

CHATHAM COUNTY HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

**REGULAR MEETING
110 EAST STATE STREET**

ARTHUR A. MENDONSA HEARING ROOM

April 1, 2009

2:00 P.M.

MINUTES

CCHPC Members Present:

**George Cohen, Chairman
Vaughnette Goode-Walker, Vice-Chairman
Jane A. Feiler
William Haynes
Pamela G. Lossing
Daves Rossell
Christian Sottile
Lisa L. White**

CCHPC Members Not Present:

Stephen T. Lindell

CCHPC/MPC Staff Members Present:

**Thomas L. Thomson, P.E./AICP, Exec. Director
Ellen Harris, Historic Preservation Planner
Janine Person, Historic Preservation Admin. Asst.**

I. WELCOME

The meeting was called to order at 2:00 p.m.

II. INTRODUCTIONS

III. PRESENTATION: Island in the Stream: Keeping Tybee-Tybee, Cullen Chambers, Tybee Island Historical Society

Ms. Harris introduced Mr. Cullen Chambers, who has served as the Executive Director of the Tybee Island Historical Society since 1994. He has overseen the complete restoration of the light station and its historic 1773 - 1867 lighthouse, as well as six historic support buildings that included the 1881 Head Keepers Cottage, the 1885 First Assistant Keepers Cottage, and the 1867 Second Assistant Keepers Cottage. She said that he has worked with the City of Tybee Island as Project Manager for the restoration of the 1906 Guard House project, served as the historic preservation advisor for City Council and Planning Commission, and represents the City on the Coastal Georgia Regional Development Center's Historic Preservation Advisory Council. Mr. Chambers has served on several organizations to support the historic 1930's Fort Screven theatre.

She said that she and Mr. Chambers have served on different committees together and he has served as a role model to her and preservationists throughout Chatham County and the region. He is also a consummate professional, preservation activist, and a friend.

Mr. Cullen Chambers stated that over the decades Tybee Island has gone through some evolution, and good and bad changes have taken place. As historic preservationists their goal and mission is to preserve the essence of the community for future generations because it is one-of-a-kind in many ways.

He spoke about how Tybee has maritime, military, and transportation history, and had one of the first lighthouses constructed in pre-colonial America. The only way to get to Tybee was by boat on a three-hour ride from Savannah. In the 1880's the Georgia Central Railway put in a train system to shorten the trip. It was a milestone in changing the development of Tybee which brought large hotels and more people.

He displayed photographs of a Spanish-Mediterranean architectural landmark that was demolished, as well as other historic structures on the island such as the DeSoto Hotel, the amusement park, the old putt-putt golf course, the Thompson cottage, and the Psalms Hotel. He spoke about the development of Fort Screven following the Civil War which had over 300 buildings on over 265-acres.

He stated that Tybee Road revolutionized access to and from Tybee Island and led to significant development on the island. He displayed photographs of raised Tybee cottages with deep porches and hipped roofs and that were elevated for parking under the houses. Thousands of people came to the island by vehicle and train, but the automobile was preferred over the train. The train ceased to exist by 1936.

The Tybee Island Historical Society paid for a professional consultant to update Ms. Reiter's study. The consultant nominated three additional National Register Historic Districts on Tybee Island, they formed a Historic Preservation Committee, and then appointed a task force to examine economic incentives. They had many public meetings educating the public about the advantages of historic preservation, added the Back River Inlet National Register Historic District and the Strand Historic District, but the commercial area did not meet the National Register criteria because of the many changes. There was too much demolition, infill, and inappropriate modifications of the historic buildings. By the year 2000 there were box type architectural developments that say nothing about the community as a unique experience because these designs are everywhere.

They formed a committee and drafted a Historic Preservation Ordinance that was passed by City Council. The ordinance is ineffective because it fails to establish local historic districts, and historic structures continue to be bulldozed on the island. Local designation is the only protection that historic resources have on a local level. The National Register of Historic Places affords no protection whatsoever. It does bring possibilities and opportunities for economic incentives, but it doesn't protect the historic resources.

He said that he has lived in other historic areas, but Tybee is a one-of-a-kind place. He went in passionately and took an adversarial role with developers by seeing them as the enemy. His rapport with them was counterproductive because he alienated them and the line of communication abruptly stopped. He learned to take a step back, take a breath, and realize that he was seeing it through different eyes than

everyone else. By working closely with developers they discovered that many were disciples of what they were trying to do. If developers pursue historic preservation ethics and work to save historic structures, they will assist by going before the Planning Commission, City Council, and advising them on how to advance the project. They will help them get variances if it will ensure the preservation of a building, as long as they maintain certain tenants and adhere to the Secretary of the Interiors Standards.

On Tybee Island they have worked with developers to relocate six cottages that would have been demolished if they had not partnered together. They realized they needed to be more active in bringing more people into preservation, and started working with other non-profit groups and City initiatives. The Post Theatre and the Guardhouse are some of the projects they are working closely with the non-profits and City government in pursuing preservation planning.

They still have battles and losses. In 2006 the Raised Tybee Cottages and one of the historic gun batteries was placed on the Georgia Trust Places in Peril which brings attention and awareness to prevent ultimate loss. There has been movement toward quality new construction to blend into Tybee better, and there have been success stories. He spoke of Butler Avenue once being a beautiful divided street with a palm-lined median, and would like it to be considered again to break up the hideous, life-threatening traffic.

Tybee has a hidden history that people don't see, is not on the tourist route, and many locals don't realize. It is significant of the cultural diversity of the Greeks, Jews, Irish, and Afro-Americans. There is little done to accentuate the history of the people who have helped Tybee evolve and develop. The most hidden is the Afro-American history and they need to move forward to do what they can to save that part of Tybee's history as well.

They continue to identify the economic advantages, act as advocates for developers who are trying to preserve Tybee's unique built environment, and have developed a recognition program where the Tybee Island Historical Society gives out an annual historic preservation and new construction award. They continually try to educate the public to help them see the advantages of historic preservation. It has been both an educational and frustrating process having been elsewhere and seeing what other communities have done, and realizing that if steps are not taken for mitigating new construction and preserving the heritage, that it will be lost.

Ms. Lossing commended Mr. Chambers for fighting to protect Tybee over many years and appreciates his efforts. She said that daily he has been battling and working and has made great strides in the preservation of Tybee. She introduced Mr. Walter Brown, Jr., a native who appreciates and knows Tybee's history.

Ms. White asked if Tybee's Historic Preservation Commission was appointed by City Council.

Mr. Chambers stated that he chaired the committee for three years and when they didn't get local historic districts, the committee fell apart. He continues to assist the City in an ex-officio role. If a developer wants to demolish a property he is given 15 days to find a new site and facilitate a house mover to relocate the property. He has, unfortunately, lost historic structures and is running out of time. They have tried to reconstitute the Historic Preservation Commission to jump start the process but the

City didn't receive enough applications. Without the Commission and a local historic district there will be a continuation of the same, but they are still trying.

Ms. Goode-Walker asked if there are height restrictions.

Mr. Chambers stated that there are and Tybee is one of the few communities on the coast that has a height ordinance. He said you cannot build anything higher than 35 feet but there are exceptions. Elevator shafts and HVAC units are a constant battle that continues to erode and diminish the height restriction.

Ms. Goode-Walker asked how the stopping point of Lazaretto for the enslaved people and those who came later is being preserved.

Mr. Chambers stated that it is in private hands. He said they effectively defeated a development project three years ago but that it is still in litigation. A developer wanted to build 14 townhouses on Lazaretto Creek and the argument is that it is sacred ground because people are buried there. They wanted documentation for it and because it is on private property, they cannot gain access to document it. They need to find a way of funding the acquisition of significant areas to interpret that part of history.

Ms. Goode-Walker stated that there is not a marker where it actually happened or where the pest house was located.

Mr. Chambers stated that where it happened is on private property and they won't let them do any kind of archaeology study.

Ms. Feiler suggested that the facades on the stores on Tybrisa Street be made like the New England town centers where the buildings face small roundabouts, and make the windows 16 light windows or small pane windows with gingerbread and pitched roofs to make it look like a turn-of-the-century fishing village. She said it would distinguish Tybee from other coastal communities along the southeast coast and people would want to come and see a fishing village.

Mr. Chambers stated that it is a good idea for defining Tybee Island in a way that keeps character there in a non-descript development. He said he would rather see the Art Deco elements of 16th Street restored because it is part of Tybee's actual architectural heritage. It would be less expensive and more historically appropriate to design the streetscape to reflect the Art Deco heritage because it would enhance the streetscape and reduce the maintenance costs to the property owners.

Ms. Feiler stated that this was done in South Beach, Florida, and maybe Mr. Chambers could include photographs of South Beach of how they made a style useful as well as creating an attraction.

Mr. Chambers stated that they have looked at areas like Savannah, Charleston, and many other communities that have done this and benefited from it, and the economic advantages are indisputable. All of the urban renewal that was tried in Miami failed miserably, but when they started restoring the Art Deco district it revitalized the district and all of Miami Beach.

Ms. Feiler asked what the Commission could do to be supportive of Mr. Chambers' actions.

Mr. Chambers stated that he gets calls from people supporting what they are trying to do, own property on Tybee Island, but don't vote on Tybee Island and that is where the strength is. The more voices they have identifying the positive benefits of historic preservation, the more people will listen. There is a growing effort, he will think about it both as a group and individually, and he would welcome any support.

Ms. Harris asked if the work that is being done with the developers, including encouraging them to use the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and facilitating the permit process, is regulated through the use of conservation easements to ensure that it continues in perpetuity.

Mr. Chambers answered yes. He said they learned that lesson the hard way when they facilitated the relocation of a building with a verbal understanding that window and door openings, the depth of porches, and the materials used on the porches would be in keeping with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. When the building was relocated the owner violated those understandings, so they currently make it a part of the written contract, and it is entered into the minutes of the Planning Commission and City Council in the approval process. They want to ensure what they are doing has a benefit and will not further deteriorate the character of the buildings.

Ms. Goode-Walker asked if the relocated buildings are part of a National Register Historic District and if there is concern about the district's integrity.

Mr. Chambers stated that most of the buildings that were relocated came from areas that are not in a National Register Historic District. He would rather see something saved than nothing at all. They try to find empty lots where particular architectural designs will be in keeping with the height, mass, and scale.

Ms. Goode-Walker stated that some communities want the national designation but not the local.

Mr. Chambers stated that it is a challenge because the communities want the best of both worlds: the economic benefit, prestige, and inherent perception of it being a place of value but they don't want any restrictions. He said in order to receive the benefits there has to be some give and take. They have failed as preservationists as a whole in taking steps to fully educate the people on how the give and take ultimately works to their benefit and it is hard for people to see. Being listed on the National Register is like being in a phone book. It does not deny anything but gives opportunities that non-listed buildings don't have. On Tybee Island, a barrier island with FEMA concerns, there are exemptions to some of FEMA requirements if you are eligible or listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ms. Feiler asked about the possibility of taking the street facades and having a SCAD architectural class do drawings so they could find financing for the project.

Mr. Chambers stated that it is an outstanding idea. He said if they could provide SCAD with some of the historical images to know the bones of the street it would help people visualize the opportunities. He has used SCAD on many projects and is a resource that every community in the area should draw upon because they have people with the passion and skills to benefit the community.

Mr. Cohen stated that Mr. Chambers' job is a tall order, sometimes a thankless position and a losing battle, but he has done a great job and hopes that he continues. He said there are people who appreciate the efforts and thanked him for presenting to the Commission.

IV. COMMISSIONERS' ITEMS

Mr. Sottile stated that he would be completing his post as a member of the Commission and his term expires on April 7th. He said that due to current commitments he will not seek reappointment for another term and it was an honor to serve. He will continue to take great pride in the goals and mission of the Commission, and will continue to seek opportunities to support the Commission and the hard work of MPC in carrying out their mission.

Mr. Cohen stated that it was a pleasure working with Mr. Sottile and that he added a level of expertise to the Commission that only he had. He said Mr. Sottile has a great way of looking at things and would be sorely missed. The Commission appreciates his efforts and looks forward to seeing the great things he would be doing for the community.

V. MEETING MINUTES: March 4, 2009

CCHPC ACTION: Mr. Haynes made a motion that the Chatham County Historic Preservation Commission approve the minutes as submitted. Ms. Goode-Walker seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Chatham County Historic Preservation Commission, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 3:05 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ellen Harris,
Preservation Planner

EH/jnp