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# Preserving for the people

*A visit with Mary-Anna Holden, mayor of Madison and historic preservationist*



photo by Marian H. Mundy

Some months ago, visitors looking for the mayor of Madison could find her involved in an activity not listed in her job description: namely, up on a ladder stenciling a decorative gold border around a temporary conference room in the former Bayley-Ellard High School.

That she would bother to spruce up temporary quarters while the municipal building gets renovated says a lot about Mary-Anna Holden. Not every mayor of a town like Madison (population: 16,000) has a master's degree in humanities and American architecture, taught art from elementary to high school, moved to town and instantly plunged into community service and historic preservation. Serving as mayor since 2008, Her Honor is unique.

*Let's see, you were head of Madison's Thursday Morning Club, a venerable women's service organization, now you're board president of Preservation New Jersey (PNJ), working to conserve important structures statewide. You're a vice president of the Morris County League of Municipalities, a Rotarian ... the list goes on. Your friends call you a dynamo.*

Well, I believe it's important to actively work for the things you're interested in. Everything I do is interrelated. I care a lot about this town and the people in it. I want to see Madison continue as a great place to live. Our entire downtown, all 52 buildings, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

## *How did you get into historic preservation?*

I grew up in North Tarrytown, NY, a town not unlike Madison, but on the Hudson, where my family had lived for four generations. I come from a family who cared about the town, talked about its past. Everyone around me knew all the buildings, all the neighborhoods and knew who lived where.

Every Saturday my uncle took me to local sites of interest and told me stories. He'd say, "See that big brick house on the hill? Your great uncle Emil was a livery driver and delivered things there after World War I."

Then he'd tell me about World War I. Or he'd say, "Look, this building has its birth date right on it. It says 1899." I was fascinated. I got hooked on history and buildings that reflected it. My thesis for my master's degree from Manhattanville was on teaching art using local architecture.

Surely you've heard of Madison's famous resident, Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge, who started St. Hubert's animal shelter and left her estate to the town of Madison. She was born in Tarrytown. I could show you the house where she grew up.

Then in the '60s the most awful thing happened. A big chunk of Tarrytown was simply bulldozed away. In the interest of so-called urban renewal, whole historic neighborhoods were destroyed. Families lost their businesses. All the little shops, eateries, gone. Replaced by a wasteland of huge faceless apartment blocks. People in them felt no sense of place, no connection to the town's past. It was tragic. But it happened everywhere.

## *How could the town have prevented that?*

By listening to the people who had lived there all their

lives, instead of the people who came in and said, this is better because it's new. By learning about the importance of rehabilitation and adaptive use instead of destruction. By recognizing the importance of keeping links to our heritage.

*Seems Mrs. Dodge isn't the only woman of note who went from Tarrytown to Madison. How did that come about for you?*

In 1987 my husband and I were both working in New York City. He was with the *Wall Street Journal*, still is. I was with a mutual fund company. We went looking for an attractive town on the train line with sidewalks. We had heard about Madison and when we saw Main Street and Waverly Place, we said, this is it. We found a house within walking distance of the station and we've been here ever since.

*And the politics part?*

Having lived through the massive town demolition era, I didn't want that to happen to Madison. People were talking about preserving the town, getting it on the National Register. I thought OK, I'd better get involved. In 1998 I was elected to the town council, then mayor.

*Tell me about PNJ, where you're board president.*

PNJ is a Trenton-based statewide historic preservation advocacy group, founded in 1978. We are activists at all government levels: local, state and national. We provide information and technical assistance. We know change is inevitable, so we came up with a slogan that explains our purpose: "We help you manage change in the places that matter to you." We help you ask: How can that building be better used? We try to manage change so you will recognize your town in 20 years.

We offer a free online toolkit of

downloadable information showing people how to go about historic preservation, how to research buildings, file applications and so on. We have lists of experts, architects, builders and craftsmen who specialize in restoration. We accept and hold preservation easements on properties. Such easements assure historic preservation even if a property changes hands.

Each year since 1995 we've compiled a list of the 10 Most Endangered Historic Places in New Jersey. You can see the latest list on our Web site, [www.preservationnj.org](http://www.preservationnj.org).

Over the years there's been an incredible variety of sites, from dams and railroad tracks to the Maplewood police headquarters.

In addition to two mid-18th-century farmhouses, this year's list includes a Union City monastery called The Blue Chapel, an early 19th-century library in Bridgeton and the pre-1725 Plume House, Newark's second-oldest building, where celluloid photographic film

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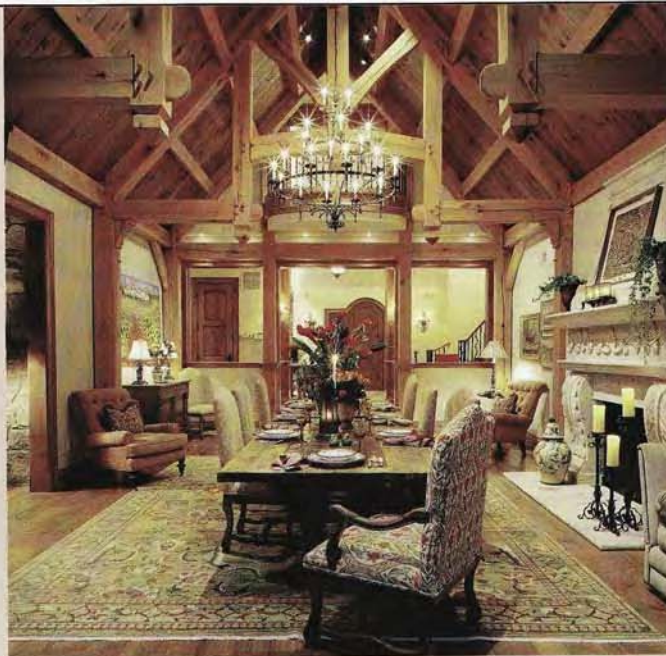
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was invented. It's now very threatened by Route 280, only four feet away.

In the past we've listed places like Fort Hancock in Atlantic Highlands and Bell Labs in Holmdel, an iconic Modernist building by the renowned architect Eero Saarinen. This year there's a landmark Trenton high school, an historic swimming pond in Ridgewood and NJ's historic diners.

### *Diners? Historic?*

Sure. People love diners. Some of them are pure Art Deco, or post-war '50s style. According to the National Park Service, anything 50 years or older is considered historic.

*Let's hope that doesn't apply to humans. What are some of the successfully preserved sites that your group has advocated for?*

Two of many: Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank, beautifully restored. And with the help of NJ Congressman Bill Pascrell, the new Great Falls National Historical Park in Paterson.

Our endangered list often includes places most people have never heard of, like Hurstmont, our newest addition. Just off Route 202 in Harding Township, it's a 15-bedroom country house designed by the famous architect Stanford White in the 1890s, one of the few Stanford White mansions still standing.

We know not everything old is worthy of preservation. But being on our list is often a catalyst for renovation and preservation. We try to convince developers that preservation is cheaper and greener than demolition. We say, the most sustainable building is the one that's already built — look what you're keeping out of the landfill. Finally, I think they're getting the message. **NJC**

*Marian H. Mundy is a freelance writer and award-winning contributor to New Jersey Countryside.*