

Save our history or be history

By David B. Brawer

For more than 50 years, Philadelphia has struggled with the question of how we are to survive as a modern metropolis after the manufacturing jobs that fueled the city's growth for 150 years left after World War II. How was the city to prosper as a destination, as somewhere more than a pit stop between New York and Washington? How were we to develop new jobs and a vibrant tourist industry? What, in the end, makes Philadelphia unique?

The answer is simple: It's the history.

Philadelphia is believed to have the largest collection of 18th-century buildings in North America. Think of the restored colonial rowhouses in Society Hill. Boston rates a poor second when it comes to Revolutionary War history. Washington has museums, but Philadelphia has *actual* buildings, on *real* streets, the places where our founding fathers lived and worked. New York has — well, you don't go to New York for the history, do you?

Our history is what sets Philadelphia apart. We have great museums, wonderful parks, and a world-class orchestra, but we have to realize that we in Philadelphia have, above all else, one thing to sell and that is our history. It's why people come here from other places.

City Council is about to consider a bill introduced by Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell that would drastically limit the authority of the Philadelphia Historical Commission. This is a body that once attracted national attention for its ability to strike the delicate balance between a modern city's need to grow and a historic city's need to be preserved. It has been under attack by those who fail to grasp this basic truth: Every time a historic building is torn down in Philadelphia, the city becomes a less desirable place to live and visit, more like any other city without a past.

On Jan. 7, fire damaged Friedman's Umbrella Store at Third and Market Streets. To the best of my knowledge, nothing much ever happened there. It was just a nice "background" building with interesting arches, nice terra-cotta decoration and a date stone more than 100 years old. The fire, though serious, did not compromise the structural integrity of the building facade, according to

Keast & Hood Co., a Philadelphia structural engineering firm that is one of the most distinguished in the nation.

Despite these findings, the city insisted that the building be demolished. Although nothing memorable happened at Friedman's, this building was important and deserved to be saved. Its demolition



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took Philadelphia one small step closer to being Anywhere, USA.

The Philadelphia Historical Commission is the first line of defense in protecting these irreplaceable assets, and the commission must be protected and allowed to continue doing its important work.

Years ago Charleston, S.C., instituted a "no demolition" policy in order to preserve its historic district. (It has only one district; we have eight.) Its dynamic, forward-thinking mayor, Joe Riley, strengthened and expanded a now-vibrant tourist industry as a result of that policy. Philadelphia, with all we have and all we have to lose, can do no less. Our past and our future depend on it.

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