Biography of Edmund H. Burke

The Architect of Newburyport's Restoration

EDMUND H. BURKE

When architect Edmund Burke died at age 89 in March 1991, his obituary described him as "one of the driving forces 25 years ago in transforming Newburyport's urban renewal project into a successful effort to preserve the city's historic downtown."

Burke and Dr. Robert Wilkins are credited jointly with major roles in changing the city's urban renewal direction from demolition and new construction to preservation and restoration, but Burke seems to have been content to let Wilkins be the principal spokesman for the preservationist movement.

By the time of his death, only those Newburyporters with long memories recognized Burke's contributions to the city's renaissance.

Edmund Burke was a native of the central Massachusetts town of Lancaster. He graduated from MIT with a degree in architecture and moved to Newburyport when he married city native Ruth Connolly in 1939.

He had a professional interest - and a personal one - in the architectural heart of his adopted city's downtown. Newburyport's central business district boasted the largest collection in the nation of intact Federal Period commercial structures, most of them built in the 10 years after an 1811 fire destroyed the city's downtown.

"He used the word 'handsome' a lot, and I think he considered them handsome buildings," said the Burkes' nephew, local attorney James Connolly.

In the early '60s, the original urban renewal plan proposed demolition of many of Newburyport's downtown buildings.

Ruth Burke was a multi-generational Newburyporter whose grandfather had owned the Phoenix Building at 20 State St., the first structure to be rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1811.

When Ruth Burke learned that the Phoenix Building was one of those slated to be razed in the urban renewal program, she decided to work to stop it, according to her niece, Elizabeth Enders of New York.

She found a willing ally in her husband.

The Burkes organized a slide show detailing the architectural treasures and natural beauty of the Newburyport area and showed it to local civic organizations in an attempt to sway public opinion toward preservation.

The Burkes and Wilkins joined forces in the summer of 1964, according to Wilkins' daughter, Mary Wilkins Haslinger, after Wilkins wrote a letter to the editor of The Daily News urging the preservation of the downtown.

They worked well together, Haslinger said.

"Ruth and Eddie Burke were very important in steering this effort initially," she said. "They needed my father and my father needed them."

The Burkes hosted a meeting on Aug. 13, 1964, at their Toppan's Lane home to talk about saving Newburyport's commercial district. In attendance were former Mayor Albert Zabriskie, Wilkins, Paul Molitor and Clement Armstrong, curator and president respectively of the Historical Society of Old Newbury, and Florence Evans Bushee, who owned a number of historic homes in the vicinity of Newbury's Lower Green - which she would later leave in her will to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Zabriskie advised the group to form a committee and the historical society agreed to let the new group affiliate with it.

Burke, Wilkins and banker John H. "Hack" Pramberg represented the Historical Society of Old Newbury's Committee on Renewal and Restoration of Newburyport's Commercial District in dealing with city officials and the Newburyport Redevelopment Authority.

George Lawler, who had been elected mayor in 1963, recalls Burke as the most ardent of the preservationists.

"If I remember right, Ed Burke didn't want anything to go," Lawler said. "He wanted to save every brick."

Eventually, Burke showed a willingness to compromise.

"They were all easy to work with," Lawler said of the committee members. "They knew that the impossible couldn't be done. They just wanted to get the best deal they could for the city."

Lawler thought the committee had made a good case and he persuaded the Newburyport Redevelopment Authority to pass a resolution in March 1965 that would at least allow the NRA to consider restoration of buildings in the urban renewal area if a developer expressed interest.

Wilkins contacted Newburyport native William Perry, the Boston-based architect who had restored Colonial Williamsburg, and got him to agree to produce a new model based on saving the buildings. It helped Newburyporters see what they had.

Lawler convinced Wilkins to join the NRA board in 1965 and the momentum gradually shifted toward preserving the downtown.

Burke, meanwhile, took on two new - but related - projects: the restoration of the 1835-vintage U.S. Custom House into a museum and the establishment of a High Street Historic District.

As chairman of the city's Historical Commission, Burke and the members undertook an inventory of historic buildings, not only on High Street, but throughout the city. Burke said there were 78 buildings on High Street that should be preserved and the commission tried unsuccessfully to get the City Council to designate the streetscape as an official historic district.

After that effort failed, Burke resigned from the commission in 1972 to work full time on renovating the Custom House.

The redevelopment authority took the Custom House by eminent domain in 1968, but it wasn't until four years later that a fundraising drive got under way to rehabilitate the granite structure, which had been used as a storage building for a junkyard and salvage business.

Burke became chairman of the three-year drive to raise the $200,000-plus needed for the project.

The Custom House was designed by Robert Mills, who also designed the Washington Monument. The federal government closed it down in 1911 and it passed into private ownership until the NRA taking.

In addition to being an active fundraiser, Burke acted as an unpaid clerk of the works on the restoration project. He was a trustee of the Newburyport Maritime Society, which

operates the museum.

Although not a native, Edmund Burke took his civic obligations seriously as a citizen of Newburyport.

As chairman of the Historical Society's House Committee for 25 years, he supervised renovations and alterations at the Cushing House Museum on High Street.

He was a 14-year member of the Zoning Board of Appeals and served as a trustee of the Newburyport Public Library.

Ruth Burke was equally civic minded. In addition to her work preserving downtown, she was a founding member of the Maritime Society and a member of the Historical Society. Ruth Burke died in 2003, at the age of 96.

[This entire article is being used in its entirety and was part of the *Daily News* series, Port in Progress, which later was edited into a book. Above enhanced with images.]

References:

Edmund Burke: Architect of Newburyport's restoration
By Victor Tine , Staff writer, *Daily News of Newburyport, November 5, 2007.*

MIT Collections: Significant Alumni
https://mitmuseum.mit.edu/collections/person/38136

***Port in Progress**, forwarded by John Macone, Newburyport Daily News, Pediment Publishing, January 1, 2008.*