

THE ROUND TABLE AT 1979

Ten years of the Round Table on Historic Area Preservation does not seem such a long time--until one is brought up short by the documentary evidence that the Arts Club of Washington in 1968 charged \$2.00 for lunch. But at least it can be said that over the decade the quality of the table--and I mean the food--has held its own. The Round Table itself has shown persistent conservatism over the years, varying little in size, membership, place of meeting or arrangements; an admirable example of the old Broadway maxim, "Never monkey with a hit." All around us things have been changing. Almost none of us has the same telephone number, even when the job or the address remains the same.

The Round Table emerged from a meeting in late 1968 of Ernest Connally, Frederick Gutheim, William Murtagh and Joseph Watterson, who concluded, "Significant efforts are under way to preserve entire historic towns and districts including, but not limited to, Alexandria, Annapolis, Cambridge, Charleston, Galena, Ill., Georgetown, Halifax, N.S., Nantucket, New Bedford, New Castle, New Orleans, Newport, Philadelphia, Portland, Salem, San Juan, P.R., Santa Fe and Savannah. Many of these towns have been designated as national historic landmarks. No national organization appears to have been concerned with this specialized activity." The four individuals named addressed the following: Carl Feiss, John H. Hill, Richard H. Howland, Dorn McGrath, Constance Werner and Russell B. Wright. The invitation added, "We hope to enlist the participation of others who share our specialized interest and would encourage you to invite any such who are known to you."

This straightforward manifestation of the interest in historic districting that had appeared with the national historic preservation legislation of 1966 does not require elaboration, but some of the assumptions wrapped up with this invitation are worth comment.

The reference to Annapolis did not hint at this contemporary battleground of private preservation interests and the employment of public powers for preservation ends. If a bridge was to be built between planners and preservationists, present and potential antagonists, it would have to be by people such as Feiss, Gutheim, McGrath and Werner--the last then deeply engaged in a study of Annapolis for the Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies. Looking at the record since this initial meeting, at least the right people were chosen.

The concept also had the capacity to stir the imagination. As Feiss wrote the organizing group, "The scale of this subject is immense. I am thinking of the unprotected New England village, the central New York Federal and Greek Revival village and small town, Pennsylvania German towns and the Virginia courthouse complexes. In the midwest from Ohio to Michigan to the Mississippi, are innumerable unprotected historic communities that are rapidly disappearing; and, of course, in the mountain states are ghost and mining towns."

What did the Round Table propose to do? Talk about it. This is not unworthy.

Among the diverse motives for the making of clubs, one is reminded of that small gathering called together by Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1749 when he was immersed in the eight-year effort of making the great Dictionary. This he thought was "to ease the loneliness and give himself some change from the atmosphere of the Dictionary." Here "he would pass those hours in a free and unrestrained interchange of opinions, which otherwise had been spent at home in painful reflection."

In their specialized capacities and official positions those who compose this Round Table have little periodic opportunity informally and in a relaxed atmosphere to exchange experiences and views with their peers, and thus contribute to the larger understanding of their professional lives. Without this opportunity each of us would be poorer. It is a continual reminder of what we owe to each other. Over the years it has provided the social adhesion that has allowed the Round Table to continue.

Why the Arts Club, that relic of Sunday painters, salon musicals and art amateurs of the turn of the century? Because Gutheim and Howland were members, were interested in preserving the historic Monroe House standing in an endangered block and a threatened square, because it was central to the location of the Round Table membership, and offered a satisfactory and reasonably priced lunch. That it had also associations with Frances Benjamin Johnson, Maurice Leisenring, Edwin Bateman Morris, and Thomas Tieson Waterman and others of long standing in the early preservation community needs also to be recognized. Today these names are being rediscovered as preservation uncovers its own history. Looking at 2017 Eye Street (1802-1808), the only architectural survivor from a decade of building activity, one can conclude our effort was timely as well as successful.

As de Tocqueville observed, Americans have a penchant for organization, but the Round Table has steadily resisted organization. It is closer to what the French call "un cercle" or Italians "una forza." In the American lingo and popular song, one recollects, "It's the oldest established, permanent, floating craps game." The simplicity of it all was described in the initial invitation of December 26, 1968, "An informal luncheon Round Table to discuss the preservation of historic towns and districts will be meeting the second Wednesday of each month beginning February 12, 1969. You are warmly invited to join such discussions. We propose to foregather at the Arts Club, 2017 Eye Street, at 12 noon (for drinks) for a 12:30 sit down lunch. The charge will be \$2.00, payable at the time. Since we must notify the Club in advance, Mrs. Shiflet will keep a record of those planning to take lunch, and you should advise her not later than the Monday preceding each meeting." Thus 10 self-selected individuals constituted themselves a nucleus around which quite promptly gathered additional regular members: Russell Keune, James Massey, Terry Morton, Nancy Dixon Schultz, Ralph Schwarz and Francis D. Lethbridge. On August 28, Gutheim was recognized as chairman pro tem, and routine arrangements were formalized in a short memorandum, the most important paragraph in which read, "The monthly meetings will continue to be informal, without set program, but members are encouraged to bring news of interest and copies of reports, documents or visual material for inspection. Guests are always welcome, but notice of their attendance must be given in advance. Members

are encouraged to add to the Round Table by those known to be interested in its field."

Inevitable absences, usually absences from the city, were experienced but guests brought the average attendance to between 12 and 20 during these first years. Guests included many notable visitors to the city such as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner or Ada Louise Huxtable. The amenities of the Arts Club garden and its al fresco dining were enthusiastically complimented. By 1973 the membership had grown to 31, including eight of the original ten founders, those lost having left the city or died, and the "round table" was frequently expanded to two or three tables. These changes reflected the growth of Washington's preservation community.

Administratively the Round Table took a quantum leap forward into new levels of efficiency with the appointment by the Ad Hoc Arrangements Committee of Massey as Honorary Steward, regularizing the stocking and dispensing of pre-prandial libations. This decision in October 1971 also confirmed the role of Constance Werner Ramirez as Secretary Pro Tem of the Round Table. The Committee also reduced the regular membership to a core group, based on frequency of attendance, and reaffirmed the original objective of "intimacy of discussion" that had been the quality most desired by the founding members. However, the larger luncheon list of about 35 was maintained. The final improvement in the Round Table's administration was the consent of Barbara Russell in Howland's office at the Smithsonian to assemble the monthly luncheon reservations and thus maintain peace with our hosts, the Arts Club. She also agreed to attend at least one luncheon a year to better identify our telephone voices.

Our agreeable but somewhat tenuous and irregular relationship to the Arts Club was recognized in 1975 when it was concluded by the Arrangements Committee that an assessment of \$7.00 annually would have to be made to purchase one membership in the Club, all those in the Round Table who had been members having resigned. The record of individual memberships has since improved.

With these developments, the half life of the Round Table on Historic Preservation seems to have reached a point of organizational stability with 16 "regular members," an invitational list totalling about 35, and a financial format that covered not only drinks and lunches, postage and an institutional membership in the host club, but something further toward the preservation of the fabric of the historic Monroe House. The treasurer's report will remain anonymous.

It remains but to note the one further significant change: after 10 years the Round Table reconsidered its initial commitment to historic area preservation and embraced by its name, and in recognition of the fact, the entire area of historic preservation.

Gustave Flaubert wrote Louise Colet in September 1853, "Unless things change during the next few years free minds will form a brotherhood more exclusive than any secret society, withdrawn from the crowd a new mysticism will develop. Great ideas grow in the shade and at the edge of precipices, like firs. One truth, however, seems to me to have emerged from all this:

the populace, numbers, majorities, approval, official recognition--these do not matter. 1789 demolished royalty and nobility, 1848 the bourgeoisie, and 1851 'the people.' Nothing is left except the vulgar and stupid mob. All of us are equally mired in mediocrity. Social equality has spread to the mind. Our books, our art, our science, are designed for everybody, like railroads and public shelters. Mankind is frenziedly seeking moral abasement, and I resent being a part of it." To Flaubert, art was the only remaining haven of human values. If I were asked to attribute the success of the Round Table on Historic Preservation in a city and at a historical period when values other than those it represents are paramount, it would be in some such terms as Flaubert used more than a century ago. Once a month we have found a moment to put aside other cares and relax in the atmosphere of fellowship, to share common interests, to exchange views, to open our minds, and to grow a little. What more can we ask?

FREDERICK GUTHEIM
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