

Preserving remnants of our past

Like dozens of other villages on the Cape, Osterville, Cotuit, Centerville, Marstons Mills, Barnstable, West Barnstable, Cummaquid and Hyannis are sites of the ancient and historic homes, barns, and other buildings which merit preservation and protection from the ravages of time and neglect.

While these structures are cherished by many people who live in those villages, their qualities are not always appreciated by newcomers to the area. Often the purchasers of old properties proceed to destroy the very features that are essential to Early American architecture.

While changes come in the name of progress, villagers assume with understandable complacency that whoever buys an antique house appreciates its singularity and will preserve its character. Why else would anyone buy a very old house?

All too often and much too late, we are dismayed as we witness the heritage each old building represents undergo modernization, transformation or, in some cases, total destruction. Some structures, which for centuries bestowed upon our small villages a flavor and appearance of antiquity, are no longer recognizable; others have disappeared entirely.

One by one, as the years go by, beautifully-proportioned

old homes and buildings give way to new, often nondescript, architecture. Examples of our losses can be found (or no longer can be found) in every village, but most particularly in those with expanding commercial zones where pressures are strong to provide even more space. There are also, of course, examples of opposite treatment where structures rich in heritage are preserved and treated with the respect they deserve. For these we are deeply grateful.

The losses can never be recouped, but there are ways to bring despoilation to a halt. The most effective method we've seen practiced has been in the Old King's Highway Regional Historic District, where all properties north of the Mid-Cape Highway, in towns belonging to the historic district, have enjoyed the benefits of protective regulation.

Regulation is often a source of irritation, additional expense, and frequently imposes unwanted controls upon people who own their property but who are subjected to decisions they find onerous. In a historic district such as that on the Cape's north shore, no alteration, no new construction, not even a house-trim paint job may be undertaken without approval of the district commission. To some property owners,

such restrictions seem irrational and arbitrary.

And yet, the character of the area, where that historic district commission controls all changes, has been preserved and is not being destroyed in the name of growth and progress.

Whenever we want to enjoy a drive, to view scenery typical of "rural seaside charm" (to borrow trite words from the chamber of commerce), to find handsome old captains' houses, cozy cottages, farmhouses nestled against hillsides, and barns presiding in simple majesty over spreading fields, we cross the Cape. We roam up Route 6A from Barnstable village through West Barnstable and East Sandwich to Sandwich village; we wander down-Cape through Yarmouth Port, Dennis village, East Dennis, and Brewster to Orleans; and we return to the south side feeling refreshed. And troubled.

Perhaps it is time, before all the landmarks of our historic past have disappeared or been so altered as to be unrecognizable, to establish our own historic district in villages our forebears called the South Seas. Perhaps it is time to preserve for our own pleasure, as well as that of posterity, the remnants of our past.