

NEWBURYPORT
PRESERVATION TRUST

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Linking the past with the present and future



Quarterly Newsletter of the Newburyport Preservation Trust

Fall 2018

'Safe Routes to Schools' project sounds as lovable as motherhood and apple pie, but it demands a closer look



High St. project proceeds to "100% design" with only one public hearing

The "Safe Routes to Schools" project that calls for wholesale alterations for a one-third mile stretch of High Street (between Tyng and Buck Sts.) running through Newburyport's National Register Historic District is now at "100% design" after just one public hearing.

Original plans included curb extensions, crossing islands, road-straightening, wider concrete sidewalks, signs, lights, and flashing beacons, in addition to ADA-compliant ramps and five-foot bicycle lanes.

According to an October 22 update on the project posted on the city's website, "the evolving plans are currently at a draft final stage. Please note that we are continuing to work with MassDOT (Massachusetts Department of Transportation) and other stakeholders on revising certain elements of the plans. At this point, the plans are intended to be finalized and the project bid out by the state in 2019 for construction."

In June 2018, Newburyport Preservation Trust observers noted that the project, to be financed by \$1.6 million in federal and state funds (80/20%), was proceeding without the required Section 106 review (i.e. as specified in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966) to assess a project's impact on historic structures, byways, and vistas. The Newburyport Preservation Trust alerted the Massachusetts Historical Commission by letter on June 28.

Subsequently the Newburyport Historical Commission (NHC) undertook the Section 106 review, and its September 25 letter to MassDOT stated that the project would not have an adverse effect on historic assets "if and only if" certain specifications were imposed for sidewalks

Do we 'preservationists' have an image problem? Might we get better at articulating preservation?

I cringe whenever I hear the word "preservationist." Even though I work in the history, museum, and preservation field, it's the "-ist" suffix that rankles me.

I resist the compartmentalizing of that "ist" suffix. It makes me think of all the other identities of marginalized special interests with the same suffix: anarchist, bigamist, communist, evangelist, fascist, satanist. I even recoil from banjoist and unicyclist.

One Member's Opinion by R. W. Bacon

My sensitivity to the "preservationist" label has increased through the years as I have observed its public perception. In my view, we preservation advocates have an image problem. To those not involved in a particular local issue or who are otherwise occupied with the all-consuming demands of present-day existence, "preservationists" may be erroneously viewed as:

- Reactionary throwbacks resistant to all change ... and all development.
- New Age idealists seeking to impose their utopian values on everyone.
- Overeducated hippie socialists with a screwball vision of the common good.
- Elitists seeking to ensure high property values ... and "insulated" neighborhoods.

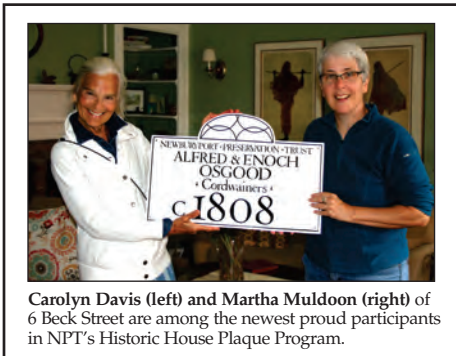
- Antiquarian eccentrics who would prefer to live in a 17th-century theme park.
- Well-to-do folks with too much time to contemplate the play of light and shadow on perfectly-spaced clapboards ... while half of the world worries about food and water.

Have I left a stereotype out? As in all stereotypes, deep within there is probably more than a kernel of truth. But in my view we preservation advocates, no matter what our individual point-of-view, have an image problem. Sometimes the way we express our heartfelt point of view, perhaps even with years of knowledge, insight, and passion behind it, simply does not resonate with friends, neighbors, or new arrivals.

When we preservation advocates claim "It's our heritage!" in a knee-jerk response to a developer making incongruous alterations to a 300-year-old house, not everyone "gets it." First of all, it's not everyone's heritage. In my view, we preservation advocates might engage more support if we got better at articulating why *all* cultures and individuals are moved to save "stuff" in the first place – from personal keepsakes; to shared memories; to landscapes, buildings, and neighborhoods. Preservation is not always about architecture. It's not all about "the last extant example of a fimbolulated finnafe."

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Carolyn Davis (left) and Martha Muldoon (right) of 6 Beck Street are among the newest proud participants in NPT's Historic House Plaque Program.

Check out NPT's new Instagram page!

The Newburyport Preservation Trust expanded its social media reach last week with its new presence on Instagram, the popular site for posting photos from a smartphone. Thanks go to new NPT board member Patricia Peknik for this initiative. We welcome participation at <https://www.instagram.com/newburyportpreservationtrust/>.



Do 'preservationists' have an image problem?

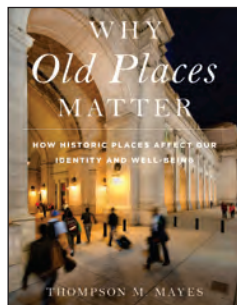
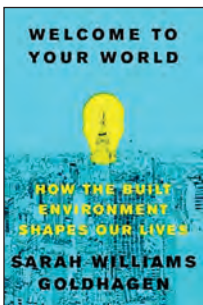
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Several sources come to mind that may help us better articulate preservation values to friends, neighbors, and new arrivals young and old.

- **Welcome to Your World: How the Built Environment Shapes Our Lives**, by Sarah Williams Goldhagen (2017). Based on cognitive neuroscience, this book explores the ways in which a room, a building, a neighborhood, or a city square shapes our feelings, memories, and well-being. The "neighborhood ambiance" we value in our National Register Historic District is more than a "history buff" fixation.

- **Why Old Places Matter: How Historic Places Affect Our Identity and Well-Being**, by Thompson M. Mayes (2018). This book looks into why we humans around the world become attached to old places. Organized by category, the values first addressed are continuity, memory, and individual identity. The values of history, architecture, and civic or national identity follow, along with eight other categories. The explicit aim is to help people express why old places are worth saving.

- **Bending the Future: 50 Ideas for the Next 50 Years of Historic Preservation in the United States**, by Max Page and Marla R. Miller (eds.) (2016). This book is a collection of 50 essays by leading historic preservation professionals, historians, architects, writers, and social activists.



Why is this your favorite building?
What is the building used for?
How do you feel when you are there?
Do you have a connection to it?

PROJECT: MY FAVORITE BUILDING

Take a walk in your neighborhood. Choose your favorite building to draw. It could be your home, school, a friend or relative's house, a museum, a building you pass on your way to school, or your favorite place to visit.

From *My Preservation Journal* (2017), by Landmark West, a preservation advocacy organization focusing on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, New York City.

It has been clear for some time that one way to make preservation sustainable (or to make *anything* sustainable) is through the powerful minds of youth. A preservation advocacy organization in New York City developed a publication and program 30 years ago for public school students that is still in use today entitled *My Preservation Journal*. The book is packed with age-appropriate observation-and-response activities that get straight to the crux of why people save "stuff." *My Preservation Journal* can be viewed or downloaded in PDF format here: www.landmarkwest.org/my-preservation-journal/. The NPT board has discussed creating a similar publication with walking tours and observational activities based on Newburyport's historical and architectural assets. Any curriculum specialists out there?

With better articulation of preservation, and a new generation attuned to its values from an early age, perhaps in the future the identity of "preservationist" will rise above the stereotypes. Yes, I'm an optimist. ■

Safe Routes to Schools ...

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(re-use existing brick), pedestrian islands (granite cobblestones at grade), curbing (use old granite), signage (existing signs at same size), and the flashing beacons (no over-road beacons).

Apparently this review by the NHC representing the public interest was not well-received by the city's own Planning & Development Office, as on October 22 it sent a detail-packed six-page letter to the NHC requesting that it moderate its "if and only if" position on specifications.

Two days later, at the NHC meeting of October 24 – a public meeting but not an legally-posted public hearing – discussions on specifications continued with MassDOT and the city's Planning & Development Office. In a revised letter to MassDOT sent on October 25, the NHC removed its "if and only if" verbiage, and agreed to raised pedestrian islands with granite curbing, old brick sidewalks to be replaced with new "wirecut" brick, and new granite curbing where necessary, among other concessions.

The latest plans are available in a 31-page PDF file for viewing or download the city's website: <https://www.cityofnewburyport.com/planning-development/safe-routes-to-school>.

Just as we value motherhood and apple pie, no one is contesting the desire for safe routes to schools. However, this project has deserved more public input from the beginning. There is no question that "safe routes to schools" can be achieved while still preserving the integrity of the High Street byway through the city's National Register Historic District. Achieving transparent procedure and ample opportunity for public participation is proving to be the greater challenge. ■