

PRESERVATION NEWSLETTER

COLUMBIA'S PRESERVATION MOVEMENT

Today, cities across the nation have preservation programs as part of their local governments, but that was not always the case. Columbia's preservation movement started in the early 1960s as initiatives like urban renewal and the desire for 'progress' threatened historic sites and neighborhoods. The program has evolved over the years, from a private effort to a more structured part of our city's government. Read on to learn more about how the focus of preservation efforts in Columbia has shifted over time.

PLANNING IN THE 1960s

To take a look at the development of the city-level preservation program in Columbia, we first have to step back to look at bigger trends in the nation in the mid-century. There were a few national policies that had long term effects on the built environment both nationwide and in Columbia. American planning in the mid twentieth century had a very top down and car-centric approach; planners, architects, and engineers across the country often looked to wipe the slate clean and remake cities to their liking. National policies of the time, including the 1949 and 1954 Housing Acts and the 1956 Highway Act, vastly effected the built environment of cities across the country. Under these acts, the federal government gave cities the power and money to condemn "slum" neighborhoods, clear them through eminent domain, and then turn over the land to private developers at cheap rates for projects that included higher-end housing, hospitals, hotels, shopping centers and college expansions. The actions that were wholly or partially funded by this federal legislation are commonly referred to as "urban renewal," and they had a devastating effect on black and poor communities across the US as, during the Jim Crow era, white residents began to label those areas of the city with concentrated African American populations as blighted.

Starting in the 1950s, the City of Columbia and Richland County governments sought to eliminate blight from the city through a county-wide Fight Blight campaign. Areas like Ward I and parts of Arsenal Hill quickly became a target for urban renewal projects. Likewise, white flight left formerly stately homes in downtown Columbia abandoned and in disrepair. The desire to 'fight blight' and modernize downtown Columbia resulted in the total obliteration of the Ward One neighborhood and resulted in the demolition of numerous abandoned homes (often to accommodate cars – the sites of many demolished homes remain parking lots today). As urban renewal devastated large swaths of Columbia, when it reached its peak in the 1960s, Columbia's nascent historic preservation movement was born.



Fight Blight campaign 1950s; photos from The State Newspaper Photograph Collection, Richland Library

THE FIGHT FOR THE ROBERT MILLS HOUSE

Now a treasured building in Columbia, the Robert Mills House was not immune to the growing pains of the 1960s. From the completion of the home in the 1820s to the late 1950s, buildings on this site served as religious educational institutions. But, by the 1960s the Columbia Bible College—today Columbia International University—had outgrown the campus that surrounded the structure. After Columbia Bible College vacated the property, the building sat vacant and was soon slated for demolition. Outspoken citizens of Columbia came together in October of 1961 to form the Historic Columbia Foundation, whose first goal was to save the Robert Mills House. Many of those who advocated for the preservation of the Robert Mills House brought broader awareness to the need for more widespread preservation in Columbia.

The citizens of Columbia who successfully fought for the preservation of the Mills House did so without the foundation of federal or local legislation that the modern preservation movement rests upon. There were few grant opportunities available and no tax credits; funds had to be raised through donations or the occasional federal, state, or municipal fund. It took Historic Columbia several years before they were able to raise the funds to purchase the property.

In the time between when the structure was slated for demolition and Historic Columbia's purchase of the building, it remained threatened. Columbia legend has it that Mabel Payne, a member of the City's Urban Rehabilitation office sat on the front porch of house in 1961 with a shotgun to prevent its demolition. While this might be a locally-born tall tale (we don't know for sure), Mabel Payne was a crucial advocate for local preservation efforts, and she was among the guiding members of Historic Columbia and other preservation groups in their early days. Eventually, Historic Columbia was able to raise the funds to purchase and restore the property and after extensive renovation, the house opened as a museum in April of 1967.



Robert Mills House, HABS, 1934 (top); Mills House Dedication, courtesy of Historic Columbia (bottom)

FEDERAL PRESERVATION LEGISLATION

Today, a focus on historic preservation is an integral part of cities and towns across the nation. However, up until the late 1960s, there was very little national legislation to support the preservation movement. Preservation was largely considered to be the responsibility or choice of private parties, with the federal government only getting involved in a very small number of instances. Although federal laws aimed at protecting certain historic sites were put in place in the early 20th century, it wasn't until the creation of the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 that the designation of non-publicly held structures and historic districts became more commonplace. The creation of the National Register was just one small part of the larger National Historic Preservation Act, which also created the State Historic Preservation Office and put in place federal level preservation legislation that is still used today.

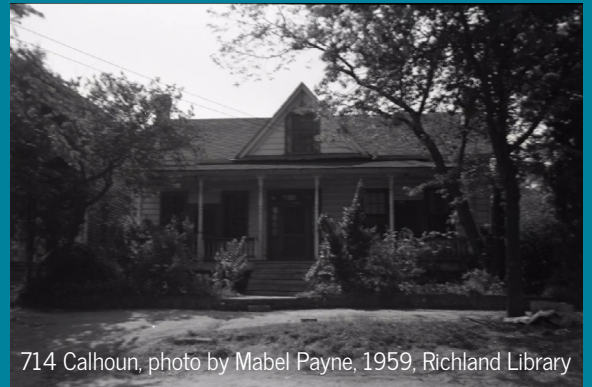
MABEL PAYNE



Mabel Payne 1956. The State Newspaper Photograph Collection, Richland Library

Mabel Payne, a housing inspector with the City of Columbia's Urban Rehabilitation Department, was instrumental in developing a list of significant structures and advocating for their preservation. Though not an architectural historian by training, Mabel Payne became Columbia's "historic preservation pioneer." The desire for preservation came from Payne's firsthand knowledge of the devastation of urban renewal. Payne recognized the rich architectural heritage of the City's oldest and most dilapidated buildings, many of which were actively being targeted for demolition. Focused on creating a record of Columbia's past, she began to identify and record structures prior to their destruction.

Among the buildings Payne identified was the Columbia cottage at 714 Calhoun Street, which she first photographed in 1959. Although it was identified at the time for its architectural significance, the structure was also among a small number of early landmarks that were not only significant for their architecture but also their association with African American history.



714 Calhoun, photo by Mabel Payne, 1959, Richland Library

HISTORIC AND CULTURAL BUILDINGS COMMISSION

With the threat to historic buildings throughout the City, it became clear that municipal efforts would be necessary to preserve Columbia's architectural and cultural heritage. This resulted in the formation of the Historic and Cultural Buildings Commission, which was created on February 20, 1963 by City Council resolution. Its purpose was to identify and protect buildings with historical significance and identify those that may develop future significance. The Commission was also tasked with reviewing applications for major exterior work and demolition as well as controlling the use of the historically significant properties.

A report submitted to the Historical and Cultural Buildings Commission from Mabel Payne lamented the harmful potential of urban renewal. She wrote: "In larger cities and especially in those which have embraced wholesale urban renewal, many of the slums have been demolished and with them the city's oldest structures." With this report, Mabel Payne submitted a list of structures that she felt ought to be included in the list of structures to preserve. The first landmark list, known then as the Historical and Cultural Buildings Plan, identified many architecturally significant properties throughout Columbia. Also at this time, the City's first local historic districts were created. These districts - the Governor's Mansion area, the Landmark District (also known as the Robert Mills neighborhood today), and the University neighborhood - represented early residential areas of the City that at the time were experiencing development pressures and seeing the demolition of older buildings. In the 11 years the Commission reviewed protected buildings, more than 40 of those identified on the original Landmark List (and over 60 when also looking at buildings within the historic districts) were demolished or removed (and later demolished) at the owners' request. Half of the parcels where these demolished buildings once sat are either vacant, parking garages, or parking lots today.

LOST COLUMBIA

One of the demolished structures on the original Landmark List was the William Glaze House (a Group I landmark), which was an excellent example of the Italianate style. The site of the house is now a parking lot. This story – of the loss of an architectural or historical treasure in favor of vehicular parking – is sadly repeated over and over when examining present-day outcomes for structures on the original landmark list. Furthermore, a significant number of structures (and neighborhoods) were lost in the years before protections went into place.



William Glaze House before demolition, 1968; photo by Mabel Payne, Richland Library



1426-1430 Marion Street, House and Office of Dr. Clifford J. Oliveros, on original Landmark list, demolished, 1966; this site is now a parking garage

In cases where mid-century construction replaced older demolished structures, many of these modern buildings are now coming of age as eligible for historic status in their own right. One such property is 1429 Senate Street, the original site of the residence of George L. Baker, the president of the State Bank and Palmetto Ice Company. The neo-classical mansion built in 1901 was demolished in 1965 after being purchased by the State. The Rutledge Building, which stands today in place of the Baker residence, was designed by Lyles, Bisset, Carlisle, and Wolff (LBC&W), a prominent Columbia based architecture firm still recognized today for their exemplary mid-century designs which can be found throughout the City. In a recent survey of the downtown area, the Rutledge building was determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register.



Dwelling of G.L. Baker (above) Rutledge Building 1968 (right), photos by Russell Maxey, courtesy of Richland Library



LANDMARKS COMMISSION

In 1974, the City of Columbia worked with the aforementioned LBC&W firm (as a consultant) to update the City's zoning ordinance. With the proposed updates to the ordinance, which were to include urban design review, LBC&W recommended that the Historical and Cultural Buildings Commission be replaced with a new body that would have broader regulatory power over preservation and urban design matters. By the end of 1974, the Historical and Cultural Buildings Commission was disbanded to make way for the new Landmarks Commission. The Landmarks Commission quickly began using its new powers to review any construction, reconstruction, alteration, repair, or demolition of any structure; erection or replacement of any sign, marquee, awning, or other exterior architectural feature; or attachment to any landmark or structure within a designated district. With these new powers, the Landmarks Commission published its first landmark list in 1975. Two additional local landmark districts were created with oversight from the Landmark Commission: the Elmwood Park district in 1988 and the West Gervais district in 1994.

In 1991, the City of Columbia initiated the creation of a city-wide preservation plan and architectural survey in an effort to identify additional historic resources and make recommendations for the Landmark Commission. The plan recommended the creation or extension of over 18 historic districts and designation of an additional 154 Individual Landmarks. Of the recommendations for historic districts, 11 of the suggestions were eventually adopted to create eight additional historic districts: West Gervais (1994), Old Shandon/Lower Waverly (2001), Melrose Heights/Oak Lawn (2003), Earlewood (2004), Oakwood Court (2007), Wales Garden (2008), Cottontown/ Bellevue (2009), and Seminary Ridge (2013). Three additional districts, not part of city-wide survey recommendations, were also added in the following years: Waverly (2005), Granby (2010), and Whaley (2010).

**For information about all of Columbia's unique historic districts, check out our website:
<https://planninganddevelopment.columbiasc.gov/historic-districts/>**

PRESERVATION TODAY

In 1999, when City Council adopted guidelines for the City Center Design/Development district, a new commission, known as the Design/ Development Review Commission (D/DRC), was created to review historic preservation and urban design projects and phased out the existing Landmarks Commission. The D/DRC continues to hear these cases today, and today four preservation planners (and one urban design planner) provide staff support to the D/DRC, which continues to oversee work to the City's 15 local historic districts and over 180 Individual Landmarks.

To find out more about the City of Columbia's current preservation efforts, please visit our website at <https://planninganddevelopment.columbiasc.gov/historic-preservation/>



We Are Columbia

This newsletter was created by the Preservation Staff of the City of Columbia's Planning and Development Services Department. If you have any questions about your specific historic property please contact your district's preservation planner. Contact information can be found on our website. If you would like to be added to our newsletter mailing list please click [here](#).