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Planning for Historic Preservation
in Cranbury, NJ

Report of: Samuel N. Stokes, Historic Preservation Consultant

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HOUSE COMMITTEES ON OVERSIGHT

PLANNING FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

IN

CRANBURY, NEW JERSEY

July 12, 1985

Samuel N. Stokes
Historic Preservation Consultant
710 Ninth Street, S.E.
Washington, DC 20003

I Preface

This study, prepared at the request of the Cranbury Historical and Preservation Society and Cranbury Landmarks, Inc., summarizes the status of historic preservation in Cranbury and makes recommendations for the protection of the township's historic resources. The study is based on the consultant's visit to Cranbury in November 1984 and July 1985, discussions with community leaders and his review of documentation relating to historic preservation and planning in the township.

II The Importance of Historic Preservation

...We seek to preserve because our historic resources are all that physically link us to our past. Some portion of that patrimony must be preserved if we are to recognize who we are, how we became so and, most important, how we differ from others of our species.... We preserve historic sites and structures because of their relation to past events, eras, movements and persons that we feel are important to honor and understand.... We seek to preserve the architecture and landscapes of the past simply because of their intrinsic value as art.... We seek to preserve our past because we believe in the right of our cities and countrysides to be beautiful.
(Robert Stipe, Legal Techniques in Historic Preservation.
Washington, D.C.: National Trust, 1972.)

Americans are preserving because they believe the presence of historic resources in their communities add to their quality of life. There is increasing concern with the sameness of many contemporary buildings. Shopping centers and residential subdivisions in New Jersey look much like shopping centers or residential subdivisions in Illinois or Oregon. Most of us feel it is important to be able to identify a community we call home that has its own special character. The rich diversity of historic districts across the nation add greatly not just to the appreciation of visitors, but to the enjoyment of the residents of these communities.

Historic preservation is also important because it is economical. It is usually less expensive to rehabilitate a building than to build a new one of the same size. Rehabilitation provides more employment and less dependence on increasingly scarce natural resources than does the equivalent square footage of new construction.

Increasingly, historic preservation is seen as an activity that is important to all Americans and encompasses all types of buildings and their environmental settings. The mansion is important, but so are the workers' houses, stores, farms and everything else that makes up a historic town. Consequently, those concerned with historic preservation are now concentrating their efforts on the protection of entire districts rather than just individual buildings.

III The Consequences of Not Preserving

The consequences of not preserving can be seen in numerous communities across the United States that are now regretting they were not able to protect more of their heritage.

For instance, Fairfax City, Va., had a population of 1,946 in 1950. The town center could easily have qualified for the National Register of Historic Places if the Register had existed at the time. It was surrounded by active farmland and natural areas. Because of its proximity to Washington, D.C., 15 miles to the east, the area came under tremendous development pressure. By 1970 the population of the city had grown to 22,727 and many of the historic buildings were gone. Main Street was widened and the trees along it were cut to accommodate the extra automobile traffic. The population of the surrounding county grew from 98,557 to 454,275 during the same 20 years. There are few active farms left in the county and only one on the periphery of Fairfax City. Many of the historically significant farmhouses and more of the farm buildings have been demolished. Most of those that are left are lost amidst the new subdivisions. Because of all the housing development and new shopping malls surrounding Fairfax City, the community has lost much of its special identity: There is little distinction left between the city and its surroundings.

Unfortunately, there was little organized activity to protect Fairfax City's historic resources until recently. A locally designated historic district established in the 1960s offers limited protection in the downtown and none to outlying buildings. In 1982, Historic Fairfax City, Inc., was established to help protect remaining historic resources and to make up for the lack of attention to historic preservation over the last 30 years.

East Brunswick, N.J., is another example of a historic community that has lost much of its significance to intensive development pressure. Prior to 1950, Old Bridge Village was the economic center of East Brunswick and neighboring municipalities. Area residents came to the village to shop, attend school, use the library and attend to business at the town hall, much as they still do in Cranbury. However, between 1950 and 1970, the township's population increased from 5,699 to 34,166. New subdivisions replaced much of the township's farmland and many historic farmsteads were lost. Commercial development along Route 18 took business from the village and gradually the town hall, library, post office and other services that had attracted area residents to Old Bridge moved elsewhere in the township. Even though the village had lost its traditional setting and function, many historic buildings remained and in the mid-1970s the Old Bridge Historic District was placed on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places. But despite these listings, inappropriate changes continue to be made to buildings within the village, which could now be in danger of losing its historic designations. Heavy traffic through the village has also led to further deterioration due to vibrations. If Old Bridge were still the focal point of the surrounding countryside, historic preservation would surely stand a better chance.

There are many other examples. Manlius, N.Y., increased in population from 10,221 in 1950 to 28,380 in 1980. The widening of Route 92 through town has destroyed much of the character of its historic downtown. The farmland between Manlius and nearby Syracuse has been largely replaced by shopping malls and

subdivisions, resulting in a loss of identity for the town. Enfield, Ct., has three significant historic districts but because of the town's location between Hartford, Ct., and Springfield, Mass., it came under great development pressure between 1950, when its population was 15,462, and 1980, by which time its population had reached 42,695. Much of its Shakertown Historic District was destroyed by the construction of a new prison. Many buildings just beyond the Main Street Historic District were demolished. Enfield's setting was once farmland, principally devoted to tobacco. But most of the farmland has gone now and with it much of Enfield's special character. Hadley, Mass., Rockville, Md., and Castle Rock, Col., are other examples of communities that had significant historic districts surrounded by farm or ranch land after World War II that have since had their historic significance severely compromised by development within and surrounding the towns.

The Ocean Drive Historic District in Newport, R.I., was placed on the National Register as a National Historic Landmark in 1976. Because of intensive condominium development within the district, the National Park Service determined that it had lost much of its significance and in 1983 removed that part of the district where most of the development had taken place, even though several historic buildings remained in the newly developed area. The Park Service determined that the settings for these buildings had been compromised to the point that they had lost the significance for which they had initially been included in the National Register district.

The lesson to be learned from these examples is that it is very difficult to protect rural historic resources in the face of major new development. It can be done, but it requires a lot of attention to the type of development, the quantity, its placement, its design and the rate at which it happens. Section VII of this study makes recommendations on how the adverse impacts of development can be avoided in a rural historic community like Cranbury.

IV The Significance of Cranbury's Historic Resources

Cranbury's citizens are fortunate to have preserved such a high proportion of their historic resources and clearly, given the broad interest in preservation in the community, the presence of these resources adds greatly to the quality of life in the township. The architectural and historic significance of Cranbury's village has been recognized throughout the state and nation by its entry as a district on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places in 1979 and on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.

The National Register of Historic Places, established by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, is the official list of the nation's cultural resources worthy of preservation. Entry in the National Register provides a measure of protection by requiring review by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation of federally assisted or licensed projects affecting listed properties. The New Jersey Register of Historic Places, established by state law in 1970, complements the National Register and requires review by the Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection for any state, county or municipal project affecting listed properties. To be approved for entry in the National Register, the Cranbury Historic District successfully met the following evaluation criteria, established by the U.S. Department of the Interior:

The quality of significance in American History, Architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

1. that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
2. that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
3. that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
4. that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history. ("National Register of Historic Places," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983-418-331.)

The National Register nomination for the Cranbury Historic District, which was accepted by the U.S. Department of the Interior, states, in part, that the district is significant because:

Cranbury is the best preserved 19th century village in Middlesex County. Its collection of fine frame buildings ranging from the late 18th century to the early 20th century project an excellent portrayal of the 19th century. While there are many small 19th century crossroad villages or small mill towns in New Jersey, few are in such an undisturbed environment as that of Cranbury... It is this assemblage of buildings -- historically and architecturally -- which makes Cranbury an attractive entity unique from any other contemporary villages. It is this identity which sets Cranbury aside from its nearby surroundings of look-alike suburbs and modern commercial developments creating a significant historical village.

Moreover, the Middlesex County Inventory of Historic, Cultural, and Architectural Resources, prepared between 1977 and 1979, describes the historic and architectural significance of several 18th and 19th century farm complexes along Cranbury Neck Road that "...are essential to understanding the historical development of the agricultural region..." The inventory is currently being updated. There are several farm complexes that will probably prove eligible for nomination to the National Register. Some of the most significant are in the northeastern portion of the township, east of US 130 and north of Half Acre Road.

The significance of Cranbury's National Register historic district is inextricably tied to its agricultural setting. The town was built to serve the surrounding farm community and its significance is directly related to that farmland. The sharp edges that remain between farmland and village are very important to the appreciation of both resources. The views of historic buildings along Main Street are greatly enhanced by the backdrop of farmland.

Chief Justice Charles O'Niell, Supreme Court of Louisiana, stated in a landmark decision that the purpose of the New Orleans historic preservation ordinance "...is not only to preserve the old buildings themselves, but to preserve the antiquity of the whole French and Spanish quarter, the tout ensemble, so to speak...." (City of New Orleans v. Pergament, 5 So.2d 129 1941).) The "tout ensemble" concept has since been applied to numerous communities across the country. The "tout ensemble" of Cranbury clearly includes the rural, agricultural character of the township.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has long recognized the connection between the protection of historic sites and the land associated with them. As explained in a fact sheet describing the organization's Rural Program, established in 1979,

Historic buildings, structures and settlements, and their functional and harmonious relationship with their surroundings evolved over the decades and are an essential part of the rural environment and of our nation's history.... Immediate action is needed to preserve rural historic resources and their unique, integral relationship to the countryside as a whole. This cannot be done without protecting open space resources such as farmland, forests and wetlands, or without close attention to historical, cultural, scenic, economic and social factors in a rural community.

V The History of Preservation in Cranbury

Cranbury's citizens have a long history of involvement in historic preservation, as exemplified by the frequent voluntary restoration of their own properties; by their participation in the inventorying and registration of the township's historic resources (as described above); by the establishment of two nonprofit preservation organizations; and by the actions of their local government.

The Cranbury Historical and Preservation Society, organized in 1967, maintains a much-appreciated museum, has done considerable research on historic houses in the township, educates the public about the importance of Cranbury's historic resources and offers advice to property owners contemplating restoration or rehabilitation work. Cranbury Landmarks, Inc., incorporated in 1973, has preserved and manages the historically significant Old Cranbury School.

The Cranbury Township Land Use Plan, adopted September 9, 1982, speaks to many historic preservation concerns in the township. All of the recommendations it contains concerning mitigating the impact of new developments on the historic district are reasonable and should be adhered to. Several of the plan's recommendations are noted and amplified upon in Section VII of this report. In May 1984, the Cranbury Township Planning Board wisely adopted the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects (Title 36 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Part 68) to guide Cranbury property owners in their restoration and rehabilitation work. The township is now considering the establishment of a historic preservation advisory board, a step that had not been necessary until the advent of recent development pressures.

When compared with other historic communities across the United States, Cranbury has been much more effective than most in protecting its cultural heritage.

VI Threats to Cranbury's Historic Resources

The principal threat to Cranbury's historic resources is from without rather than from within. Through the work of its committed citizens, nonprofit organizations and elected and appointed officials, Cranbury has a good record of recognizing and protecting its historic resources. However, the township's location in the fast-growing Philadelphia-New York corridor, makes it very attractive to large scale developers. Although Route 130 and the New Jersey Turnpike have cut through farms in the eastern part of the township and although some new housing has been constructed in agricultural areas -- notably the Shadow Oaks subdivision -- the township retains its rural and agricultural quality. As more new development is permitted within the township, it will be increasingly difficult to maintain the rural and agricultural qualities of the township, on which its historic significance depends.

Regardless of how much new development takes place in Cranbury, it would be theoretically possible to preserve most of the township's historic buildings. However, if development is excessive, Cranbury's historic buildings will lose their settings and the village will lose the rural and agricultural quality that is integral to its historic significance. If random development takes place throughout the township, it will at some point become impossible for farming to continue in the township. Once Cranbury's agricultural base is destroyed, much of its historical significance will be destroyed as well.

Increased development in the township could eventually result in the following specific threats to the village historic district:

1. Loss of historic agricultural setting: The village's historic setting is farmland. Although some expansion has taken place beyond the historic district, the village is still compact. There are many views from the historic village to the surrounding farmland. Increased development could close off these remaining views.
2. Deterioration due to increased traffic: The National Register nomination for Cranbury states that "The major visual impact of the Cranbury District, however, is its overall ambiance. Although differences in styles and details are common from building to building the overall scale and massing of the structures are uniform providing aesthetic streetscapes throughout the village." The trees along the streets are an integral part of these streetscapes and the setback of the buildings was planned for streets of the current width. The scale of the village would be destroyed by any road widenings and tree cuttings that might be necessitated by increased traffic. Furthermore, increased traffic in the village would result in loss of the small town ambiance that is part and parcel of a historic village. Increased traffic could also result in vibrations that can cause damage to older buildings.
3. Inappropriate changes to historic business district: As stated in the significance section of the National Register nomination, "Main Street in Cranbury has functioned as the

commercial center of the village from the 19th century." Indeed, it is still the commercial center of the entire township. Cranbury's residents rely on the village for a variety of services -- including restaurants, banks, a barbershop, the post office and the school -- and retail stores -- including drug, hardware and convenience stores. The threats from increased development to Cranbury's historic commercial center are twofold: Excessive new retail business development outside the village would result in the decline of the village's businesses. On the other hand, excessive residential development without accompanying retail store construction could result in great pressure on existing downtown businesses to expand to the point where historic commercial buildings are replaced by larger new structures or expanded and altered to the point that they lose their significance. Parking could also become a problem.

In his letter of October 26, 1984, to Thomas J. Sadlowski, Thomas F. King, Director, Office of Cultural Resource Preservation, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, summarizes the concerns of that federal agency, which is charged with reviewing federal undertakings affecting National Register properties:

The village, of course, does not exist isolated from its environment. On the contrary, the open, productive farmland that surrounds the historic community is vital to its ambience and sense of place.

It is apparent that the qualities of the Cranbury Historic District are very fragile, but in all likelihood, the District could accommodate gradual and well planned residential development. In our experience carefully designed low and moderate income housing can often strengthen the social and physical fabric of an historic district. Based on our experience, however, the scale of residential development envisioned for Cranbury's environs would make such careful planning impossible. We should anticipate the following consequences from the development as described in the documentation you provided us:

- * The village would be cut off and isolated from its historical associations with the surrounding pastoral farmland;

- * The massive influx of population into the vicinity of the village would either transform the downtown, as new businesses sprang up there to serve the needs of new residents, or diminish its economic viability as new competitive retail centers developed on the outskirts of the community.

- * Transportation patterns would be altered, resulting in immediate traffic impacts to the District and generating the need, in the long run, for highway improvements that would further alter the District's character.

The cumulative effect of these impacts would be the effective destruction of the village's setting, character and significance.

VII Recommendations Concerning the Protection of Cranbury's Historic Resources

There are many historic preservation principles and techniques that can be applied to protect Cranbury's historic resources. As noted above, Cranbury is fortunate to have had a long history of protection efforts through both governmental and private activity. The township's governing bodies and nonprofit organizations need to continue their current preservation programs and consider additional ones. They also need to assure that federal and state laws protecting historic resources are adhered to.

In protecting the township's historic resources, the following general principles should be observed by all parties:

1. Cranbury's diversity should be maintained by assuring the well being of all its citizens. It is the diversity of people who live in a historic community that make it a special place. Those concerned with historic preservation should make sure their activities complement community efforts to alleviate poverty and provide adequate housing in order to assure that all who have traditionally lived in the community can afford to continue to do so. Cranbury's goals of providing housing for those in need and preserving its historic resources are entirely compatible. It should be possible to provide appropriate low and moderate income housing through the rehabilitation of existing buildings and appropriate new construction. Large scale new development should not be necessary to achieve this important goal.
2. Cranbury's rural setting should be protected. Farmland adjacent to the village historic district, particularly where it can be seen from public rights-of-way, should be conserved to retain the rural character of the village. The Cranbury Township Land Use Plan recommends that the farmland to the west of the village be designated as "an Agricultural Preservation Area" and that most new development be concentrated east of the village. The State Development Guide Plan (New Jersey Department of Community Affairs) also places the land west of the village in an "agricultural area" and "...recommends that State agricultural and investment policy focus on maintaining such areas in agricultural use." These recommendations make sense from a historic preservation perspective as well since the best views of farmland from the village are to the west. The two above mentioned plans make many important recommendations concerning the protection of farmland and natural areas which, if followed, will help protect not only those assets but historic resources as well.

3. Historic buildings, both within and beyond the village historic district, should be preserved. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects provide good guidance for any restoration, rehabilitation or adaption for new use of these buildings. A key standard is: "The distinguishing original qualities or character of a building, structure, or site and its environment shall not be destroyed. The removal or alteration of any historic material or distinctive architectural features should be avoided when possible."
4. New development should be appropriate. New development is consistent with historic preservation if it is well designed, properly located and of a quantity and scale that will not overwhelm the historic village. New development should be phased to allow time for adequate planning to assure its compatability with the township's historic resources. Good contemporary design that complements rather than imitates historic buildings in the township should be encouraged for any new buildings that are constructed, whether they be in the village, adjacent to it or elsewhere in the township. The design of new buildings should be compatible with the size, scale, height, proportion, color, material, setback and setting of nearby buildings, and compatible with the neighborhood and environment.
5. The village's small town scale and streetscapes should be conserved. As recommended in the Cranbury Township Land Use Plan, the current density of the village should be retained. The current size of businesses within the district should also be retained. If major new development does occur in the township, every effort should be made to assure that as much of the new traffic generated as possible is diverted from the historic district. To the extent feasible, principal and major arterials should not be visible from public rights-of-way within the historic district. The present width of the village's streets should be maintained. Trees along public rights-of-way should be retained.

In addition to the general principles listed above, more specific preservation techniques should be considered:

1. Architectural controls should be enacted. As recommended in the Cranbury Township Land Use Plan, the township should consider enacting architectural controls to protect buildings of historic or architectural significance, both within and outside the Cranbury National Register district. Over 1,000 municipalities in the United States have enacted ordinances creating preservation commissions that have the power to regulate exterior changes to designated

buildings. "The controls on property development serve to assure property owners that investment in rehabilitating significant structures will not be negated by incongruous development on neighboring properties. With such assurances, property owners will be more willing to preserve their properties, thus reinforcing the overall character of the area." (Environmental Law Clinic, Franklin Pierce Law Center, Historic Districts in New Hampshire: A Handbook for the Establishment and Administration of Historic Districts. Concord, N.H.: Author, 1980.) When preservation commissions work well, they are seen as a benefit, not only by those concerned with historic preservation, but also by property owners and developers. A building or addition that fits its environment has enhanced aesthetic and economic value. The township can take advantage of the model Municipal Ordinances for Historic Preservation prepared for the County and Municipal Government Study Commission in New Jersey by Michael A. Pane. The township may also wish to seek the assistance of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in designing a preservation ordinance.

2. An easement program should be established. The private non-profit preservation organizations in Cranbury should consider a program to receive donations of easements on buildings of architectural or historic significance and on land that contributes to the town's historic significance. Numerous nonprofit organizations across the United States have established such programs to protect key properties. Easements "...are ingenious, often inexpensive ways of protecting property, more specific to the protection needed by a particular property than zoning can be, yet falling short of outright ownership. Conceptually, any piece of property may be considered as a bundle of 'rights.' 'Fee simple' property owners have complete rights to their property and can do what they please with it, subject only to such governmental limitations as zoning. In an easement transaction, the fee simple owner sells or donates certain property rights. The transaction is recorded in the deed of ownership. The rights thus separated can be defined in any way that is agreeable to the property owner and the recipient of the easement.... The gift of an easement or undivided interest to a nonprofit organization or government may be tax deductible, if all federal and state laws are carefully observed." (National Trust, Rural Conservation. Washington, D.C.: Author, 1984.)
3. The inventory of historic resources should be completed. Buildings of architectural and historical significance within the township that have not yet been inventoried should be inventoried promptly. Significant historic landscape features should also be included in the inventory. As appropriate, additional properties should be nominated to the National and New Jersey Registers of Historic Places.

4. The village's business district should be protected.
Assuring that the village of Cranbury maintains businesses appropriate to the historic district will require great care. As the population of Cranbury and the surrounding area grows, the township should assure that the scale of commercial activity within the historic district remains appropriate for a village of its size and that the businesses are appropriate for their historic surroundings. The businesses within the historic district should neither be overwhelmed by new demands causing them to expand excessively, nor duplicated by new businesses causing them to decline.

5. The Cranbury Historical and Preservation Society, Cranbury Housing Associates and the township should cooperate to provide low income housing in and adjacent to the village.
Several buildings within the historic district would lend themselves to rehabilitation for this purpose.

6. Special attention should be given to the protection of historic farmsteads in the northeast corner of the township.
Some of the township's finest historic farmsteads are in the area bound by the New Jersey Turnpike, Half Acre Road, U.S. Route 130 and the northern boundary of the township. Unfortunately, this area is currently zoned for intensive use, including industrial use. The township should consider appropriate changes to its zoning. There are other parts of the township where intensive use would not adversely affect historic farmsteads. At the least, the township should encourage developers to preserve farmsteads as part of new developments or move the most significant buildings to other locations.

Finally, any developers who anticipate that their development will require federal permits or involve federal funds should be required to alert the appropriate federal agency and have that agency provide the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation an opportunity to comment in a timely manner. Mr. King justifiably states in his letter of October 26, 1984 (referenced above), that the Advisory Council has serious concerns

...about situations in which actions taken by non-federal parties in advance of an application for Federal assistance in effect make it impossible for Federal agencies to perform their functions in a manner consistent with Federal historic preservation policies.

There is no evidence that any Federal agency is involved in the currently proposed development in and around Cranbury. It seems extremely unlikely, however, that development on the scale proposed could be carried out without some form of Federal participation (e.g. water and sewer grants, subsidized housing assistance, community development block grants, permits issued by the Corps of Engineers, etc.). If a Federal agency did become involved, Section 106 of the

National Historic Preservation Act would require that agency to consider the effects that its action would have on the Cranbury Historic District and provide the Council an opportunity to comment in a manner consistent with our regulations (36 CFR Part 800).

The Advisory Council will use the following criteria, amongst others, to determine whether an undertaking has an adverse affect on the National Register district in accordance with its regulations:

An effect occurs when an undertaking changes the integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, or association of the property that contributes to its significance in accordance with the National Register criteria. An effect may be direct or indirect. Direct effects are caused by the undertaking and occur at the same time and place. Indirect effects include those caused by the undertaking that are later in time or farther removed in distance, but are still reasonably foreseeable. Such effects may include changes in the pattern of land use, population density or growth rate (emphasis added) that may affect on (sic) properties of historical, architectural, archeological, or cultural significance....

Adverse effects on National Register or eligible properties may occur under conditions which include but are not limited to:

- (1) Destruction or alteration of all or part of a property;
- (2) Isolation from or alteration of the property's surrounding environment (emphasis added).... (36 CFR Part 800.3)

VIII Conclusion

Cranbury's citizens are right to be concerned about the pressures of excessive development on their outstanding historic resources. Given their strong commitment to historic preservation, they are in a good position to develop solutions that will both protect their historic resources and accommodate responsible new development.