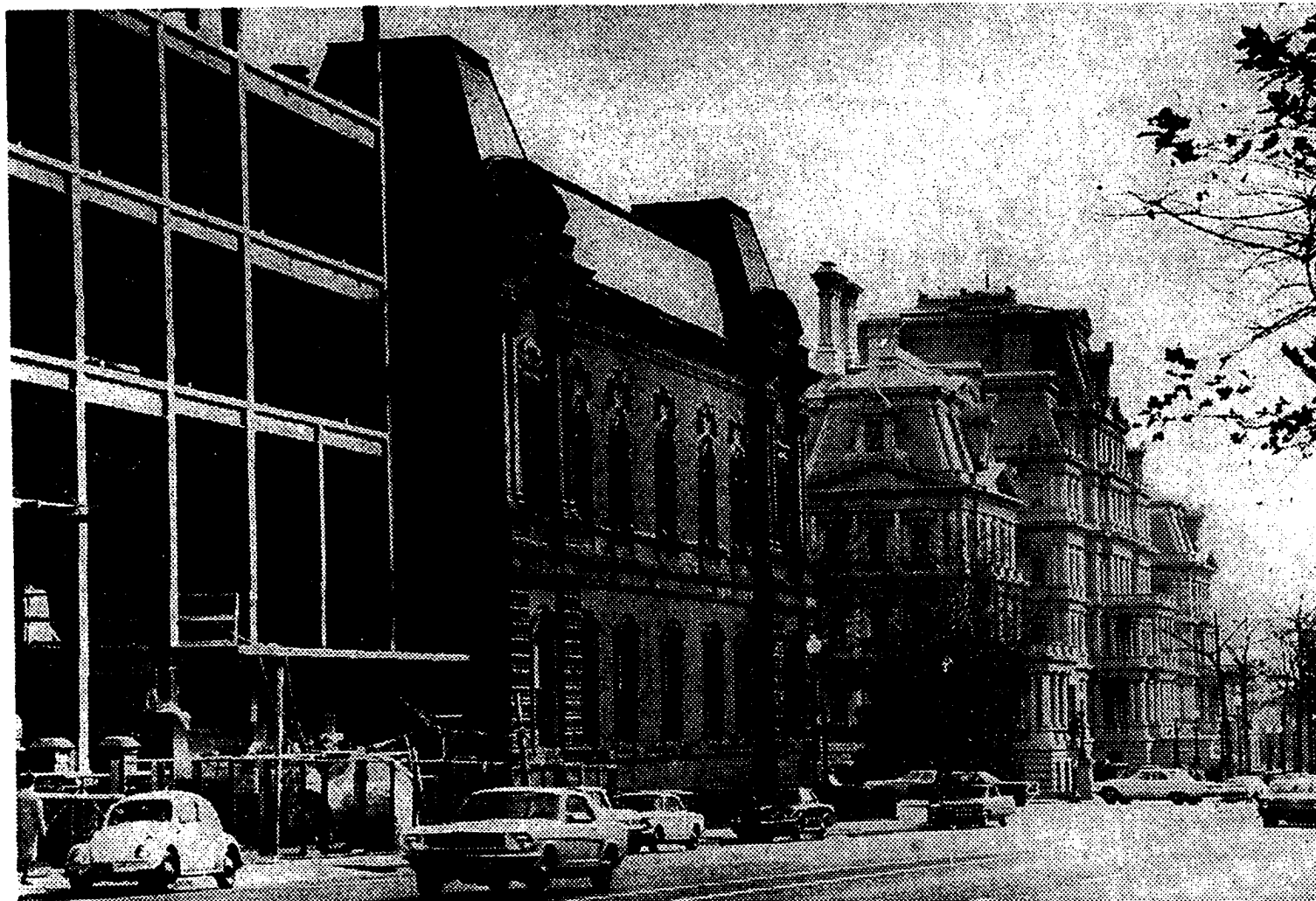
As an example of the lack of direct Federal aid, current housing and urban renewal legislation, which will increasingly shape the destiny of cities through the new Department of Housing and Urban Development, offers no grants or loans for the specific purpose of historic preservation.

There is survey money, and even moving money, if an old building is in the way of renewal construction, but there are no funds to restore the building or keep it usefully alive within the new plan. The inevitable result is demolition, unless private philanthropy comes to the rescue.

## European Precedent Cited

As another example, citation as a registered National Historical Landmark by the Department of the Interior carries nothing with it but an honorary plaque, which is of little use against the bulldozers.

The strength of the national report and its chief contribution



Doris Bowers

Old State Department Building, right, is being preserved in Washington, and for this the General Services Administration is praised in report. At center is old Corcoran Gallery. At left is part of Lafayette Square project.

is in its specific program of legislative recommendations. Citing European precedent, where historic preservation is established government responsibility, it places clear emphasis on the need for greater government support in this country.

The proposed Federal program would include the legal affirmation of a national historic preservation policy. New laws would coordinate and consolidate existing programs.

A national advisory council on historic preservation would be set up, with Government and private membership, to advise the Federal Government, make studies, develop policies and resolve conflicts between Federal departments and projects.

## Would Clarify Tax Law

Annual appropriations would be authorized for the Department of the Interior to acquire important historic structures and sites. Federal inventory and survey programs, now restricted, would be reinforced as a national register. Additional funds would go to the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior, which now operates the limited Historic American Buildings Survey, to administer and publish the register. Grants to state and local governments would carry out similar programs.

Amendment or clarification of the Internal Revenue Code is urged to determine the status of preservation properties in terms of gifts, income tax deductions for maintenance, and definition of public, tax-exempt or charitable classifications.

Preliminary review of all historic sites and buildings involved in federally sponsored

or aided projects would be mandatory for approval of the project.

The system of matching of proportionate grants, including the alternative of noncash contributions of equivalent value, now available to communities under urban renewal legislation, would be expanded to include historic properties and preservation. Matching grants would also be made to aid the work of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which is Congressionally chartered but privately supported and operated.

## Series of Bills Planned

New and liberalized loan programs would be instituted for private acquisition and rehabilitation of landmark structures and districts.

Senator Muskie and Representative Widnall, in a joint statement yesterday, announced that they would soon present to Congress the first of a series of bills designed to cover the report's recommendations as completely as possible. They said that an omnibus bill could not do the job because a multiplicity of Congressional committees was involved. These include Banking and Currency, Ways and Means, Finance, Interior and Insular Affairs, Appropriations, District of Columbia, and Government Operations.

"We hope to provide this implementation as soon as possible during this legislative session," the Congressmen said.

The report's Federal recommendations are followed by a full list of state and local suggestions linked to the national ones.

Among these are establishing local preservation agencies, reviewing programs and prepar-

ing legislation, exempting from inheritance taxes the gifts of historic property to government bodies, legal delays of demolition to provide time to find alternative solutions, studies of historic and district zoning, forming architectural and historical review boards, and providing local budgets for maintenance and preservation.

## Essays in the Report

The essays that make up the body of the national report on historical preservation are a somber litany of demolition and loss; nearly half the buildings recorded in the last 30 years by the Historic American Buildings Survey have been destroyed. Unfortunately, the essays, findings and recommendations are embedded in a presentation of woolly, romantic pretentiousness. The tone is set by a running commentary of poetic non-

captions for untitled America-the-Beautiful pictures identified only by diligent sleuthing in the editorial limbo between introduction and preface.

The fact that a poet wrote the commentary does not save it from inanity and unsuitability. There is more real poetry in the remarkable facts of the history, style, invention and aspirations of the building art in the United States than in all of the synthetic, sugar-coated, hoop-skirt history that passes for authentic Americana.

This sanctimonious archness is too well expressed in the prayer-borrowed title, "With Heritage So Rich." Instead of being brought down to bedrock reality, where it belongs, the subject is wafted off into some

detached sphere of pious sentimentality. It has been floating there too long. The national report did not need to fall into this familiar, fatuous trap.

Another unfortunate flaw is the section on "findings," preceding the recommendations, that supposedly summarizes the vicissitudes of preservation in the United States to the present time. The sad and ugly tale of ruthless destruction reads like a polite apologia for the public agencies that have substantially contributed to it.

There is no point in not facing facts. A pat on the back to the Bureau of Public Roads for memorandums of 1964 and 1965 requesting more consideration of historic and esthetic sites does not obscure the extended massacre that can be laid to the Federal highway program and allied state agencies in terms of villages bisected, landmarks destroyed and vistas ruined.

The impact of an expressway



Fate of Custom House here will be at issue when the agency moves to new trade center

approved just last week to cross in front of New Orleans's Vieux Carrée, even at proposed grade level, is still being hotly debated.

The General Services Administration is commended for its restoration of the Old State, War and Navy Buildings in Washington—actually saved by Executive command under the Kennedy Administration—while it continues policies that require the sale and demolition of such beleaguered, federally owned landmarks as the old St. Louis Post Office, by the same architect as the Old State Building.

The future of New York's handsome Beaux Arts Custom House will similarly hang in the balance when the Customs Bureau moves to the new World Trade Center.

The Urban Renewal Administration has been unable to match objectives at the top to local plans, with continuous destruction of historic urban fabric and continuity.

These are all Government policies and practices as urgently in need of corrective measures as anything cited in the report's recommendations.

The significance of the report, however, transcends its deficiencies. The fact is that a comprehensive preservation study has been produced on a national basis, with the cooperation of national agencies