

Bill Harris - A Force for Historic Preservation



William R. Harris was a major player in the 1970's preservation of public access to Newburyport's waterfront. He was also a major contributor toward preservation of Newburyport buildings rather than the demolition of its architectural history.

He was born in New York City in 1941, the son of two professors of psychiatry at Columbia University. He graduated from Harvard College in 1962, and Harvard Law School in 1966.

In 1969, while teaching graduate seminars at Harvard Law School –first working under future U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger – Bill and his wife purchased a property in the South End of the City. At this time, investing in that part of the city was considered foolish and was often labeled, “The bad part of town”. It was a large brick home on Lime Street (Newburyporter's nicknamed it ‘Slime Street’!) in the early '70s and then spent much time renovating the historic 16-room structure. As related to Reginald Bacon, a member of the Newburyport Preservation Trust, several years ago; Bill forged a truce with the neighborhood's legendary young hooligans by hiring some of them to do the grunt work for his home restoration projects.

It was this interest in refurbishing in accordance with period details that he became involved in the history of the city.

At that time, there was significant pressure to develop the waterfront with buildings and a hotel large enough to hold conventions. The public sentiment was to remove all historic structures and indeed most of the effort was successful in doing just that. The result was a wide area filled with construction materials, weed-filled lots complete with drunks, and the whole area generated a seedy appearance to the average onlooker.

It was at this time; a huge backlash rose-up against development and an intense desire for historic preservation that caused many projects that involved new construction on the water ended up generating large public resistance. In stepped Bill Harris. He helped organize Friends of the Waterfront, and he generated local headlines in the '70s advocating an open, historic waterfront. In part because of his legal training, Friends of the Waterfront initiated numerous lawsuits to halt any further razing of historic buildings.

For the next decade he led the group's court challenges against the city, the Newburyport Redevelopment Authority, and development interests to keep open the public "ways" established as early as 1671.

Though he lived in California during the '80s and '90s, he maintained the house on Lime Street, to which the family returned most summers.

The Harris family returned for good in 2003, and he again turned his attention to local matters. He was a board member of the Newburyport Maritime Society from 2003-2006.

In 2011, he stated, "I think the Friends (committee) achieved just about everything we had hoped for. We wanted access to the water, which we now have, and we wanted to preserve the look and architecture of the downtown, and that happened.

"I do think we are better off than we would have been if the old buildings had been torn down and we had lost our tie with history."

Well known locally, most residences do not know that Mr. Harris had a 30-year career with the Rand Corporation. His impact on the global scene was significant.

Harris took a position as senior project manager at Rand in the '70s, and for more than two decades he did consultant work on a diverse array of public-policy issues.

Harris directed projects on arms-treaty verification; nuclear energy and safeguards against weapons proliferation; modernization of the Washington-Moscow hot line; and strategic arms reductions.

His work also included developing energy-conservation plans relating to daylight saving time, and the study of natural gas allocations and solar heat. In maritime matters, he investigated offshore oil spills, and he researched salvage rights relating to a derelict Russian submarine.



In fact, it was his international standing that allowed him to sway much influence in Washington, DC for the little city on the lower Merrimack.

He passed away on April 21, 2021, at age 79. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth, their three children, four grandchildren, and extended family.

Every visitor to the Waterfront is experiencing the legacy left by Bill Harris. That 'open' waterfront has been enriched since then by a citizenry that owes much of their inspiration from the vision and tireless effort of this man.

References:

Bill Harris, Still fighting for the waterfront, Dyke Hendrickson, *Newburyport Daily News*, February 21, 2011

Bill Harris (1941-2021), a major force in Newburyport's waterfront preservation, by Reginald Bacon, *NPT Quarterly News*, Spring, 2011.