Future Planning of Historic Wilmington

By John H. Voorhees

In 1960, during the process of developing the Future Land Use Plan for Wilmington, it became evident that some of the more important development characteristics of the City were not being properly assessed. Wilmington had a charm which could not escape the attentions of its many visitors and a great part of this charm was generated from the older section of the City. Here was an area of historic homes, significant architecture and landscaped streets which were a constant reminder of our historic past.

The new subdivisions on the outskirts of the City did not have the same quality of civic design and the houses did not have the stately beauty which expressed their time and individuality. These historic and architectural features were considered so important to the future development of Wilmington that a special study of these characteristics was made and incorporated in the report, *Wilmington's Historic Area*.

This study recommended that the Historic Area be recognized and delineated for special consideration for historic preservation. The Wilmington City Council passed these recommendations in the form of an ordinance delineating a historical district and setting forth special zoning and architectural controls to help preserve it. Under this ordinance, an Architectural Review Committee was appointed to prevent the willful destruction of the cultural values inherent within the architecture and design of the historic area.

In considering applications for new development within the Historic Area the Architectural Review Committee began to realize the tremendous need for a preliminary plan which would outline in greater detail how the Historic Area should be developed in the future. A preliminary plan was necessary to indicate how different areas might be developed and how the values of the area could be protected from the encroachment of commercial development, increased traffic loads and deteriorating properties. Without an over-all plan it

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MEETING

Time: Wednesday, March 9, 1966, 8:00 p.m.
Place: St. Andrews-Covenant Presbyterian Church
Speaker: Mr. John H. Voorhees
Subject: Future Planning for Historic Wilmington.

John Voorhees is Director of the Special Projects Section, Division of Community Planning of the State of North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development. The Division of Community Planning will be working on the preliminary plan for the preservation and development of the Wilmington Historic Area.

A Nashville, Tennessee native, Mr. Voorhees received his B.A. degree in Sociology and Economics from Vanderbilt University. He continued his studies at the University of North Carolina where he had graduate training in the Department of City and Regional Planning.

Mr. Voorhees had previous experience working on planning projects for small cities in Oklahoma and Arkansas before coming to North Carolina in 1958. His first assignment was to prepare a development plan for Wilmington and to assist in setting up the Wilmington City Planning Department. It was during the early years while working on the Future Land-Use Plan for Wilmington that Mr. Voorhees became interested in preserving as much as possible the old residential area. He wrote Wilmington, Historic Area, in which he stated, "the older section of the city . . . had a stately beauty, civic design and individual development which our existing survey techniques did not properly recognize." The preservation of Wilmington's Historic Area was initiated by Mr. Voorhees.

MEETING OF DIRECTORS

At a recent meeting of the Board of Directors R. V. Asbury, Jr. was elected to fill the unexpired term of Douglas Hudson who resigned, and the Rev. Mortimer Glover was elected vice-president.

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LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.
BULLETIN
Volume IX, Number 2
Wilmington, N. C. February, 1966

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was impossible to make adequate judgements concerning the future of any individual structure, whether it had historic value or not.

Part of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society’s program for 1965 consisted of raising funds to underwrite a preliminary plan for the Historic Area. When funds were secured, the City made application with the Department of Urban Development for a planning assistance grant. This will enable the Department of Conservation and Development through their Division of Community Planning to prepare this plan. Finally, during November of 1965 the application was approved and planning will start this year.

The first step in the preparation of the preliminary plan for the Historic Area will be maps outlining the study area and showing all buildings and physical features. A land use survey would then be made to determine the detailed characteristics of the area. This would include such information as the condition of structures, valuations, architectural and historic character and the materials and widths of the streets, sidewalks and planting strips. The land use survey would be followed by an analysis and evaluation of existing conditions taking into consideration historical background and architectural significance. Basic principles or objectives would have to be formulated which would provide a sense of purpose and direction for the design of the preliminary plan.

UPON COMPLETION of the analysis and evaluation, recommendations as to how the Historic Area might be preserved and enhanced will be made. Suggestions will be made in regard to the basic structure of the neighborhood and how it might be maintained and strengthened. Recommendations

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A letter from the PRESIDENT

It is my hope that in the coming months we can add to the achievements of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, not only in material attainments, but in cooperation within our membership, and support to other cultural organizations.

Nearing the ten-year mark as a historical society, we can look back with pride over the achievements of the past decade. In the past, in our infancy we learned to walk, and faltered with few stumbles along the way... only minor discouragements as compared with the numerous successes. We have been fortunate to have men of high goals and standards, and I hope to follow the paths of my predecessors, in helping to develop new ideas and projects in the coming months of my presidency.

In November, Mr. Hargrove Bellamy presented us with a generous gift of $1,000. The Society, in December, was the recipient of $5,000 from the Sarah Graham Kenan Foundation, due in part, to the kind assistance of Dr. Jesse C. Fisher, of Riegel Paper Corporation. Mr. Herbert Latimer graciously contributed $1,000 to the Society in January, and in February, we received a $2,000 grant from the Richardson Foundation. It is my hope that with the available funds, we will be able to develop many ideas which have already been in the planning stages. There is a great need for a fire-proof vault for our valuable accumulated documents. Also, we need a working area and meeting room for officers at the Latimer House. I believe the basement area could be suitably arranged to accommodate these needs. Also, we need to think of ideas for the picturesque servants quarters immediately to the rear of the Latimer House property, and of course, with landscaping the yard and garden could be quite attractive. I hope we can develop ideas and carry them through as well as our friends just down the street at St. John’s Art Gallery. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Wright have excellent plans for their property at the corner of Front and Orange Streets, keeping up with the current trend in historical preservation.

There is much to be accomplished in the historic area, and with the aid of the State Department of Conservation and Development, we will soon have a master plan designating preservation measures and uses for various buildings in the historic area. Mr. Voorhees, director, will be assisted in this survey by Mr. Larry Sabiston, a community planner, who worked for a Wilmington Architect while studying architectural design at North Carolina State University’s School of Design. Having had previous experience in architectural design, he joined the staff of the Special Projects Section of the Division of Community Planning in 1964. This project will need the support of every member of our Society. Help by informing your friends of the projected plan and the importance of restoration and preservation of our older buildings.

Recently I have talked with Miss Constance Werner, director of urban planning for historic preservation, in Washington, D.C. She has obtained facts and photographs about Wilmington’s Historic Area, to be used in a government publication. Wilmington, with ten other selected towns, will be given several pages of publicity.

We need to enlarge our membership. I hope every member will bring in one or more new members this year. Let us continue to do our part in preserving the historical atmosphere in our port city.

R. V. ASBURY, JR.

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will be made concerning the basic pattern of traffic circulation and parking, and interrelationship of commercial and residential land uses, the minimum standards and locations for buildings, parking areas, and other development.

The preliminary plan would be a guide to the future development of the Historic Area and would establish future land use patterns and indicate the manner in which they should be developed. This would include recommendations for parks, streets, sidewalks, planting strips, street lights, signs, trees and other planting materials.

The planning and development of any area within the City is extremely complicated because it must consider the active or inactive wills of residents, property owners, municipal officials and the general public. Each of these groups becomes a force for accomplishment within the area and it is only with their active support and participation that preliminary plans may become realities.

John Burgwin, Attorney-at-Law, Clerk of the Councell, member of the Upper House of the Assembly, and merchant of Wilmington, was residing here in April, 1771. It has been restored by the N.C. Society of the National Society of Colonial Dames of America, and has long been an outstanding tourist attraction.
For these reasons meetings will be held with the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, the Architectural Review Committee, the Wilmington Planning and Development Commission and other interested groups to consider the proposed preliminary plan and the methods by which private interests, individual property owners, the City, the Historical Society and other groups may implement the plans. At the same time it is hoped that progress may be made in organizing and financing the actual construction of parts of the preliminary plan. The plan itself will set forth ideas which may take 10 or 15 years to complete. However, it will include things which could be started immediately. During the last five years since the original Historical Area was delineated as a planning area, a number of things have happened. The Historical Society has purchased the Latimer House, the St. John’s Art Gallery has been established in old St. John’s Tavern and several individuals have purchased homes. Although these actions are small within the amount of work to be accomplished they are a good beginning and should pave the way to a more permanent future.

A great man once said, "If we could first know where we are and whither we are tending we could better judge what to do and how to do it." This sets forth our goals for this year. It will take a great deal of work and cooperation on the part of all interested persons.

Wilmington lost this historical building by demolition. It is still being referred to by historians of the Revolutionary period as the home of an outstanding American Patriot, Cornelius Harnett.