



## History of the Preservation Movement in Saratoga Springs

*Historic Preservation is the Foundation of Saratoga Springs’  
Success*

Today, interest in and commitment to historic preservation is widespread. The city of Saratoga Springs is a leader in this movement. The activities of the Historic Review Commission, created in 1977 and renamed the Design Review Commission in 1993, are evidence of the city's most recent commitment to historic preservation, but Saratoga's interest in preserving the structures and environments that make it unique is not new. Citizens and city officials, as well as local, state, and federal agencies have all contributed to the history of preservation in Saratoga.

**First Preservation Efforts Focus on Springs** Saratoga's celebrated mineral springs were the focus of its first preservation effort. By the early twentieth century, commercial over-pumping was endangering the springs. Residents, worried about this threat to both the natural environment and local economy, pushed the state legislature to establish the State Reservation at Saratoga Springs in 1909. The state bought land and springs, closed some of the springs and maintained others for therapeutic bathing and drinking. Stately Georgian buildings, joined by colonnades, were built at the state reservation in the 1930s. These became the centerpiece of the Saratoga Spa, which was formally opened in July 1935. Fifty-two years later, in 1987, the Department of the Interior designated the Saratoga Spa State Park a National Historic Landmark.

In 1913, the city's purchase and expansion of Congress Spring Park, then privately owned, was the culmination of efforts of local residents and village trustees. The city also acquired the elegant Canfield gambling casino, which reform had closed, and its extensive grounds. In a separate purchase, the city acquired the Congress Hall Hotel property. These properties were united to form "Historic Congress Park." Congress Park and the Canfield Casino were also named National Historic Landmarks in 1987.

As Skidmore College expanded, it adapted many grand old Victorian properties for college use. Summer homes, carriage houses, a church and a convent were among the buildings acquired and put to new use as dormitories and classrooms. Their academic use allowed these buildings to survive the Great Depression when private owners could not have afforded to maintain them. Forty years later, Skidmore's move to its new campus on the city's north side presented a new threat to the old buildings. They

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were sold again to individuals and eventually renovated for use as residences and professional offices.

The years during and immediately following World War II brought serious financial problems that led to the destruction of the United States Hotel in 1946 and the Grand Union Hotel in 1953. In 1951, a state gambling investigation closed down illegal gambling. Saratoga Springs was in a slump, but key people in the community remained actively concerned about the city's future and its historic environment.

In 1946, the Saratoga Springs Planning Board was created as an advisory body to the City Council. Its primary goals were to conduct comprehensive surveys of the city's needs and develop a comprehensive plan for the city's future. Although the planners were mainly concerned with solutions to the city's economic problems, they saw the need to restore and maintain its aesthetic integrity and character. The Planning Board recognized the importance of keeping "the best of the past while seeking the best of the future." In 1949, the Planning Board published "Saratoga Looks To The Future," which integrated the various surveys, laid out possible projects, and identified Broadway as the city's heart.

**Crisis Leads to Renewed Emphasis on Preservation** A proposal to incorporate the Canfield Casino into a hotel complex generated a major controversy in 1955-57. The business community, hoping that a hotel would improve economic conditions, supported the proposal. Voters approved the plan in a city referendum, but no hotel was built. Many people opposed the hotel plan and their protest drew considerable attention. The publicity emphasized the need to consider the future of Saratoga's historic buildings.

The 1960s were a period of change and growth. During these years, city groups such as garden clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, the Historical Society, the Historical and Cultural Commission, and other committees appointed by the mayor laid the foundations for historic preservation.

The first city master plan, "Saratoga Springs, a City of Transition," was published in July 1960. This document was primarily a study of economic development, but also identified the need to protect the charm and character of North Broadway, to beautify the city, to restore dilapidated buildings, and to restore and maintain the Canfield Casino. In the same year, Mayor James Benton appointed a Citizens Advisory Committee to educate the public about the master plan. In 1963, Benton established a Temporary Committee on Historic Buildings and gave it two charges: to study the restoration needs of the Canfield Casino, and to identify and catalog the historic buildings in Saratoga Springs.

In the 1960s, federal programs helped shape Saratoga's development and the direction of its preservation efforts. In 1962, the Saratoga Springs Urban Renewal Agency was created. Over the next twenty-five years it undertook three major projects in the downtown area. It demolished ten buildings on Broadway and cleared many nearby properties. These were redeveloped in two long strips parallel to Broadway. A

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mini-mall, with benches and walks leading to new parking areas on Woodlawn Avenue, was built on the west side of Broadway.

The federal highway program brought Interstate 87 to the city in 1965. This made Saratoga Springs more accessible to tourists and new residents. Many of these newcomers, attracted by the city's Victorian buildings, history, and ambiance, became interested and active in preservation activities.

By 1964, a subcommittee of the Citizens Advisory Committee, the Committee on Historic Zoning, was investigating the possibility of a historic zoning ordinance. In April 1966, Mayor James Murphy appointed a Committee on Historic Preservation, whose first job was to recommend paint colors for the Canfield Casino and City Hall. Two months later, an editorial in *The Saratogian*, called for protection of the city's historic buildings and urged the city to adopt aesthetic regulations proposed by the Chamber of Commerce.

Another indication of a growing interest in preservation appeared in May 1967. The state Natural Beauty Commission sent a questionnaire to the city historian, Beatrice Sweeney. She replied that the "greatest need [is] for aesthetic and historic preservation ordinances." The mayor's Citizens Advisory Committee and the Active Community Thinking (ACT) Committee of the Chamber of Commerce urged the adoption of protective ordinances.

**Early  
Preservation  
Battles Lead  
to First  
Preservation  
Laws**

The City Council adopted the city's first aesthetic zoning ordinance in late 1967. Under this law, a Board of Architectural Review was appointed to review plans for construction on Broadway, Union Avenue, in Congress Park and the Hathorn Spring area, and in Franklin Square. This architectural review function later passed to the Planning Board.

The controversial proposal to develop a hotel complex, using the casino, in Congress Park was revived in 1968. Again, there was protest, publicity, and public outrage, and, again, no hotel was built. Local residents intent on preserving the casino and the park helped persuade the developers to withdraw their proposal. A Committee for the Preservation of the Casino was formed to raise funds for the building's preservation. The New York State Historic Trust approved the application for a matching grant with which to rehabilitate the structure, and the city received its first preservation grant, \$16,500, in 1970.

Preservationists won another battle in 1968. A plan to build a shopping mall on Union Avenue was stopped by residents eager to preserve the street's beauty.

During this period, many city initiatives were aimed at reviving the slumping tourist industry. The Holiday Inn, built through community efforts in 1964, gave Saratoga Springs a convention center and bolstered civic pride. The Saratoga Performing Arts Center, opened in 1966, was another great boost for the community. SPAC extended the Saratoga summer season and provided substantial financial and cultural benefits to the area.

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Times improved in the 1970s and, with progress and change, optimism grew and preservationists made substantial gains.

The New York State Council on the Arts published *The Nineteenth Century Architecture of Saratoga Springs in 1970*. This was the first publication that placed Saratoga's remarkable architecture in a scholarly context. The authors, Stephen S. Prokopoff and Joan Siegfried, both Skidmore faculty members, expressed "a deep concern over the neglect, the deterioration and ... the demolition that presently threatens many of Saratoga's remaining Victorian structures." An editorial in *The Saratogian* of September 7, 1971 praised the book and noted that the key to saving older buildings is to make them economically viable.

The primary mechanism for doing this was the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. It provided a policy and program to encourage surveys of historic districts and listing structures on the National Register of Historic Places. Other provisions of the Act banned highways from historic districts and required that the impact of federally-licensed or federally-funded programs on historic areas be identified and considered in the planning process.

Over the next ten years, more than eight hundred Saratoga buildings were placed on the Department of the Interior's National Register of Historic Places. In 1972, Beatrice Sweeney, the city historian, led a successful effort to place Congress Park, the casino, and part of Circular Street on the National Register. The next year, Franklin Square was listed; the Drink Hall, the Union Avenue and the Broadway Historic Districts were later added. In 1985, the Saratoga Spa State Park became Saratoga's sixth National Register District.

As the 1970s progressed, growing national and state interest helped to promote preservation locally. The New York State Historic Trust conducted a statewide survey of historic resources in 1970. Visitors were provided with brochures detailing walking and driving tours, complete with notes on "local history and architectural styles." These were made available by the Chamber of Commerce in cooperation with the city historian and the city of Saratoga Springs.

In 1972, the "Plan of Action" began to draw considerable support. This was a grassroots effort that eventually led to the revitalization of downtown Saratoga Springs. The plan identified five ways to attract private investment to the downtown area and make it economically viable: rehabilitation of historic facades, improved parking, maintenance, sidewalk repair, and promotion. In May 1973, Mayor Sarto Smaldone proclaimed Historic Preservation Week; the purpose was to focus public attention on the city's historic landmarks.

In 1974, the U.S. Postal Service's plans to renovate the Saratoga Springs post office building and remove a historically significant skylight created a public furor. Negotiations between the city and the Postal Service resulted in an agreement to limit the changes. The controversy inspired Mayor Raymond Watkin to create a Historic Preservation Committee, chaired by Julia Stokes. Its purposes were to establish a city historical register to record outstanding public and private buildings, and to recommend legislation to the City Council establishing a Historic Preservation

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Commission. The committee also asked that a foundation, to function as a quasi-public agency, be established to oversee and coordinate preservation efforts in the city.

The Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation was incorporated in April 1977. Among its early goals were establishing a preservation information resource center, overseeing and protecting historic sites, and informing the city government and citizens about legislation, grants, and the actions of government agencies. The foundation's goals have since expanded to include sponsoring conferences and lecture series, rehabilitating a row house on Clinton Street, and conducting house tours. By the mid-1980s, the foundation's duties included improvement of survey records, maintenance of thirty facade covenants on historic structures, and restoration of landmarks such as the Trask Memorial in Congress Park and the Gideon Putnam Burial Ground.



*1-5 Clinton Street, row houses in the Franklin Square Historic District. The Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation obtained grants for the rehabilitation of number 5 in 1979.*

In 1977, the City Council created the city's first local historic zoning district and the Design Review Commission which has jurisdiction over it. The city's zoning ordinances govern the exterior construction, destruction, alterations, repairs and additions to buildings in the historic districts.

The 1976 federal income tax incentives for historic preservation projects provide financial incentives to property owners for rehabilitating income-producing historic buildings. In Saratoga Springs, many owners of properties on the National Register have taken advantage of these incentives to make improvements to their buildings.

In 1978, the city became one of New York State's fourteen Urban Cultural Parks. This statewide system of urban communities uses the historical resources of each city to trace the development of the state. Saratoga Springs' historical resources are being developed to enhance its contributions to historic preservation, education, recreation, and economic vitality.

The gains preservationists made in the 1970s were continued and expanded in the 1980s. Owners of historic buildings have made substantial investments to enhance Saratoga's downtown and residential neighborhoods. The city's Office of Community Development began the Historic Facade Easement Program in 1977, and three years

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later the Facade Easement Committee awarded the first grants for facade improvements. Nearly \$500,000 in federal Community Development Block Grants has been invested in rehabilitating facades of commercial buildings in Saratoga's historic districts. Owners receiving these funds agree to have the buildings carry a covenant stipulating that the facades will not be altered for at least twenty-five years without the permission of the city. The Preservation Foundation monitors these covenants.

The city has carried out an ambitious preservation program on City Hall and its own properties in Congress Park. These public properties have been made local historic landmarks and are among those overseen by the Design Review Commission. Ongoing work, coordinated by the Department of Public Works, preserves and improves their condition and appearance.

In 1986, Saratoga Springs became the first municipality to be named a Certified Local Government by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. This designation makes federal funds available for local historic preservation efforts.

The preservation movement's future in Saratoga Springs looks more promising than ever. There was overwhelming community support for expansion of the Commission's jurisdiction to the Eastside National Register District in 1985 and to the Franklin Square National Register District in 1987. In 1993 the Westside District was nominated to the National Register and the Broadway District was expanded. In 2000, a Real Property Tax Abatement was adopted to provide financial assistance to homeowners who are investing in rehabilitating an historic house.

The city's historic ambiance is firmly established and recognized as a primary ingredient in its economy. A major challenge for Saratoga Springs' preservationists today will be to reconcile the city's current growth with preservation ideals. The Commission looks forward to working with all members of the community to ensure that these ideals flourish.

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**HISTORIC REVIEW IN SARATOGA SPRINGS  
A LEGISLATIVE HISTORY**

1946	May 17	Saratoga Springs Planning Board created
1960	July	First Saratoga Springs Master Plan: "Saratoga Springs, a City in Transition"
1962	April 29	Saratoga Springs Urban Renewal Agency Created
1963		Mayor established a Temporary Committee on Historic Buildings
1964		Citizens Advisory Committee appointed a Subcommittee on Historic Zoning
1966	April	Mayor appointed a Committee on Historic Preservation
1966	October 15	National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 passed by U.S. Congress
1967	December 18	City Council adopted zoning ordinance with a Board of Architectural Review
1972	June 19	National Register designation of Congress Park, Canfield Casino, and part of Circular Street as an historic district
1973	September 9	National Register designation of Franklin Square
1974	November 20	National Register designation of Drink Hall
1976		Federal Tax Act of 1976 (P.L. 94-455) implemented financial incentives to rehabilitate income-producing historic buildings.
1977	April 8	Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation incorporated
1977	May 16	Saratoga Springs zoning ordinance amended to establish Historic Review Commission and create the local historic districts.
1978	April 4	National Register designation of Union Avenue Historic District
1979	June 25	Union Avenue Historic District added to local historic district
1979	August 12	National Register designation of Broadway Historic District
1980	June 23	New York State Historic Preservation Act of 1980 passed, creating a State Register and requiring review of state agency actions affecting historic properties.
1980	December 12	National Historic Preservation Act, Amendments of 1980
1981	July 20	Saratoga Springs Urban Cultural Park designated
1982	October 29	National Register designation of Eastside Historic District

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1985		Eastside Historic District added to local historic district
1986	October 6	Saratoga Springs designated New York's first Certified Local Government
1987	May 4	Franklin Square Historic District added to local historic district
1990		Architectural Review Districts created on all of the major entrances to the City
1993		National Register designation of Westside District
1993		Expansion of Broadway Historic District
1993	June 7	Historic Review Commission renamed Design Review Commission
2000		City of Saratoga Springs adopts Real Property Tax Abatement as a financial incentive to preservation
2001		City Council Adopts First City-wide Plan for Historic Preservation
2002		Gasholder Building listed on the National Register
2004		Gideon Putnam Burying Ground listed on the National Register
2006		New York State Rehabilitation Tax Credit and Residential Rehab Tax Credit adopted.