

# “The Gospel of New Castle”: Historic Preservation in a Delaware Town

DEBORAH VAN RIPER HARPER\*

**A**LTHOUGH Delawareans know New Castle as the colonial capital of their state, and hundreds of schoolchildren visit it annually when studying state history, out-of-staters must usually make a deliberate effort to discover the town. It is not a place that anyone would know from simply passing through because the roads do not pass through it; they only pass it by. Over the centuries New Castle has repeatedly suffered the fate of being passed by. At various times a seat of government, manufacturing, and transportation, it has always been eclipsed by other cities so that today the mayor worries that the town has become a “bedroom community” with no economic base of its own.<sup>1</sup>

One business does prosper in New Castle, though, and that is tourism. When the town lost its preeminence in transportation and trading in the first half of the nineteenth century, it fell into an economic slump that prevented many residents from dramatically changing their homes, so that it retained the appearance of its Federal-era heyday. Visitors today stroll down cobblestone streets past antique shops and historic houses, or wander along the path that follows the river in Battery Park, imagining the merchant ships that docked at the wharf in days long past. The town’s romantic image is enhanced by the program of historic preservation that has been followed in New Castle for so long and to such an extent that one early supporter has referred to it as “the gospel of New Castle.”<sup>2</sup>

---

\* Deborah Van Riper Harper received her M.A. in history from the University of Delaware. She is employed by the Winterthur Museum and lives in New Castle.

<sup>1</sup> “Mayor Klingmeyer Urges City Update Its Comprehensive Plan,” *New Castle Eagle*, Apr. 4, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Worthington G. Button to Daniel Moore Bates (hereafter DMB), Jan. 16, 1951, Bates Family Papers, Box 69, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington (hereafter referred to as Bates 69), All Bates papers are at the Historical Society of Delaware (hereafter HSD) unless otherwise noted.

The origins of America's historic preservation movement are found in the mid nineteenth century. As the United States gradually rose from an insecure fledgling nation to a world power, Americans began to take pride in their accomplishments, which resulted in a new appreciation for the people and events that had brought them such success. This included the veneration of places that had witnessed American triumphs. Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., has noted that even before the Civil War one finds "abundant evidence of an emergent national consciousness that caused some individuals to look upon the preservation of historic sites as a sign of cultural maturity."<sup>3</sup>

Early activists cited a structure's antiquity and its association with hallowed persons or events as justification for its preservation. The strongest rallying cry sounded when a building bore an association with George Washington. His godlike stature encouraged Ann Pamela Cunningham's successful drive in the 1850s to preserve Mount Vernon as a national shrine. Her effort was the first attempt to establish a national base of support for historic preservation. Other early campaigns were not as well organized, and many failed; but the demolition of an important structure, such as the John Hancock Mansion in Boston, motivated preservationists to prevent additional losses.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a rising sense of national consciousness encouraged widespread enthusiasm for historic preservation as a vehicle for instilling American values in the vast numbers of immigrants who arrived here. Many "established" Americans, whose ancestors had arrived generations earlier, feared that their traditions would be undermined by the influx of foreign ideas. Anticipating the very destruction of their way of life, they attempted to indoctrinate the newcomers with their own ideals. Part of the process of Americanization included visits to sites so steeped in history that the foreigners would come to value American traditions above their own.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, disillusioned by their experience with global involvement in World War I, Americans became so isolationist in their outlook that legislation was passed in 1924 that severely restricted immigration to the United States.

The next decade saw the establishment of many shrines to American democracy. In 1924 the American Wing opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, followed shortly thereafter by Henry Ford's Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, and John D. Rockefeller's Colonial Williamsburg. Those museums sought not only to educate immigrants, but also to glorify American achievement for the edification of all people. Many took advantage of the freedom provided by

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg* (New York, 1965), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> William B. Rhoads, "The Colonial Revival and the Americanization of Immigrants," in *The Colonial Revival in America*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York, 1985), p. 341.

higher wages, increased leisure time, and the newly popular automobile to travel to national parks and historic sites.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to greater freedom, the mobility provided by inexpensive cars also brought problems. People took jobs far away from their hometowns, which resulted in the loss of extended family networks and a related concern for the breakdown of traditional values. In addition, the many new highways, filling stations, parking lots, and repair shops intruded upon bucolic farmlands and forests.<sup>6</sup> Preservation was seen not only as the glorification of American achievement but also as a way to hold on to a landscape, as well as a way of life, that was changing much too fast.

The course of preservation in New Castle parallels the national movement. Its stirrings are evident even in the early 1820s, when John Watson, passing through the town, described the humility he felt at the sight of the ancient Tile House on the Strand.<sup>7</sup> He noted the irons proclaiming the date "1687" imbedded in the front of the structure, a date which provided the house with an aura of timeworn nobility.

After its demolition in 1884, the Tile House assumed legendary status in the minds of town residents. The building inspired local artists whose images of the house were more or less fanciful, but consistent in the prominent display of the date irons. In fact, the date of the building's erection is conjectural, and the date irons may not have been original to it. All that has been ascertained regarding the date of construction is that the building did not exist when John Boyer bought the property in 1678, but after his death around 1704 his daughters' inheritance included a substantial brick house on the plot. The irons are not present in Benjamin Latrobe's depiction of the Tile House on his 1804–05 survey of New Castle; since his view does include other significant details, it is unlikely that he simply ignored them. The house was renovated in the early nineteenth century and it is possible that the irons were added then, but if so, that fact was forgotten by 1884.<sup>8</sup> By that time, the 1687 date was considered accurate, and the Tile House came to be viewed as New Castle's John Hancock Mansion—a terrible loss, one not to be repeated.

One person interested in the lost Tile House was local artist Laussat Richter Rogers. Like others, he painted images of the old landmark, but his influence in New Castle went beyond painting. He carried out several

<sup>5</sup> Charles B. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926–1949*, 2 vols. (Charlottesville, 1981), 1:2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> John Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania*, 1844 edition, 2 vols., 2:539, cited in Thomas Beckman to Roderick Blackburn, Jan. 3, 1986, museum registrar's file, "Tile House—New Castle 1687 date irons," HSD.

<sup>8</sup> Beckman to Blackburn, Jan. 3, 1986, museum registrar's file, "Tile House—New Castle 1687 date irons," HSD.



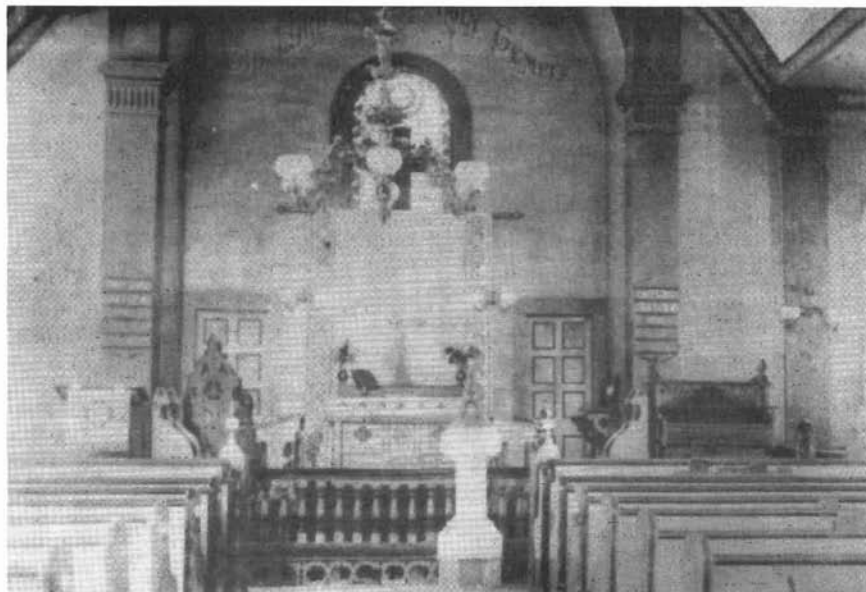
**FIGURE 1.** The Tile House, shortly before its demolition in 1884. Compare this photograph with the idealized view on the cover. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

restorations in New Castle in the early twentieth century, including those of the Amstel House and Immanuel Episcopal Church.<sup>9</sup>

The Amstel House, so named by the owners for whom Rogers did his restoration, was home to such prominent early Delawareans as Nicholas Van Dyke, acting president of Delaware between 1783 and 1786, and his son-in-law Kensey Johns, who served as state chancellor. Had Van Dyke and Johns not been famous in their own right, their place in history, along with that of the Amstel House, would nevertheless have been assured by the legend that George Washington visited the house for the wedding of Johns to Van Dyke's daughter Ann in 1784. The house changed hands several times in the decades following, ultimately suffering the indignity of having its spaces divided up after 1870 for use by

---

<sup>9</sup> Laussat Richter Rogers (1866–1957) was born in California but had close family ties to New Castle. After completing training as an architect in the 1890s, he returned to New Castle to live at Boothhurst, his family home just outside of town. An advocate of the colonial revival style of architecture, he was involved in several preservation projects in the town in the early twentieth century. He also founded the *New Amstel Magazine* in 1908, by which he claimed credit for “rescuing from oblivion the name of New Amstel” (Gene E. Harris, biographical essay in *Laussat Richter Rogers* [Chadds Ford, Pa., 1986], pp. 7–15).



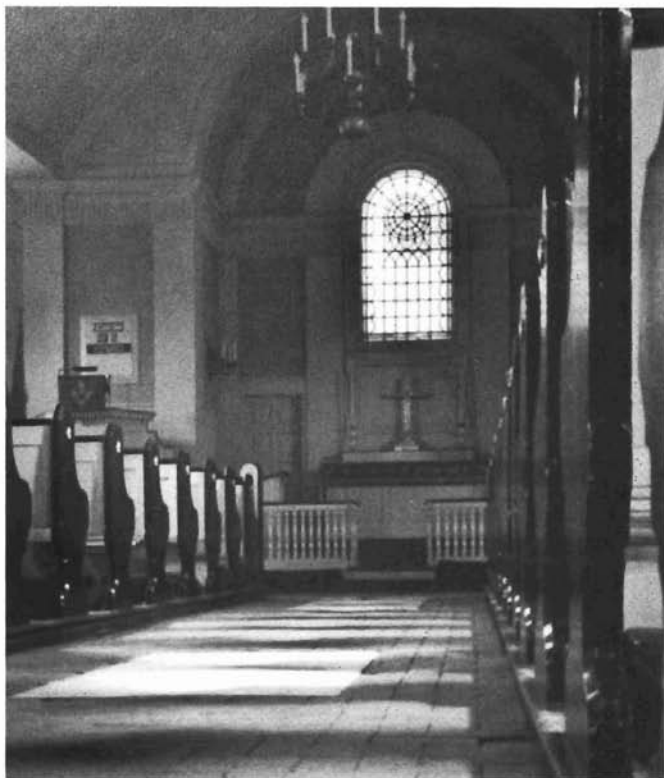
**FIGURE 2.** Interior of Immanuel Church during the Victorian era. (Collection of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

various tenants. Such destruction, however, was not sufficient to blot the vision of Washington's presence, so when the house was purchased by Rogers's relatives Sophia and Henry Hanby Hay, they commissioned him to restore its former splendor. The grandeur to which Rogers restored the house possibly exceeded its original stature, for he is believed to have added architectural elements to create an ideal colonial relic.<sup>10</sup>

Rogers's changes to Immanuel Church were part of a long series of renovations that began soon after the church was built in the early 1700s. It was enlarged several times in the eighteenth century, but the nineteenth century saw the most dramatic changes. In the 1820s William Strickland, formerly assistant to Benjamin Latrobe but by then one of the leading architects of the day, added the transepts and tower with its spire. Thereafter the church's exterior experienced few alterations, but its interior reflected changing tastes. In the 1850s, the sanctuary was Victorianized with the chancel recessed into the tower and a permanent altar installed against the backdrop of a large stained glass window, the whole crowned by an overarching gilt inscription, "The Lord is in His Holy Temple." By the early twentieth century, the backlash against the excesses of Victorian taste demanded the elimination of those influences

---

<sup>10</sup> Conversation with Kathy Bratton, director, New Castle Historical Society, May 21, 1990.



**FIGURE 3.** Interior of Immanuel Church, 1956, showing Laussat Rogers's colonial revival alterations. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

from a half century earlier. Rogers, a member of the church, was enlisted to make the changes.

In the early 1900s Rogers began "correcting" the Victorian Immanuel by introducing architectural details in the colonial revival style. He designed a new pulpit, altar, and lectern, and in 1918 he replaced the stained glass window.<sup>11</sup> The *Wilmington Every Evening*, greeting his efforts with accolades, described the earlier window as "a monstrosity" and Rogers's improvements as "rightly named, and not the kind that will make the heads of future generations hang in shame, because their forebearers had bad taste instead of good."<sup>12</sup>

Rogers also played a part in the restoration of the George Read II

---

<sup>11</sup> Christopher M. Agnew, "A Brief Architectural History of Immanuel Church" in *God With Us: a Continuing Presence and the Vital Records Taken from the Parish Registers of Immanuel Church, New Castle, Delaware*, ed. Christopher M. Agnew (New Castle, Del., 1986), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Wilmington Every Evening*, Nov. 23, 1918, cited in Agnew, p. 2.

House in the 1920s for its new owners, Philip and Lydia Laird. Both of the Lairds came from prominent Maryland families, but they met and married in Wilmington, where Philip was a partner in his brother's firm, Laird and Co. They acquired the Read House in 1920, and in 1925 Rogers was asked to create a rustic taproom in the basement of the house. A casual counterpart to the formal rooms upstairs, the space epitomized how freely early collectors brought together a hodgepodge of old artifacts to create an ideal colonial fantasy.<sup>13</sup>

Already a well-known property before the Lairds came to New Castle, the Read House fostered a sense of pride among townspeople. Built between 1797 and 1804 by George Read II, son of a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, it was considered pretentious when new, but by the early twentieth century its grandeur and patriotic associations endeared it to town residents. When the Lairds first saw the house in 1920 it was for sale, to the dismay of the local people. An editorial in the *Wilmington Every Evening* voiced the concerns of all those who knew the house:

It would be a grave crime to let the old house come into inappreciative ownership and to think of its being gutted of its treasures makes one shudder . . . [the] *Every Evening* feels, with most every citizen of the state, that the old house on the New Castle Strand should be under some sort of public control or ownership so that it would never be demolished nor dismantled.<sup>14</sup>

The Lairds' purchase of the Read House provided the means of achieving the editorialist's goal. They immediately set about restoring the house, although their "restoration" incorporated many changes to the building. They did not attempt to determine exactly how the structure had looked in George Read's day, nor to recreate his taste, but neither did they violate his intent. In fact, they did exactly what George Read had done one hundred years previously: they used their home to illustrate the epitome of fashion and good taste according to prevailing standards. Ultimately, through the Lairds' generosity, the Read House did become a museum open to the public, but that was decades in the future, and after the Lairds' influence on preservation in New Castle had moved beyond the sidewalks of the Strand.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Timothy J. Mullin, "In the Spirit of the Original: Fantasizing about the 18th Century with Phillip [sic] and Lydia Laird," interpretive essay, Mar. 1987 (hereafter cited as Mullin), p. 9, George Read II House, HSD.

<sup>14</sup> *Wilmington Every Evening*, Jun. 23, 1920, cited in Mullin.

<sup>15</sup> Lydia Laird gave the Read House to the Historical Society of Delaware in 1975. Since then it has undergone a thorough restoration to its early-nineteenth-century appearance, even to the restoration of the original brilliant paint colors, but the dining room,

The Read House first opened informally to the public in May 1924 as a featured attraction in the first "Day in Old New Castle." Still held every year, "A Day in Old New Castle" was organized by Anne Rodney Janvier, a descendant of George Read, as a fund-raiser for Immanuel Church. The first organized promotion of New Castle's historic treasures, the day provided a chance for the public to visit the old houses and sip tea served by hostesses in period costume. "If you're especially lucky," one writer tempted, "you may find yourself drinking a julep in a garden under lavender-blossomed paulownia trees."<sup>16</sup> Beyond this, the day also supplied New Castle's response to the Met's American Wing and the Immigration Act of 1924. Already possessing a substantial immigrant population in its West End, the town now had a way to instill proper American values into the foreigners residing so close to the colonial stronghold. The churches, the Court House, and the Old Town Hall reminded the public of the moral wisdom upon which the nation was founded, while the stately houses conveyed the quiet strength of home and hearth.

The Lairds' participation in "A Day in Old New Castle" led to their involvement in other preservation efforts in the town. In March 1929 the Amstel House, having changed hands after the Hanbys' restoration, was to be sold. Concerned that it would be altered or demolished, Philip Laird and other prominent townsfolk advocated the formation of a corporation to purchase the property. Touting the names of Nicholas Van Dyke, Kensey Johns, and George Washington, the group sought funds to preserve the house as a "model home of the Colonial period."<sup>17</sup> By December 1931, with the property purchased and free of debt, Laird, Richard S. Rodney, C. Douglass Buck, and Francis Janvier sought to establish a non-stock corporation to provide for the care of the building.<sup>18</sup> They advocated a self-perpetuating board of trustees, to ensure that "the building would always be in charge of those most interested in its preservation and welfare." They also recommended purchasing the adjoining lot, originally part of the Amstel House property, in order to remove a building that they perceived to be a fire hazard. At a meeting held on December 19, the attendees voted to incorporate the New Castle

---

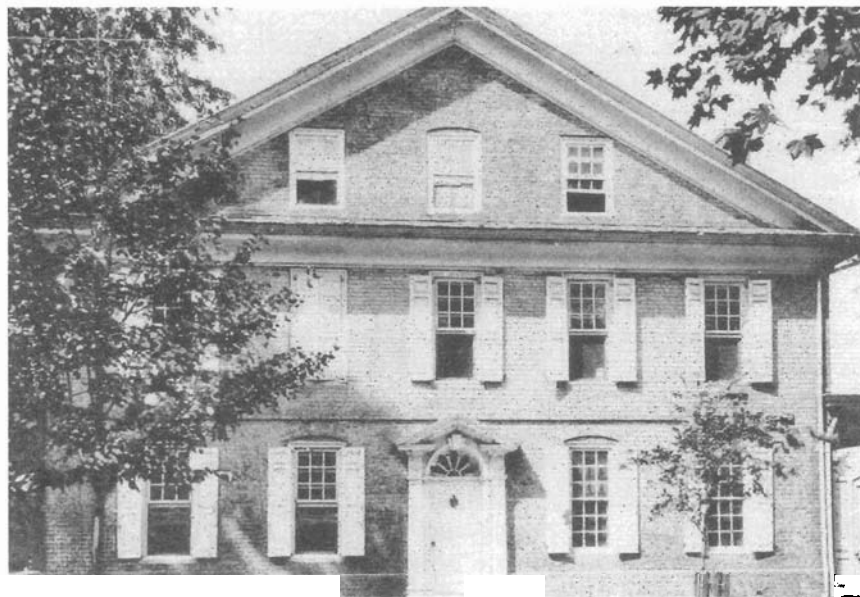
basement taproom, and one bedroom have been left as decorated by Lydia Laird in recognition of her generosity.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Higgins, *New Castle, Delaware, 1651-1939* (Boston, 1939), p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Open letter from Mary E. Shaw, Harriett M. Cavanaugh, Annie R. Janvier, C. Douglass Buck, Philip Laird, Richard S. Rodney, Mar. 5, 1929, files of the New Castle Historical Society (hereafter referred to as NCHS).

<sup>18</sup> From a New Castle family of long standing, Judge Richard S. Rodney (1882-1963) lived on Third Street and was intensely interested in anything relating to New Castle history. Elected president of the New Castle Historical Society in 1934, he held the position until his death in 1963. Francis Janvier (1874-1940) came from another old New Castle family. C. Douglass Buck (1890-1965) served as governor of Delaware from 1929 to 1937.





**FIGURE 4.** The Amstel House, 1919. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, which would be reincorporated in 1934 as the New Castle Historical Society. Among those elected to the board of directors was Philip Laird.<sup>19</sup>

While the New Castle Historical Society pursued its mission to preserve the Amstel House, another group organized with the intent of preserving all of New Castle. The Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities was founded in January 1937 with Mary Wilson Thompson as president. Prior to accepting her office, Thompson urged the leadership role upon another of the society's members, Col. Daniel Moore Bates. He declined the offer, claiming to be too busy in other enterprises to give the position the attention it deserved. He assured her, though, of his deep interest in the society, stating that Delaware provided a wonderful opportunity for such an endeavor, especially in the old town of New Castle.<sup>20</sup>

Bates was a native Delawarean, born in Wilmington in the year of the nation's centennial, 1876. Educated in private schools in Wilmington

---

<sup>19</sup> Letter from C. Douglass Buck, Philip Laird, Francis deH. Janvier, and Richard S. Rodney addressed "To the Patrons of Amstel House," Dec. 4, 1931, NCHS files; minutes of the board of directors, Dec. 19, 1931, minute book, NCHS; and certificate of incorporation, Jun. 1934, NCHS files.

<sup>20</sup> DMB to Mary Wilson Thompson, Dec. 31, 1936, Bates 69, Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities (hereafter referred to as DSPA) file.

and Philadelphia and a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he began his career in the textile industry with Joseph Bancroft & Sons Co. in Wilmington. He spent his working years with several textile and engineering firms and developed a strong interest in scientific management. During World War I, he served as a major and colonel in the ordnance department of the United States Army. In World War II, he spent two and one-half years teaching mathematics to servicemen at the University of Delaware. Bates did not own property in New Castle, but lived northwest of Wilmington in Centreville where his neighbors included Henry Francis du Pont and Louise du Pont Crowninshield, both of whom demonstrated great interest in preserving relics of the American past, and both of whom Bates counted as friends. It may have been their influence that encouraged him to pursue the possibilities of preservation in New Castle, which he viewed initially as an outlet for his creative energies as he retired from active business. So although he referred to New Castle casually as an area where the new Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities might find opportunity, his interest in the town was hardly casual.<sup>21</sup>

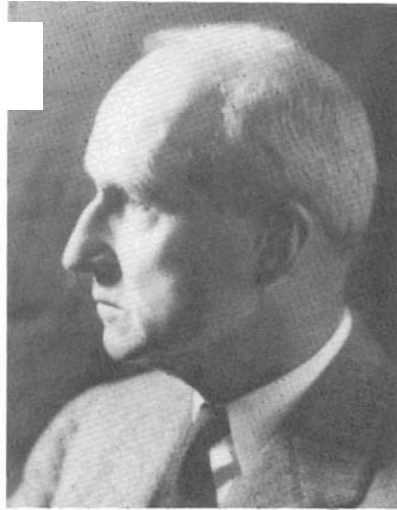
Bates's interest in New Castle extended at least as far back as 1933, when, as a member of the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Delaware, he received a communiqué from Electus D. Litchfield of the Society in the State of New York regarding the future of New Castle. The Society of Colonial Wars, an hereditary fraternity organized in 1892 to honor the memory of colonials who served in the military, included as part of its mission the preservation of historic sites. Litchfield had visited New Castle and believed the town could benefit from the society's influence. He encouraged Bates to work to have New Castle declared an historic monument and placed under the care of the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Delaware. He also suggested that while the state of Delaware itself need not purchase any property in the town, an arrangement might be worked out whereby property owners would maintain their homes in original condition and occasionally open them to the public in exchange for exemption from taxation.<sup>22</sup>

Bates took Litchfield's suggestions seriously and decided to pursue the possibility of seeing New Castle restored in the same manner as Williamsburg. In 1934 he wrote to the Reverend W. A. R. Goodwin, the Virginia clergyman who had captured Rockefeller's interest for Williamsburg, to inform him of the possibilities of New Castle. Goodwin wrote back at length. Already personally familiar with New Castle, he shared Bates's enthusiasm for its potential, but raised an issue that was

---

<sup>21</sup> DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, Apr. 10, 1946, Bates 69, Hepburn & Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn from Nov. 1, 1946 file.

<sup>22</sup> DMB to Electus D. Litchfield, Jun. 1933, Bates 69, DSPA file.



**FIGURE 5.** Daniel Moore Bates. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

to plague all of Bates's efforts: New Castle had no Rockefeller. The problems that Bates faced were different from those encountered in Williamsburg, where financial needs were supplied by one individual and the involvement of state and local agencies was limited. Goodwin stressed the need for concerted action and a strong national program for preservation to assist individuals and community groups, something not yet available to assist the New Castle effort.<sup>23</sup>

Bates hoped that the newly formed Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities would provide a pool of resources to help him fulfill his goal. He was, however, cautious in his approach, recognizing that potential supporters might be scared off by the difficulties they would come up against. One of the early meetings of the society, in the spring of 1937, featured Litchfield and Goodwin as speakers, their presence arranged by Bates. For the same meeting, he also invited his old friend and schoolmate Andrew Hepburn to make a presentation. Hepburn was a partner in the Boston architectural firm of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, which had carried out the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. Bates was candid in his invitation to Hepburn to speak at the society's May gathering:

The meeting Friday we want to devote to the subject of the work done at Williamsburg, . . . without laying too much stress upon New Castle. . . . There are some people among

---

<sup>23</sup> W. A. R. Goodwin to DMB, Mar. 23, 1934, Bates 69, DSPA file.

the older residents there who are very shy about committing themselves in any way to any sort of outside regulation, or zoning restrictions, etc., and we do not want to try to shape up any New Castle program until interest generally in these matters has been aroused, and until the possible leaders in Delaware in such a movement can have the benefit of consultation and advice from yourself and Dr. Goodwin and Mr. Litchfield.<sup>24</sup>

After the May meeting, Electus Litchfield wrote to Mary Thompson recommending the immediate organization of a foundation that would strive to preserve New Castle in perpetuity. The first priority of this foundation would be to sponsor a survey of the town to determine which of the buildings should be designated historic monuments. Among those he recommended for a seat on the committee were Philip Laird and Daniel Moore Bates.<sup>25</sup>

The Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities prepared to take on that role of preserving New Castle through its efforts to preserve the so-called Old Dutch House on Third Street. Bates wrote to W. A. R. Goodwin in July 1937 that the society stood a good chance of obtaining at least the control of, and possibly the title to, that ancient building; by December, the society owned the house. Five members of the society—H. Rodney Sharp, Alfred Bissell, Mrs. William C. Spruance, Mrs. Macmillan Hoopes, and Bates—underwrote the purchase cost of \$2,500. In a letter sent to members of the finance committee announcing the purchase of the house, committee chairman Bates reported that an additional \$7,500 would be needed to renew the building's understructure and foundation, which had suffered from termites. Beyond the money required to restore the building's structural integrity, still more would have to be raised to furnish the house. Bates concluded his letter by stating that the financial support of the entire society and of all Delawareans would be needed to preserve the Dutch House.<sup>26</sup>

The society and the public responded enthusiastically. In January 1938, the underwriters' money was refunded because the purchase price had been raised from contributions. Restoration went on through 1938. Furnished with period artifacts, most provided by society member Louise du Pont Crowninshield, the restored house was included in *New Castle, Delaware: 1651–1939*, a book published by the society that featured photographs of New Castle landmarks. By 1940, \$7,500 had been

---

<sup>24</sup> DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, May 5, 1937, Bates 69, DSPA file.

<sup>25</sup> Electus D. Litchfield to Mary Wilson Thompson, Jun. 1937, Bates 69, DSPA file.

<sup>26</sup> DMB to Alfred E. Bissell, Dec. 12, 1937, Bates 69, Laird file; and DMB to W. A. R. Goodwin Jul. 13, 1937, and DMB to Mrs. H. B. Thompson, Philip Laird, Alfred E. Bissell, Mrs. Francis deH. Janvier, and H. Rodney Sharp, Dec. 27, 1937, Bates 69, DSPA file.

foundation to sponsor a survey of the town and identify sites worthy of preservation. And he remembered Litchfield's recommendation that Philip Laird be included on the committee to organize that foundation.<sup>28</sup>

Philip Laird had a keen interest in the formation of such a foundation. He wanted to assure the preservation of the Read House by giving the property to such an organization, subject to the Lairds' retention of life interest. Toward that end he began corresponding with Bates's friend Andrew Hepburn regarding a systematic preservation of New Castle. Hepburn in turn arranged for Kenneth Chorley, president of Colonial Williamsburg, to come to New Castle to meet with Laird and Bates. Chorley, enthusiastic about New Castle's possibilities, reiterated Litchfield's suggestion that a comprehensive survey must be the first order of business. To capture the imagination of a potential benefactor, skillfully rendered sketches of a fully restored town would say what words could not. The existence of Colonial Williamsburg proved this, for it was just such a portfolio that secured Rockefeller's backing for that project.<sup>29</sup>

Chorley's reference to Rockefeller echoed Goodwin's earlier caution, but others pondered the question of sponsorship as well. In 1938, an anonymous letter in the *Sunday Star* spoke of the need for a benefactor to renovate and preserve New Castle's wharf area, claiming that the town could vie with Williamsburg if a sponsor could be found to finance the work.<sup>30</sup> Yet some residents were not inclined to have New Castle systematically restored. Many families had roots in the town that reached back generations and were proud of the town just as it was. Perhaps some resented the interference of a newcomer like Laird, or the meddlesomeness of an outsider like Bates. Possibly they questioned the men's motivation. Laird owned several choice properties in New Castle. Then in 1939, through his newly organized New Castle Improvements Corporation, he purchased the Jefferson House on the Strand to renovate as a colonial inn and restaurant. He informed potential investors that Battery Park, recently acquired by the city, would be cleaned up in the near future, and that all buildings in the park and on the wharf adjoining the Jefferson House property should be removed as well, allowing hotel guests a fine view of the river. Laird's membership on the Battery Park Commission put him in an influential position, and as the proprietor of a colonial inn in the heart of a restored New Castle, he stood to profit handsomely.<sup>31</sup> Bates reported to Hepburn that "some of

---

<sup>28</sup> Electus D. Litchfield to Mary Wilson Thompson, Jun. 1937, Bates 69, DSPA file.

<sup>29</sup> DMB to Kenneth Chorley, Nov. 15, 1948, Bates 69, Laird file; and Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 1:69.

<sup>30</sup> *Wilmington Sunday Star*, May 29, 1938, clipping in Bates 68.

<sup>31</sup> Philip D. Laird to DMB, Oct. 26, 1939, Bates 69, Laird file. Laird stated that



**FIGURE 7.** Philip Laird's proposed development of the Jefferson House at The Strand and Delaware Street into a colonial inn. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

the New Castle people are not very enthusiastic about Mr. Laird's plans."<sup>32</sup>

One part of the plan about which Laird was not enthusiastic was the cost for the preliminary drawings. Andrew Hepburn told the New Castle group that a set of presentation sketches could be prepared for about \$15,000. Chorley explained that this outlay would be an investment against future gate receipts, which while not on the scale of Williamsburg's, could be sizeable.<sup>33</sup> All agreed that the sketches were essential, but as they debated the feasibility of obtaining the necessary funds, World War II began, putting the project on hold.

After the war, the prospects for New Castle changed somewhat. Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, now well known for their work at Williamsburg and other sites, increased their fee for the comprehensive survey to \$20,000. At the same time, the project took on an air of greater urgency as spreading industrial development encroached upon New Castle.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Philip Laird's involvement in the project diminished due to illness. It fell to Daniel Moore Bates to carry the plan forward.

Bates realized that the chances of success were limited if they depended solely upon his resources. He turned for assistance to his friend Louise du Pont Crowninshield, already known in New Castle for her efforts to preserve the Dutch House on Third Street for the Delaware

---

considering the historic interest in New Castle, it was necessary that there be an attractive inn for people to visit, and for this purpose he formed the New Castle Improvements Corporation. The new firm was a completely separate entity with no ties to Laird and Co.

<sup>32</sup> DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, Oct. 1, 1940, cited in Mullin, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 1:69.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew H. Hepburn, "New Castle," introductory essay to the Preliminary Survey by Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, Architects, Dec. 22, 1947, HSD.

Society for the Preservation of Antiquities. He informed her in September 1946 that Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn were prepared to do a preliminary survey and additional research work if the \$20,000 they required could be raised. "I am so much interested in the New Castle project," he continued, "that with your backing of experience and interest and such financial help as you may be able to give, I am prepared to underwrite."<sup>35</sup> She responded that she thought it a marvelous project and one she hoped would be successful, but that her own investment would be small because of her involvement with other charitable endeavors.<sup>36</sup> In spite of that cautious response, Bates immediately linked Mrs. Crowninshield's name to his own as cosponsor of the New Castle project.

Bates wasted no time in sending out a confidential letter informing some few "representative residents" of New Castle that an opportunity was forthcoming at which a small group of interested persons could meet with Andrew Hepburn and Kenneth Chorley to discuss options. Those invited to the meeting, held at the Amstel House, had already demonstrated an interest in preservation through leadership in the New Castle Historical Society and the Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities. The letter began Bates's selective involvement of influential people in his plans, a practice that he followed meticulously and that rewarded his efforts.<sup>37</sup> Bates reported to Mrs. Crowninshield that the meeting was a success. He wrote glowingly of the inspiring presentation given by Kenneth Chorley, who appealed to the company's sense of noblesse oblige in urging them to preserve their town for the benefit of generations to come.<sup>38</sup> To Andrew Hepburn, he wrote of his astonishment "at the enthusiastic reception of the idea by the people representing New Castle who were at the meeting."<sup>39</sup> Believing he now possessed the interest necessary to carry out his plan (and hoping that the financial backing would follow), Bates, with Chorley acting as advisor, made a contract with Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn to begin their survey.

Bates labored unceasingly for the next two and one half years to bring the survey to the point at which it could be presented to the public. The

<sup>35</sup> DMB to Louise du Pont Crowninshield, Sep. 3, 1946, Bates 68, New Castle—Crowninshield correspondence file.

<sup>36</sup> Louise du Pont Crowninshield to DMB, Sep. 13, 1946, Bates 68, New Castle—Crowninshield correspondence file.

<sup>37</sup> DMB and Louise du Pont Crowninshield to potential sponsors, Oct. 3, 1946, Bates 68, New Castle Historical Society file. The potential sponsors included Mr. and Mrs. Newlin Booth, Mr. and Mrs. J. Danforth Bush, Jr., Mr. John J. B. Cooper, Miss Mary Cooper, Mr. and Mrs. Horace Deakyne, Mr. and Mrs. James T. Eliason, Jr., Mr. and Mrs. J. Rogers Holcomb, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Holcomb 3rd, Mr. Albert Kruse, Miss Gertrude Kruse, Mr. and Mrs. Philip D. Laird, and Mr. and Mrs. Richard S. Rodney.

<sup>38</sup> DMB to Louise du Pont Crowninshield, Oct. 29, 1946, Bates 68, New Castle Historical Society file.

<sup>39</sup> DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, Oct. 28, 1946, Bates 68, Correspondence—Hepburn file.

work progressed under the umbrella of Historic Research, Inc., a non-profit corporation that Bates established so that contributions to the preservation effort would be deductible from the income taxes of the donors. Nevertheless, the greatest stumbling block proved to be obtaining financial backing. Anxious to make the report public in hopes that more money would thus be forthcoming, Bates chafed at having to keep the work secret to keep real estate speculators from moving in. A letter sent out to potential benefactors, including several du Ponts, proved unsuccessful. Responses such as H. F. du Pont's were typical: he wrote that while interested and happy to give some time to the project, his financial contribution would necessarily be small because his funds were committed elsewhere. Others, while interested, did not wish to be publicly associated with the project. Lamot du Pont Copeland contributed to the effort, but when Bates wanted to list him as an underwriter, he refused, stating that merely showing interest did not make him a sponsor. The greatest single contribution that Bates received was not monetary, but rather the generosity of Louise Crowninshield in allowing her name to be associated with the project. She realized that Bates needed a name attached to his endeavor that would draw others to the bandwagon, if only in the interest of vicarious association. Unfortunately, prestige alone did not pay the architects. In the end, Bates contributed over \$15,000 to the cost of the survey. He wrote to a friend, "Sometimes this New Castle work . . . has made me feel like a traveler along a lonely road."<sup>40</sup>

In addition to paying for the bulk of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn's work through his firm Historic Research, Inc., Bates found himself contributing to other associated activities, hoping to see some return from his efforts. He arranged for some New Castle merchants and councilmen to go to Williamsburg to see the commercial prosperity that resulted from the restoration there. He also paid at least part of the cost for the "loan" of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn to the New Castle Presbyterian Church, then undergoing a simultaneous, but ostensibly unrelated, restoration of its church building built in 1707.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, Jun. 26, 1946, Bates 68, New Castle . . . the New Castle Historical Society meeting file; Henry Francis du Pont to DMB, Nov. 27, 1946, Winterthur Archives, Box 248, "Daniel Moore Bates," Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware; Lamot du Pont Copeland to DMB, Jan. 19, 1949, Bates 68, New Castle—Misc. Correspondence 1949 file; Louise du Pont Crowninshield to DMB, Jan. 18, 1949, Bates 69, Crowninshield correspondence 1949 file; DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, Nov. 3, 1948, Bates 68, Hepburn and Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn correspondence, Report file; and DMB to Katherine Callery, Jun. 18, 1949, Bates 68.

<sup>41</sup> DMB to Henry N. Haut, Oct. 22, 1948, Bates 68, New Castle—Shops file. In fact the two projects were closely allied through the association of Bates and James T. Eliason, Jr., president of the board of trustees of the New Castle Presbyterian Church (Bates 68, New Castle Presbyterian Church file).



As the time neared for the report of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn to be publicized, Bates focused his attention upon its format and presentation. He told Andrew Hepburn that he questioned the partners' decision to stress the architectural importance of the New Castle buildings, as he believed emphasis on their historical importance would have more appeal for the general public.<sup>42</sup> As a result, historian Jeannette Eckman joined the project.<sup>43</sup> Her research into the histories of New Castle properties dispelled some myths and provided the final report with another hook by which to capture the townsfolk's attention.

Bates also stressed that the actual presentation at a public meeting would need to be visually strong, suggesting the use of slides, diagrams, and photographs to attract attention. He desired some sort of publication, a brochure or pamphlet, that could be distributed at the meeting and which would summarize important points. Here Bates turned for advice to Charles Lee Reese, managing editor of the *Wilmington News-Journal* and member of the Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, and his colleague Anthony Higgins, who had written the text of *New Castle, Delaware: 1651–1939*. Reese suggested a question-and-answer format that would address why preservation should be undertaken, what had already been done, what remained to be done, and how an individual might contribute. He also suggested including in the pamphlet postcard reproductions of some of the restoration projects proposed for New Castle, including the restored shop fronts on Delaware Street and a resurrected Tile House on the Strand, to serve as visual reminders of the goals of the project.<sup>44</sup> In addition, he recommended that Bates contact Nicholas McIntire, editor of the *New Castle Gazette*, to enlist his assistance with further publicity and development. The decision to involve the local newsmen at the start of the project proved invaluable. In the months leading up to the presentation of the report, McIntire often touted the historic and architectural value of New Castle in his paper and encouraged the preservation of New Castle's buildings as a way to insure prosperity. Once the report was made public, both he and Reese wrote favorable editorials on the subject for their respective papers and provided complimentary reviews of the progress made.

The report of the preliminary survey by Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn was announced at a meeting held June 15, 1949, in the Old Academy on the Green in New Castle. The date appears an inspired choice, for on

---

<sup>42</sup> DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, Apr. 21, 1937, Bates 68, New Castle Report file.

<sup>43</sup> Jeannette Eckman (1882–1972) was known for her untiring research in New Castle where she supervised the Delaware Federal Writers' Project that resulted in the publication of *Delaware: a Guide to the First State* (1938) and *New Castle on the Delaware* (1936).

<sup>44</sup> DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, Sep. 10, 1947, and DMB to Hepburn, Oct. 22, 1948, Bates 68, New Castle Report file.

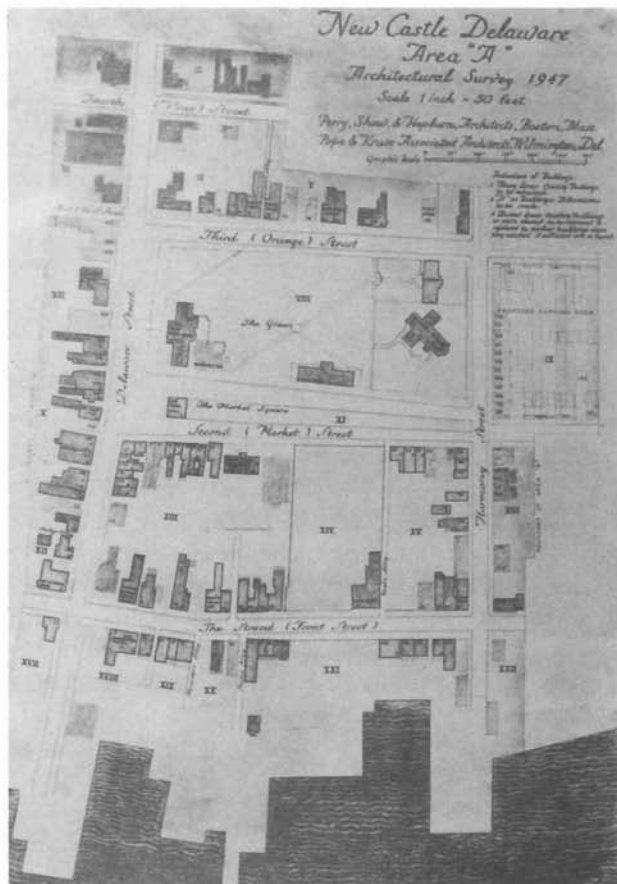


FIGURE 8. Map of Area "A," from survey by Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, 1947. The map showed which houses were to be preserved, altered, or removed. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

that same day in Washington, Congressman J. Hardin Peterson of Florida introduced into the House of Representatives Bill No. 5170 calling for "public participation in the preservation of sites, buildings, and objects of national significance or interest and providing a national trust for historic preservation."<sup>45</sup> In actuality, Bates had wanted to have the meeting back in May, around the time of "A Day in Old New Castle," but June 15 was the only day on which both Hepburn and Chorley could attend. Bates felt it imperative that these men be present, Hepburn

<sup>45</sup> U.S., Congress, House, *A Bill to Further the Policy Enunciated in the Historic Sites Act (49 Stat. 666) and to Facilitate Public Participation in the Preservation of Sites, Buildings, and Objects of National Significance or Interest and Providing a National Trust for Historic Preservation*, H.R. 5170, 81st Cong., 1st sess., 1949, p. 1.

because he had prepared so much of the report, and Chorley because he was Chorley. Williamsburg's president knew how to arouse an audience, and he gave full measure to the several hundred citizens who attended the meeting. He described them as trustees who had the responsibility of preserving New Castle's old buildings for the future. He addressed their economic sensibilities by describing the prosperity that Williamsburg experienced after undergoing systematic restoration. Finally he appealed to their sense of patriotism:

Upon completion of your plan, New Castle will become a reminder that one of the greatest faiths of all ages of civilized man is the faith we know today as Democracy. . . . The physical measure of our achievement as a people is merely an evidence of the tremendous constructive force which comes into existence when men and women are free to think, to speak, to achieve. . . . If you believe in your heritage; if you believe that the future may learn from the past; if you believe that the question of human liberty and freedom is 'unfinished business'; if you believe in Democracy; if you believe in the future of this country and of the world, . . . then I look forward with every confidence to the day when New Castle will stand restored and preserved as one more beacon light and symbol of free men.<sup>46</sup>

Andrew Hepburn described the survey, explaining the rating of buildings in the proposed historic section and emphasizing that because of the wonderful care townsfolk had bestowed upon their property, very few structures were slated for removal.<sup>47</sup> "What you have," he told them, "is so great that all you have to do is preserve it." Hepburn described the plan not as a mandate, but as a resource for residents, even for those who might put off restoration for some time.<sup>48</sup> The whole event was well orchestrated. Bates was careful to plant people in the audience to ask questions, and he chose Judge Rodney, a familiar and respected figure in the town, to preside over the meeting.

---

<sup>46</sup> "Restoration Project Is Seen As Leading to Great Prosperity," *New Castle Gazette*, Jun. 17, 1949.

<sup>47</sup> The Preliminary Report compiled by Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn consisted of scale drawings of the front elevations of all houses within the designated historic area "A" along with considerable historical background on each houses compiled by Jeannette Eckman. It also included a plan of Historic area "A" indicating which houses were to be preserved ("P"), altered ("A"), and removed ("R"), and some sketches of proposed restorations, along with procedural recommendations. Copies of the report may be seen at the Historical Society of Delaware, the New Castle Historical Society, and at the New Castle Public Library (photocopy).

<sup>48</sup> "Restoration Project Is Seen As Leading To Great Prosperity," *New Castle Gazette*, Jun. 17, 1949.



**FIGURE 9.** Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn's sketch of the proposed restoration of The Strand, including the rebuilt Tile House, 1947. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

In general, the response to the presentation was overwhelmingly positive. Bates received many glowing letters, and favorable reviews appeared in the local and Wilmington papers. In the following weeks, only one letter appeared in the *New Castle Gazette* questioning the wisdom of the proposal. The anonymous writer protested, "I can not understand how it is proposed to destroy a number of the buildings . . . listed for removal from the present scene. . . . [I]t just does not seem logical . . . to destroy buildings of a sturdy type that are serving a useful purpose. I think that many others who think through the proposal will see this as I do." Nicholas McIntire responded, "The ultimate aim is not to tear down buildings, but to replace . . . structures which are incongruous. . . . Our own personal feeling is, that some buildings which have been marked for eventual removal, might possibly be remodeled. . ."<sup>49</sup>

The protester had cause for concern, considering the scope of the project. Hepburn played down the magnitude of the proposed restoration, but the plan called for demolishing some fifty buildings. Fifty more were to be altered. Many structures slated for removal were important in the life of the community, including the library, the Masonic Hall, the Hotel Louise, the New Castle Club, the Presbyterian Church built in 1854, and an entire block of houses north of Harmony Street. Nicholas McIntire, who supported the plan, unintentionally revealed the importance of some of those buildings when he suggested renovation rather

<sup>49</sup> Anonymous, "A Letter To The Editor," *New Castle Gazette*, Jun. 24, 1949.

than demolition. Elsewhere he noted that some residents undoubtedly would feel nostalgic at the loss of the familiar landmarks.<sup>50</sup> In a related vein, James Eliason, president of the Board of Trustees of the New Castle Presbyterian Church, had written to Bates shortly after the congregation voted to restore the colonial church and demolish the 1854 building. He was eager to proceed with the work before members had time to reflect on how much the Gothic church had meant in their lives, and regret their decision to tear it down.<sup>51</sup>

Few people publicly protested the restoration scheme, in part because most buildings slated for demolition were less than one hundred years old. Many Americans at mid-century reacted to the turmoil of industrialization and global responsibility with nostalgia for the perceived simplicity of preindustrial life. Thus they revered artifacts of the colonial era and despised those from the more recent past. Many New Castilians participated fully in that colonial revivalist ideal. McIntire's and Eliason's words nevertheless reflected Bates's concern that the project be proposed in a way that would avoid alienating residents opposed to change. Thus Hepburn touted how much of the town would remain intact, rather than how much would be altered. Two years later, after various restoration projects were already underway in accordance with the plan, Mrs. J. Danforth Bush, in an address before the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings, still emphasized, "We do not intend to rebuild the town in one fell swoop—we would be run out of town if we tried."<sup>52</sup>

Although Bates received many favorable comments following the presentation, a major benefactor did not appear. This was a crushing blow. He had counted on all of the good publicity to entice someone to take on the challenge of restoring New Castle, but all his corporation, reincorporated as Historic New Castle, Inc., received to carry out the program was a single endowment grant of \$1000.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Bates did not give up hope entirely. He still had a few cards left to play. First, he looked to Lydia Laird.

Long before the June meeting, Bates had been communicating with Lydia Laird about the possibility of her relinquishing her New Castle properties to his company for preservation, thus fulfilling the desire that

<sup>50</sup> "New Castle is Talking About," *New Castle Gazette*, Jun. 17, 1949.

<sup>51</sup> James T. Eliason to DMB, May 20, 1947, and DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, May 29, 1947, Bates 68, N. Castle—Old Presbyterian Church file.

<sup>52</sup> "New Castle Goes Forward with Restoration—A Review of Past Achievements and Present Plans," excerpts from a presentation by Mrs. J. Danforth Bush to the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings, Oct. 19, 1951, in *New Castle Gazette*, Nov. 1951.

<sup>53</sup> After the report of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn was presented to the public Historic Research, Inc., was reincorporated as Historic New Castle, Inc. Bates had felt it prudent to adopt the name Historic Research, Inc., so as to prevent tipping off real estate speculators to the interest in New Castle.

her husband Philip had expressed back in 1940. He had died in 1947, but Bates credited him with inspiring his pursuit of the preservation of New Castle. He assured Lydia Laird that a way could be found by which she would retain life interest in the properties, yet at the same time create "a Foundation in memory of your husband and yourself which would insure old New Castle's going on through the years intact and beautiful and ever grateful to the Laird family for making possible its lasting conservation."<sup>54</sup> Bates enlisted the aid of Kenneth Chorley, who explained to Laird at length the process by which Williamsburg residents retained life tenancy in their historic homes while at the same time enjoying freedom from property taxes, insurance payments, and maintenance costs. Lydia Laird repeatedly expressed her interest in carrying out her husband's wishes, even publicly stating her desire to give the Read House to a foundation, but she could not bring herself to take action. Bates blamed the financial circumstances of Historic New Castle, Inc. Since he had been unable to obtain sufficient backing to guarantee the company's solvency, he did not blame Laird for her reluctance to entrust the care of her properties to the firm. Equally frustrating for him was the realization that if she could be enticed to give the Read House to Historic New Castle, Inc., her gift would be the galvanizing force the firm needed to attract more benefactors.<sup>55</sup>

Failing in his negotiations with Lydia Laird, Bates focused his attention upon the upcoming celebration of the tercentenary of the founding of New Castle, as he believed the excitement created by the celebration might be transferred to his preservation plans. Unfortunately, there did not appear to be much interest in the tercentenary among New Castle's residents. Once again, it fell to Bates to get the ball rolling. His associate, Jeannette Eckman, wrote a letter to the *Sunday Morning Star* "after waiting till the last hour for New Castle people to make the move," urging the celebration of the New Castle tercentenary and the appropriation of funds by the state legislature to establish a commission to plan the events. Her efforts resulted in a \$5,000 appropriation, which Bates dismissed as "a paltry sum," stating that he had hoped for an appropriation of up to \$100,000 to do major restoration on the old Court House.<sup>56</sup>

Not one to be daunted by lack of funds, Bates took on the task of planning a tercentenary celebration for New Castle, even traveling to the Netherlands to arrange participation by the Dutch government. He also leapt at the opportunity to have an exhibit at the Library of Congress

---

<sup>54</sup> DMB to Lydia C. Laird, Mar. 1948, Bates 69, Laird file.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Chorley to Lydia C. Laird, Jun. 20, 1949, memorandum of Jul. 14, 1949, and DMB to Kenneth Chorley, Jun. 9, 1950, Bates 69, Laird file.

<sup>56</sup> Jeannette Eckman to DMB, Jun. 17, 1949, clipping from *Wilmington Sunday Morning Star*, Apr. 3, 1949, and DMB to Jeannette Eckman, Jun. 18, 1949, Bates 68, New Castle—Misc. Correspondence 1949.

that would honor New Castle's tercentenary. Among the items included in the exhibit were Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn's illustrations of a restored New Castle.<sup>57</sup> Bates considered the celebration and the exhibit his best opportunity to generate national interest in New Castle, resulting, he hoped, in a benefactor coming forward.

When no "angel," as Bates described his non-existent benefactor, revealed himself after the tercentenary celebration, Bates turned his attention to the old Court House. The restoration of the Court House had been a priority to Bates since the contract discussions with Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn in 1946, although he found it expedient to support other projects, such as the restoration of the Presbyterian Church and the alterations to the shop facades on Delaware Street, rather than push for the Court House restoration due to the extreme cost of that undertaking. At the time of the tercentenary, more people began to call for the restoration of that historic structure. The old building housed a restaurant, which, some feared, might be a fire hazard; it was Bates's intention that once the building was restored and preserved, it would be taken over by Historic New Castle, Inc., to operate as a museum. Although the Court House was owned by the state, provision had been made for its operation as a museum in 1915. Even at that early date, the building was recognized as being of significant historic value and worthy of preservation. The state legislature passed a resolution providing that "... if any Historical Society now incorporated or that may be incorporated under the laws of the State desires to use the said old State House at New Castle for administrative and museum purposes, that the commissioners ... shall turn the building over to the said Historical Society."<sup>58</sup>

Although there was widespread interest in restoring the Court House, the cost factor and the governmental red tape were daunting. The preliminary survey alone, necessary before restoration could begin, cost \$18,000. A benefactor for this project did appear in the person of H. Rodney Sharp, well known among Delaware preservationists for his restoration of the town of Odessa. Louise Crowninshield managed to interest Sharp in the project, and he offered to put up half of the funds required by Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn to do the job. Having failed in his efforts to get Lydia Laird to donate the Read House to Historic New Castle, Inc., Bates saw the Court House project as his final chance to demonstrate the validity of his intentions. He wrote to Sharp that his offer was just the spark needed to get New Castle "on its mettle," and that he hoped assistance would be forthcoming from the Trustees of

---

<sup>57</sup> *Old New Castle and Modern Delaware: The Tercentenary of the Founding of New Castle by the Dutch* (Washington, D.C., 1951).

<sup>58</sup> "Old Capital, State's No. 1 Shrine, Target for Restoration," *New Castle Gazette*, Jun. 15, 1951. The 1915 legislation cited the building's status as the oldest courthouse in the country and concern that it be fireproofed as reasons for its preservation.



**FIGURE 10.** Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn's sketch of the proposed restoration of Delaware Street opposite Market Street, 1947. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

New Castle Common through Bates's influence with trustees sympathetic to his endeavour. Not willing to rely even on his close associates to provide the rest of the money, Bates told Sharp in confidence that while he was not feeling too financially secure at the moment, he valued the opportunity to save the Court House and would provide the other \$9,000 himself.<sup>59</sup> Louise Crowninshield then offered to contribute half of Bates's share, but ultimately the Trustees of New Castle Common did come through, and neither Bates nor Crowninshield had to contribute towards the project. Even so, the preliminary survey revealed that a difficult and expensive project was at hand. The restoration took years, and once again Bates lost the opportunity to have a significant restoration project associated with Historic New Castle, Inc.

Although Bates failed to secure a sound financial base for his firm, he did triumph in obtaining zoning regulations for the town. This had been a primary goal of his since the 1930s and by 1950 the townspeople agreed that the town center should be protected from undesirable development. Their motivation was not necessarily preservation of the historic buildings for their own sake. One faction wanted to force a long-established tavern out of business because it operated in what they considered to be a residential district.<sup>60</sup> Many businessmen desired a

<sup>59</sup> DMB to H. Rodney Sharp, Jul. 18, 1950, Bates 69, New Castle—H. Rodney Sharp file.

<sup>60</sup> Clipping, "The Zoning Matter Illustrated," *New Castle Gazette*, Nov. 17, 1950, Bates 69, New Castle Clippings—Misc. file.



restored town because they had been informed repeatedly by Bates and others of Williamsburg's prosperity. Yet increasingly people came to favor preservation because they saw New Castle as a place worth protecting.

In the early 1950s the New Castle City Council turned to Bates for advice on establishing suitable zoning ordinances. He secured for them copies of zoning ordinances from Williamsburg and other historic cities which served as the models for New Castle's plan. New Castle's proposal included establishing a board of architectural review to include at least two city residents and an architect recognized as a specialist on historic buildings. Town meetings enabled residents to voice their opinions regarding the proposed ordinances, with favorable results. The only criticism in the local paper came from realtors, who disliked the strict setback requirements for new construction. Most residents within the proposed historic district approved the proposal, and some asked that the boundaries of the historic section, where the strictest regulations would pertain, be enlarged. This delighted Bates as it displayed the growing support for preservation.<sup>61</sup>

In spite of his success with the zoning ordinances, Bates's inability to obtain either a benefactor for New Castle or a major restoration project for Historic New Castle, Inc., was a constant frustration for him. By the early 1950s he was seriously considering curtailing his activity in New Castle and in historic preservation in general. After a serious automobile accident left him hospitalized for months early in 1952, Bates wrote Louise Crowninshield that he had in recent years been "endeavoring to get out of my various commitments and responsibilities in this and other connections."<sup>62</sup> Crowninshield was unwilling to let him go so easily and tempted him with a request to accept membership on the National Council of Historic Sites and Buildings' regional committee for the mid-Atlantic states. As a member of the National Council since 1949, Bates felt such respect for the organization and the efforts Louise Crowninshield had made on its behalf that he accepted the position.<sup>63</sup> However, by 1953 he desired to withdraw as president of Historic New Castle, Inc., and turn the mantle of authority over to another of the firm's trustees, Daniel Wolcott; but Wolcott protested, saying "You are the driving force

---

<sup>61</sup> Undated memorandum, Bates 69, New Castle Misc. Correspondence 1951 file; clippings, "Public Hearing on Zoning Ordinance Scheduled Tuesday," *New Castle Gazette*, Oct. 19, 1951, and "New Castle Sets Zoning Meeting," *Wilmington Morning News*, Nov. 5, 1951, Bates 68, New Castle—Zoning file; and DMB to Henry N. Haut, Nov. 24, 1951, Bates 69, New Castle Misc. Correspondence 1951 file.

<sup>62</sup> DMB to Louise du Pont Crowninshield, Apr. 11, 1952, Bates 69.

<sup>63</sup> Louise du Pont Crowninshield to DMB, Jan. 23, 1952, and DMB to Louise du Pont Crowninshield, Apr. 11, 1952, Bates 69.

which has progressed the matter thus far.”<sup>64</sup> It was not for Bates to carry the matter any further, however, as he died in Wilmington on February 23, 1953.

By 1953, Daniel Moore Bates likely considered his efforts to preserve New Castle only partially successful. In a letter to Andrew Hepburn in 1948, Bates outlined his priorities for New Castle. They included the restoration of the early-eighteenth-century Presbyterian Church and the removal of its mid-nineteenth-century counterpart, the restoration of the shops along Delaware Street, the removal of the old library and the Masonic Hall, the reconstruction of the Tile House, the restoration of the Court House, and the building of a colonial-style hotel on Battery Park adjacent to the town.<sup>65</sup> Five years later, the Presbyterian Church had been restored and work was underway on the Court House, but these accomplishments had been achieved without a substantial contribution from Historic New Castle, Inc., as the firm had never obtained an endowment sufficient to fund any restoration project. Likewise several buildings on Delaware Street and elsewhere in town had been restored, but by their owners rather than by Bates's corporation.

While Bates chafed at his role as advisor and strove to obtain the financial backing that would enable him to take a more active part in the preservation of New Castle, it is probable that he failed to see the significance of his contribution to the town. While there were earlier scattered attempts at preservation in New Castle through the work of Laus-sat Rogers, Philip Laird, the New Castle Historical Society, and the Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, Bates's years of concentrated activity galvanized efforts to preserve the town. His decision to involve national players in the field of preservation such as Kenneth Chorley and the architectural firm of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn made New Castle's people more fully aware of their town's historic significance and encouraged their efforts to preserve it.

Modern preservationists are relieved that the “restoration” plan espoused by Bates and Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, which advocated demolishing many significant buildings, never came to fruition, for it would have resulted in a fantasy town that presented a false history of New Castle. Such selective history was typical of the colonial revivalist ideals of the first half of the twentieth century, but now preservationists recognize that all buildings have their stories to tell, that no single time period is more “historical” than another, and that a community's vitality

---

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Wolcott to DMB, Jan. 7, 1953, Bates 69, Historic New Castle, Inc., 1949 file.

<sup>65</sup> DMB to Andrew H. Hepburn, Dec. 15, 1948, Bates 68, Hepburn and Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn correspondence, Report file.



**FIGURE 11.** Aerial view of New Castle, no date. The Read House is in the lower right; the Victorian Presbyterian church, demolished in the late 1940s, is in the upper left. (Collections of the Historical Society of Delaware.)

over the centuries is discernible only when all of its architectural and cultural manifestations are respected.

Today most of New Castle's architectural gems from all time periods remain more or less intact, but support for preservation is not universal. Some residents still consider Victorian buildings unworthy of special consideration. They chafe at the restrictions that come with living in the historic district and would have them lifted on houses dating from the post-colonial era. Several Victorian-era buildings have been demolished, some quite recently, and replaced with bland pseudo-colonial structures or with mini-parks that leave telling gaps in the streetscapes. Other buildings are threatened. Yet many residents take pride in the city's diverse architectural heritage. Nicholas McIntire often wrote in the *New Castle Gazette* about the annual "Day in Old New Castle" celebration, fondly calling it "Colonial Day," but that term is inappropriate today, when restored Victorian homes are also proudly displayed to the visiting public.

It was largely for the "visiting public" that Daniel Moore Bates and his associates sought to preserve New Castle. Their motives were admirable by the preservation standards of their day, for they truly believed that

they were performing a service to the American people, one that would foster a sense of patriotism while providing a stabilizing influence in a rapidly changing world. Yet the real credit for the town one sees today lies with the residents, who, while inspired by the early preservationists, ultimately demonstrated a broader vision. They see New Castle not as a relic from the past, but as a vibrant community whose story continues to unfold, and choose to protect it not as a museum, but because it is their home.