



— BEL AIR —
HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
ABOUT THE MEANING OF HISTORIC DISTRICT
DESIGNATION TO PROPERTY OWNERS



BEL AIR HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

This brochure has been prepared by the Bel Air Historic Preservation Commission and the Bel Air Planning Department and is designed to answer some of the most commonly asked questions about historic district designation. We have tried to be as brief as possible, but matters concerning property can be complex and for further clarification you are urged to contact the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC).

*"The Town's buildings and streets are
our link with the past."*

Q 1. Why is historic preservation important?

Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 which has resulted in substantial benefits to hundreds of American communities. Different communities have benefitted in different ways. In some, preservation has served as an economic development strategy; elsewhere, preservation has resulted in improved housing. Other benefits have been the rebuilding of community pride, increased awareness of community heritage and improved livability of towns and cities.

In Bel Air, preservation is particularly important for its contribution to our sense of community. We have a reputation for being an attractive community with a small-town character, and the Town's buildings and streets and the memories they evoke are strong contributory factors.

The Town's buildings and streets are our link with the past. When we look at and walk by our older buildings we share that collective memory which bonds long-time residents with newcomers and helps create a strong feeling of community.

Q 2. Is Bel Air really historic?

Hasn't nearly all of "historic" Bel Air been torn down?

You may be surprised to realize how many historic buildings remain. While Bel Air does not have architecture on the "grand scale," it does have a significant collection of buildings which are a living monument to the Town's past. The Historic Preservation Commission has produced two slide shows and

videos available for loan which illustrate the richness which still exists. An extensive history survey produced between 1978 and 1996 identified 304 historic buildings. Buildings 50 years or older are eligible for historic designation. The preservation of historic buildings, sites or districts may be for historical, archeological, architectural or cultural significance. In addition, new buildings continually become eligible for historic designation.

Q 3. I think that a lot of old buildings are ugly. Is the Historic Preservation Commission seeking to save everything? Isn't the Commission standing in the way of progress?

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," of course, and what may seem unattractive or run down to one person may be important to another. However, that does not mean that the HPC wants to save every building that is more than 50 years old. The HPC's mission is to preserve structures of "historic and architectural value." The Commission is also charged with strengthening the local economy and improving property values. Thus, for example, it would run against the Commission's mandate to seek to preserve a building with little architectural value which was reducing property values.

Historic preservation does not mean fossilizing a town or standing in the way of progress. The Commission believes, however, that progress can be made while retaining the best of the past and by assuring that new development enhances the existing built environment through compatible design. The Commission does not seek a ban on construction, but seeks to encourage sympathetic construction and quality design.

Q 4. I'm confused between National Register, State listing, and local designation. Please explain.

Historic designations are available at the Federal, State and local levels. Each has its own criteria.

At the Federal level the National Register is the official list of the Nation's cultural resources worthy of preservation. The list is not limited to buildings. Archeological sites and environmental settings are also included. Several places in Bel Air are listed including Courthouse Square, the Armory, and the Oddfellows Hall. Listing on the National Register makes a property eligible to receive certain Federal tax credits. Listing also means that a review is undertaken of Federal or State projects which might impact the resource. However, listing has no impact on what the property owner can do with the property. Thus, National Register listing does not give complete protection to a resource.

The Maryland Historical Trust maintains a statewide list of historic resources, but having a property on this list does not mean protection. The Maryland Inventory of Historic Sites provides a wealth of historical documentation on each property listed, as well as photographs. This information on Bel Air buildings is available from the HPC. Information for properties in other areas can be obtained from the Maryland Historical Trust.

Finally, a building can be designated historic at the county or municipal level. This means that buildings and neighborhoods of local, but perhaps not national, significance can be recognized and afforded a degree of protection not provided by State or Federal listing.

- Q 5. What are historic sites and districts?
What is the effect of local historic designation on a building?

In Bel Air a local historic site is an area of historic significance. A historic district is an area of more than one site. Both are designated by Resolution of the Bel Air Board of Town Commissioners.

Local designation makes the building's owner eligible for a number of tax credit, loan and grant programs. It protects the building from demolition or encroachment from public or private actions which might damage the building's architectural or historic value. Additionally it places certain restrictions on exterior changes to the structure and on requests for demolition of the building. Thus, for example, proposed changes or alterations to the exterior of a building or property must be approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. If a property owner wanted to construct an addition, install siding on the building, or construct a building on a vacant lot in a historic district, the plans would have to be approved by the HPC before a building permit was issued.

- Q 6. Isn't that just adding a layer of bureaucracy — one more layer of government to an already bureaucratic system?

Historic designation does add an extra stage to the review process, but there are also benefits. First, the HPC membership consists of members with backgrounds in architecture, history, etc., who can provide assistance in questions of design and construction. Second, construction which would be unsympathetic to the character of a neighborhood can be prevented. A property owner in a historic district knows that a neighbor will be prevented from doing something which might detract from his property. Third, local designation means protection for a property; a property owner can be assured that the property will be protected

The Historic Preservation Commission makes every effort to keep the level of bureaucracy to a minimum. Review takes place simultaneously with the regular building permit approval process. Certain minor alterations are reviewed administratively by the Planning Department staff and do not come before the Commission. There is no charge for review and the requirements for submission are reasonable. The Commission can usually give a decision on an application at its regular meeting and, by law, must render a decision within 45 days.

"We want to preserve structures of
historic and architectural value."

Q 7. I'm concerned about who will be making decisions about my property. Who sets up the Historic Preservation Commission, where does it get its power from, and who are the members?

Bel Air's Historic Area Zoning ordinance was enacted in 1985 by the Board of Town Commissioners under authority of Article 66B of the Annotated Code of Maryland.

It is of great concern to the National Preservation movement that Historic Preservation Commissions be credible, that their decisions are objective and show integrity. To that end the State has instituted strict criteria to govern members' qualifications. There are currently seven (7) members of the Commission. Members are appointed by the Board of Town Commissioners. Each member must possess a qualification in history, architecture, architectural history, planning, anthropology, archeology, curation, conservation, landscape architecture, historic preservation, urban design, or a related discipline.

In 1987 the Commission published design guidelines (available free of charge to Town property owners) which define the design standards the Commission considers acceptable. Decisions of the Commission are made based on these guidelines.

Q 8. What is the process for designating a building or a property as historic?

The Historic Preservation Commission or a property owner can initiate review which has to be accompanied by a written description of the property and its significance. A public hearing is held before the HPC which makes a determination whether or not to recommend that the property or properties be designated. The recommendation is then sent to the Board of Town Commissioners which makes the final decision.

Q 9. What recourse do I have if I disagree with a decision made by the Historic Preservation Commission?

All Commission meetings are public. Meetings to discuss permits in historic districts are termed "public appearances" and procedures are informal. The intention is to provide an atmosphere where issues can be discussed and resolved. If the property owner disagrees with a decision made by the HPC or the Town Board of Commissioners, an appeal can be filed with the Harford County Circuit Court.

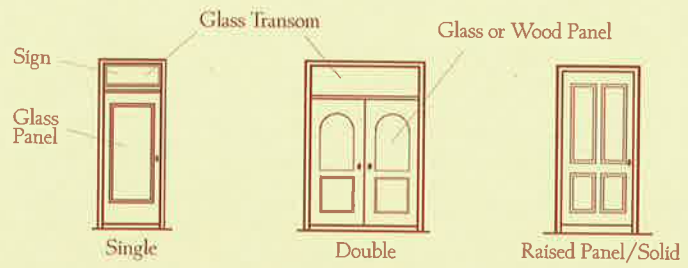
Q 10. Isn't Historic Preservation costly?
Doesn't it cost more money to maintain old buildings?

Preservation is not necessarily more costly, and even modern construction and materials are rarely totally maintenance free. As in many fields, preventive maintenance is usually less costly than replacement, although, if building features such as sash windows are allowed to deteriorate too badly, repairing them can be more expensive.

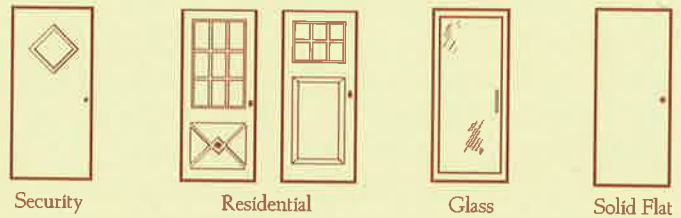
The Historic Preservation Commission and its staff are available to provide advice on preventive maintenance. The HPC maintains a library including product information and a directory of local contractors who work on historic buildings. The HPC recognizes that repair may not always be possible or desirable and their Design Guidelines make provision for replacement. For example, the Commission's guidelines on roofs states:

- I. HPC Policy: Every effort should be made to preserve the original roofing with replacement or repair in-kind.
- II. If the property owner requests a change in roofing, these conditions should be followed:
 - (a) Replacement material should be of a texture and color similar to the original roofing.
 - (b) Galvanized or other non-reflective flashing should be used.
 - (c) Gutters and downspouts should be placed and painted so as not to obscure or disrupt cornice and eave lines or introduce distracting or competing vertical lines.

Similar guidelines exist for windows, doors, etc. Following the guidelines should not necessarily result in added expense to the property owner and should help the owner achieve an attractive and compatibly designed addition or renovation.



TYPICAL DESIRABLE FRONT DOORS



TYPICAL UNDESIRABLE FRONT DOORS

An illustration from the Commission's Design Guidelines which define acceptable standards for preservation, rehabilitation and new construction.

Q 11. What kinds of financial assistance are available?

There are a number of types of financial assistance, primarily in the form of tax credits and loans. The State of Maryland and the National Park Service offer tax credits for approved restoration. For further information you should contact the Historic Preservation Commission or the Maryland Historical Trust.

Town Programs

The Town of Bel Air offers tax credit programs to owners of locally designated properties. Owners can receive a Town property tax credit for 10% of the expense of approved exterior restoration or rehabilitation work. A 5% credit for the exterior costs of architecturally compatible new construction is also offered. Both credits may be used in conjunction with Federal or State programs.

Q 12. What happens if I sell my property?

Designation applies to the property, not the owner, and buildings which are locally designated remain listed as historic sites when sold.

Q 13. Doesn't that put a severe limitation on what I or a future property owner can or cannot do to the property? What if I want to demolish it?

The Historic Preservation Commission only has the power to approve or disapprove proposed changes to the exterior of the building and, as the Commission's Design Guidelines indicate, a variety of design solutions may be acceptable.

Application to demolish a building may be made to the HPC. While demolition is discouraged and should be considered only as a last resort, the Commission recognizes that it may not always be possible or in the best interest of the community to save a historic structure. Reconstruction or demolition may be approved if the retention of the site or structure would cause undue financial hardship to the owner.

Q14. What is the effect of historic designation on property values?

Historic designation is just one of a range of factors which may or may not have a significant effect on property values. Research shows that historic designation has generally resulted in increased property values. Certainly this has been the case in the surrounding areas of Baltimore, Annapolis and Frederick.

"To create a strong feeling of community."

Q15. Will people know my property is historic?
Will I have to show my home to people?

The Town has initiated a program whereby a small bronze plaque is affixed to the exterior of the building to indicate that it has been designated, but there is no requirement to display the plaque. Your historic home is private property and there is no obligation to open it to the public.

Q16. If my property is designated, will I have a problem getting homeowners insurance?

Homeowners insurance is generally based on value, condition of the property and cost of replacement. Under normal circumstances, obtaining insurance for a designated property will be no different from that of a non-historic building, since designation does not in itself alter the value or condition of the property, and does not require exact replacement of damaged features. As a property owner, you will want to protect your investment and may wish to consider replacement cost coverage.

There are insurance companies which offer "insurance to value" which you may wish to consider if your property contains unique or unusual features.

Q 17. Are there any local historic property owners I can talk to about historic designation of my property?

Yes, the Historic Preservation Commission has a list of property owners who are willing to be contacted. They will provide first-hand experience to property owners considering designation for their property. Contact the HPC through the Bel Air Planning Department.

For further information please contact the following:

Historic Preservation Commission c/o Town of Bel Air
Department of Planning
705 Churchville Road
Bel Air, MD 21014
410-638-4540, 410-879-9500

Maryland Historical Trust
100 Community Place
Crownsville, MD 21032-2023
410-514-7600