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# How MoCo's Historic Preservation Program Works

By David S. Rotenstein

First things first: The Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission does not have the authority to tell people who own properties designated as historic under county law what color to paint their walls or where their living room furniture may be placed. Since 1979, Montgomery County has had a law on the books—codified under Chapter 24A for those brave enough to navigate the legalese—defining the legal standards for what may be determined historic, the process by which a property is designated, and the regulatory framework for ensuring the protection of designated properties. The historic preservation ordinance created the Historic Preservation Commission and paved the way for staffing units in the Planning and Parks Departments housed in the Maryland National Capital Parks and Planning Commission which document and ensure the protection of the county's archaeological, architectural, and cultural landscapes that make Montgomery County unique.

Montgomery County's historic preservation program is like hundreds of others throughout the nation at the county and municipal level. It is based on federal historic preservation programs administered by the National Park Service. The National Park Service administers the nation's honorific inventory of important historic and prehistoric places known as the Na-

tional Register of Historic Places. To be listed in the National Register a building, site, structure, or object (e.g., a statue or a historic ship) must meet one or more criteria. Properties may be listed be-

cause of their association with significant individuals; they may be important because they reflect important periods in history or an important event occurred there; they  
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<http://www.nfcca.org/news/nn200804.pdf>

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# Historic Buildings in the County

(continued from page 10) may be architecturally significant; or they may have archaeological significance. Maryland also has its own inventory program known as the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties.

County law establishes two basic categories of historical significance: historical and cultural significance and architectural and design significance. MoCo's inventory of historic properties is known as the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. To be listed in the Master Plan (or in an intermediate classification known as the Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites), an individual property or a district of related properties must be evaluated against the county's criteria. This evaluation process involves the completion of an inventory form that includes historical information about the property as well as detailed descriptions of its architecture and environmental setting. Anyone—a property owner or a third party—can nominate a property to be designated in Montgomery County.

The inventory forms are submitted to the Planning Department's Historic Preservation Section for review. Once an application has been found to be complete it is then brought before the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC)—a nine-member volunteer board appointed by the County Executive composed of experts in architecture, history, and archaeology, as well as community representatives—which votes on whether the property meets one or

more of the criteria for designation. While the County Council has the final say on whether a property is designated or not, the Planning Board votes whether to forward the designation to the Council with a recommendation to add a property to the Master Plan.

Once a property is listed in the Master Plan, it is subject to the regulatory oversight of the HPC and it becomes eligible for state and county tax credits for qualifying rehabilitation and restoration work. To make significant changes to a designated property, e.g., putting on a new roof, an addition, replacing windows, or demolishing an outbuilding, property owners must submit a Historic Area Work Permit that details the proposed work. The HPC then determines if the HAWP meets the standards established under county law and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. It is this process that is the least understood and most feared by communities. Generally speaking, the standards work to maintain community character by preventing teardowns and McMansionization; property values remain stable or increase in historic areas; and, contrary to popular belief, the rules for designated historic properties are significantly less restrictive than most homeowners associations which dictate paint color and landscaping, among other things.

In our community there is one property that is designated

in the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. Holly View, an antebellum vernacular farmhouse at 130 Kinsman View Circle, was designated in 1979. Nearby, just south of University Boulevard, is the county's smallest historic district. The Polychrome Houses Historic District consists of five Art Deco-style houses fronting Colesville and Sutherland roads. Built between 1934 and 1936, this district is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Before 1996, there also were several properties in the Four Corners area that were listed in the Locational Atlas. The former William Read house at 507 Dennis Avenue, a frame house built in 1904, was found to have been significantly altered and the HPC and Planning Board recommended removing it from the Locational Atlas.

There currently are about 20 historic districts and 400 individually designated Master Plan historic properties. These include properties such as Bethesda's Riley Farm (Uncle Tom's Cabin) and Silver Spring's Jesup Blair House, both of which are county-owned. There are many properties that have historical and architectural significance in Montgomery County which have not yet been evaluated. Among these are properties in the North Four Corners area, including early homes in the Northwood Park subdivision (1936-1939) and perhaps even the 1950s faux log cabin recreation building in North Four Corners Park.

[Rotenstein is Vice-Chair of the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission and a resident of Northwood Park.] ■