

The **WINTER 1991**
South End
Historical Society

THE SEHS NEWSLETTER

532 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02118

Vol. 20, No. 4

Confessions of a Landmarks Commissioner

by John Neale

How many times have you been wandering through the South End when you spotted some horrendous renovation of a building that made you stop and exclaim, "How did they ever get away with *that!*" Those familiar with the South End know that such renovation policing is a favorite weekend activity of the local residents as they head to the market, the hardware store and other local destinations. Sometimes the architectural affront is so unforgivable or close to home that the offended party will call The South End Historical Society or the city to register a complaint.

This is where The South End District Commission enters the picture. Depending on your point of view, which varies according to which side of the complaint you are on, the Landmark District commissioners are the saintly protectors of the South End's architectural integrity, or they are just esoteric meddlers whose sole purpose seems to be the harassment of innocent South End property owners.

In reality, the Commission is a group of well-intentioned people who have the difficult task of helping to administer the nation's largest and most diverse Landmark District. I recently joined the South End Landmark District Commission and

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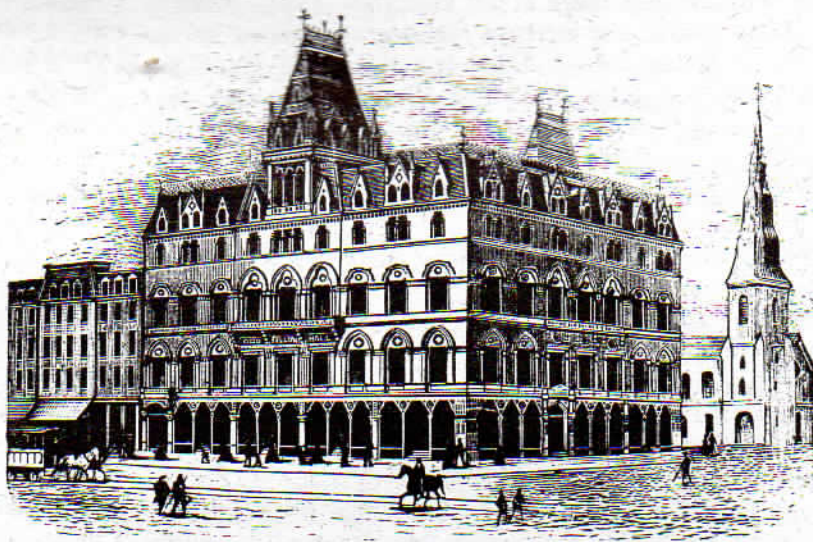
Dear Members:

from Arthur F. Howe

There are rumors prevalent in the South End that the South End Historical Society is preventing the Boston Center for the Arts from increasing the size of its parking lot at the corner of Tremont Street, East Berkeley Street and Warren Avenue. An old filling station on the site seems to be at the heart of the problem.

The parking lot next to the National Theater has a long history. The site was occupied by the Hotel Clarendon until it was demolished after a bad fire in 1969 when the empty lot became part of Parcel 8 of the South East Urban Renewal Plan. The part of the site containing the filling station was originally occupied by the Odd Fellows' Hall, destroyed by a fire in 1932 and

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Odd Fellows' Hall, Tremont Street.

The Odd Fellows' Hall at the corner of Tremont and Berkeley Streets—built in 1872 and destroyed by fire in 1932. To the left, behind the horse car, is the Hotel Clarendon destroyed by fire in 1969. To the right, the Berkeley Temple (with steeple) now the site of the Police Station.

Dear Members:

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makes up the remainder of Parcel 8. For many years, under control of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, it was used by the police at Station 4 as a free private parking lot. After the BCA was established, it took nearly 10 years to remove the police from the lot.

In 1985, the BCA applied to the Zoning Board of Appeal for permission to use the lot for parking. However, after many requests for postponement by the BCA, the proposal was finally turned down by the Board in 1986. The BCA nevertheless used the lot for parking and finally in 1990 reapplied to the Board of Appeal for approval of the lot for parking sixty cars. In the meantime, the BCA had made commitments to various developers of other portions of the Center's site (St. Cloud artists' apartments and restaurant, the Boston Ballet, the other artists) for nearly all of these spaces. In October of 1990, the Board of Appeal granted the request for parking sixty cars to run until January 31, 1995. After making various improvements to the site such as grading, marking, fencing and lighting, the BCA turned the operation of the lot over to a professional operator.

In August, 1991, the BCA appeared before the South End Landmark Commission for permission to expand the parking lot to 113 spaces by using 33 spaces under the old filling station and 20 additional spaces created by demolishing the filling station and utilizing additional spaces around it. It is a policy of the South End Landmark Commission not to review proposals until all zoning issues have been settled. Since in this case the parking permit is for sixty spaces, any increase requires a rehearing by the Board of Appeal. To date this has not occurred. Under the Landmark guidelines, demolition of buildings is prohibited except under extraordinary circumstances. Removal of a building in the Historic District for surface parking does not meet this guideline.

At an administrative hearing before the South End Landmark Commission, the South End Historical Society supported the Landmark guideline. It is our feeling that demolition of any building to create surface parking is inappropriate. Since parking lots are also very lucrative, it is frequently difficult to remove them once they are established. The Historical Society did not oppose demolition of the old garage on the opposite end of the Center for the construction of the new Boston Ballet building, nor would we oppose demolition of the filling station if the Center were ready to build a new building on that site. As with any regulatory body, the decisions of the South End Landmark Commission must be consistent, and it is unwise to establish an undesirable precedent.

The site of the filling station accounts for only 8 of the 113 spaces.

Confessions of a Landmarks Commissioner

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thought a report from the front lines of the ongoing assault on the South End's historic character might prove enlightening for those of you who have not had occasion to sit in on one of the Commission's monthly hearings.

The hearings, which are open to the public, take place on the first Tuesday of every month in City Hall. A visitor will find that they are an alternately engaging and boring mixture of thoughtful architectural discussion, attempts at heavy-handed political maneuvering, and scenes right out of "People's Court." Subjects under discussion can run from a mundane review of someone's plan to paint his or her house, to impassioned arguments that cover everything from the First Amendment to the rights of the handicapped.

The first part of each month's agenda covers Design Review Applications, most of which can be boiled down to three major categories:

1. **Roof Alterations.** South Enders, especially recent South Enders, can't seem to leave a good roof alone. Besides the ubiquitous roof decks with privacy fences, there are enough hot tubs, greenhouses, planters, trellises, pergolas, potting sheds, flag poles, rumpus rooms, and B-B-Q pits to convince Californians that they had never left their Malibu beach house behind. And sadly, for those unfortunate neighbors condemned to gaze upon such additions from their windows, most of these rooftop novelties begin to resemble parts of a set from "Green Acres" after a few years of being exposed to the elements.

2. **Windows.** Who could ever have imagined the number of clever, energy-efficient ways you can replace the two-over-two wood sash windows that characterize the homes of the South End? South Enders have come up with hundreds of fascinating solutions to the problem of old windows. Prior to the creation of the Landmark District, a simple piece of plexiglass caulked into the window opening was a popular solution, but in recent years tastes have become more sophisticated, shifting to those quaint, six-over-six pane numbers with the muntins (dividers) sandwiched between the two panes of glass. This gives a home that "ye olde colonial" look, but with the E-Z Kare cleaning that is so important for today's on-the-go lifestyles.

3. **Everything Else.** This is my favorite category, because this is the one where owners, architects and neighborhood-based organizations enter the picture with some truly fascinating interpretations of nineteenth-century architecture. These can range from digging out front yards in order to create extra basement living space to vehemently arguing on behalf of that charming twentieth-century contribution to the urban streetscape, bright white concrete sidewalks. Due to hard economic times, the current crop of major new renovations are almost exclusively non-profit organizations renovating buildings for housing or public service agencies. The

supportive public comments and testimonial letters pile up as many of the organizations ask to be exempted from various aspects of the Landmark's guidelines because of the altruistic nature of their missions. The commissioners have to be able to withstand the iciest glares imaginable to carry out their legal duties when faced with such applications, but ultimately, fairness prevails.

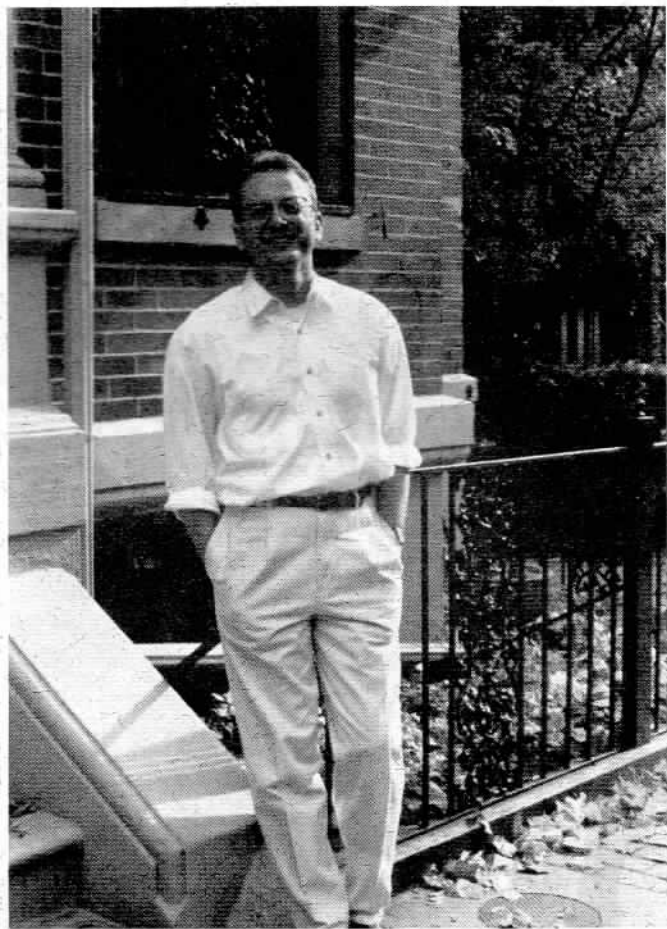
Besides some brief Administrative Reviews, the rest of the monthly hearing is taken up with Landmark's version of being taken out to the woodshed, more correctly known as the Review of Outstanding Architectural Violations. This is where those accused of being architectural scofflaws have their day in court. Those shocking white aluminum windows the people across the street just installed or that roof deck they thought they could sneak in did not escape the notice of the renovation police.

This is where the tempers run hottest. One reason for this is that remodelers never admit they are wrong, because (choose one or more): a) They did not know about the Landmark District, b) the offending violation was always there, c) their contractor told them it was OK, d) they thought it looked kind of historic-like, e) it's like that on their neighbor's house, or f) chartreuse is a nice color. Some people are genuinely ignorant of the Landmark District guidelines due to language difficulties or misinformation from neighbors, but a substantial percentage of the violators know their guilt. These sly folks just go ahead with their little additions or changes knowing that once something is done, it is a lot more difficult to undo.

When this happens, it is time for the Landmark Commission to haul out the big guns. This means a legal action involving the city attorney, and sometimes things can get very nasty. Several years ago one unfortunate transgressor learned this the hard way when he was forced to remove a tar-papered penthouse he had erected without permits. Neighbors were relieved to see the roof-shack vanish, and the Commission won the hearts of at least one South End block that year.

Serving on the Commission makes life more interesting, especially when you find that property-owning neighbors who would rarely say hello in the past are suddenly very cordial. Fortunately, we commissioners cannot be swayed from our duties by any amount of cajoling or pleading outside the hearings, although it is very entertaining to see the ways in which people will try to influence your opinion. Nothing as interesting as all expense paid trips to Rio, mind you, but the attempts are not always very subtle.

Ultimately, our reward is knowing that we are helping to preserve one of America's premier Landmark Districts. As the years pass, despite the Commission's efforts, a dwindling number of South End buildings retain original windows, stonework, iron fences and roofs. Vague approximations of original details gain devastating cumulative effect as the years pass, and there are fewer buildings you can look to for authenticity. This sad, on-going approximation of the South



John Neale, South End Landmark District Commissioner, reporting from the front lines of the ongoing assault on the South End's historic character. Photo by Elizabeth Sippel.

End would eventually lead to a Disney-style Victorian pastiche of a neighborhood if left unchecked by the Commission.

The Landmarks Commission today is scandalously understaffed, but there is something you can do to help. The next time you are on your way to the dry cleaners or the market, do your part by looking up, looking out, and joining your local renovation police.

This newsletter is published by The South End Historical Society, 532 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, MA, 02118; office telephone (617) 536-4445. The opinions expressed by the contributors are not necessarily those of The Historical Society. Every effort will be made to return unsolicited manuscripts submitted for possible publication if accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Those interested in printing articles must obtain written permission from the editor. Copyright, The South End Historical Society.

Receipt of this newsletter is a privilege of membership in The Historical Society, an association of people interested in the recognition and preservation of historic resources in, and recording the history of, the South End of Boston. Individual membership is \$10 per year; family and dual memberships are \$15.

This newsletter has been printed on recycled paper.

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Elizabeth Sippel

Proponents of affordable housing projects argue with understandable conviction that they should be exempted from standards they believe will add "unnecessary" costs to the project.

Preservation and Affordable Housing: Maintaining the Standards and Criteria

by Pauline Chase-Harrell

One of the most vexing—and frequent—questions to come before the South End Landmark Commission is: how strictly can the standards and criteria for treatment of buildings in the Landmark District be applied to low-income owners and affordable housing projects? While all such districts face the problem to some extent, it is uniquely important to the South End. Not only do we have many low-income residents in need of good, affordable housing, but the ethnic and social mix which includes them is a historically significant aspect of the District itself which the designation was meant to preserve.

Proponents of affordable housing projects argue with understandable conviction that, because they are working on very tight budgets and the need for the housing is so great, they should be exempted from standards they believe will add "unnecessary" costs to the project. Neighbors and preservationists argue that the standards were meant to preserve the character of the whole district and therefore must apply to all buildings within it. And, indeed, other applicants argue that "You let them do it; why can't I? My budget's tight, too!" What to do?

Unfortunately, a number of time worn myths surround historic preservation, some with more basis in fact than others. One is that historic preservation is elitist: it benefits only the rich, and they are the only ones who care about it. Another is that doing it right always costs more. These two ideas, especially when placed against the obvious need for adequate housing, create a highly charged emotional background to specific issues of vinyl versus wood window sash, restoration versus removal of decayed ornate cornices, tall panelled versus modern glass doors. Both assumptions deserve a closer look.

Is preservation only for the rich? If we accept that idea and exempt affordable housing from appropriate preservation standards, we will be creating a neighborhood in which everyone can readily discern "rich people's houses" from "poor people's houses," a neighborhood of first class citizens and second class citizens. By applying the standards even-handedly, however, we create a neighborhood in which the buildings testify to the community's belief that all neighbors are equal, with equal right to good, and beautiful, homes. To understand the importance of this, one has only to compare the housing built before the existence of the District—Methunion, for example (although recent efforts have greatly improved its integration into the neighborhood),

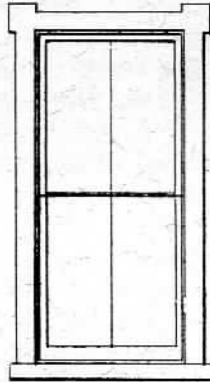


Photo by Theresa Pease

with the Tent Cities, Langham Courts and Parmalee Courts built in compliance with District standards. Could anyone look at these and say that only the rich have benefited from the existence of the South End District?

And the cost? Unfortunately, it is true that the appropriate materials and treatments often cost more—at least initially. Real slate, for example, costs more than “SuperSlate” and much more than asphalt shingles. But it is also true that, in many cases, the cost of the materials is only a small component of the overall project. (This is often especially true of row houses, where the actual expanse of Mansard roof, fancy cornice or cast iron fence is tiny compared to its impact.)

More importantly, the cost of repairing the original slate, windows, doors, or whatever, may be less than the cost of the inappropriate replacement. This, of course, is often not an option suggested by the contractor with a vested interest in providing replacement materials, and the sales pitches of vendors have convinced many of us that new is better. This is not always the case: the Commission often sees applications to replace metal windows that are five or ten years old, dilapidated, and unrepairable, while many of the wooden windows applicants seek to replace are 125 years old, and could still be reconditioned for many more years of service. While initial cost is a factor when calculating the cost of housing, it is important to consider the long term costs as well, and this is just as true when there is public investment involved as in the case of private owners.



Pauline Chase-Harrell was chairwoman of the Boston Landmark Commission until April of 1989. She came to historic preservation from a background in teaching architectural history and got involved by moving to the South End and buying a brick row house in an area where a great number of buildings were being torn down by the process called urban renewal. Chase-Harrell was co-author, with Jane Holtz Kay, of Preserving New England.

There are, of course, places for compromise. That is why the Standards and Criteria written into the designation are flexible and why the Commission reviews each case. Especially in new construction, SuperSlate might be a justifiable substitution for the real thing; detailing executed in different colors of brick rather than in more costly sculptural techniques could be effective. In rehabilitating older buildings the range of options is narrower, but even here, modest but appropriate substitutions are sometimes possible. And repairing the old is often the most cost-effective solution of all.

The South End is a special place not only for its architecture, but for its people; its history is not just of buildings and squares and fountains but of a rich diversity of people inhabiting them and forming a vibrant cohesive community. The Landmark District designation was designed to protect both aspects of the neighborhood. Only by an even-handed application of the Standards and Criteria throughout the District can we maintain the special qualities of our neighborhood.

South End Landmark District Report of Architectural Violation

Date: _____
Address of
Violation: _____

Description of
violation: _____

Signed: _____
Address: _____

Tel.# _____
Name, address, and telephone number are
not mandatory. Please accompany with photograph,
if possible (not Polaroid).

Mail one copy to:
Environment Department
Boston City Hall, Room 805
Boston, Massachusetts 02201

And one copy to:
The South End Historical Society
532 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02118

Cathedral Organist Now on CD

Illustration
first appeared
in *Punch*.



The first Compact Disc recording of the magnificent 101-rank E.&G.G.

Hook & Hastings Organ, built in 1875 for the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, has just been released. The recording features Cathedral organist Leo Abbott performing works of Bach, Mendelssohn, Widor and Vierne, as well as pieces composed by former Cathedral musicians J. Frank

Donahoe, who became cathedral organist at age 18, and George E. Whiting who later became music director at the Church of the Immaculate Conception on Harrison Avenue.

According to Josiah Fisk in the *Boston Sunday Herald* of October 20th, "The recording of Franck's short and exquisite 'Cantabile' is the first wholly satisfactory one I have heard. Abbott's playing is relaxed but purposeful, his

phrasing individualistic but not mannered, and the organ itself is perfect."

The proceeds from the recording will benefit the Cathedral Organ Restoration Fund, begun by Abbott, for the eventual total restoration of this historic instrument, the largest remaining example of nineteenth century American organ building by the Boston firm of Hook & Hastings.

Repairs have been progressing for the past four years, and so far, over 2,000 of the 5,292 pipes have been washed by a few stalwart friends and parishioners. This past October, the Third Annual Organ Benefit Recital raised over \$5,000, and on February 23, 1992, the 116th anniversary of the organ's dedication will celebrate with a concert of organ and choral works.

Those interested in purchasing the CD should write to the Cathedral Organ Restoration Fund, 75 Union Park Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 02118. A cassette version, now in production, will be available by December 1st. The donation is \$18 (includes postage) for both the CD version or the cassette tape.

Calendar

1st Tuesday of every month

South End Landmark Commission
Room 801, Boston City Hall
4 pm
For more information, call 725-3850.

2nd Thursday of every month

The South End Historical Society
Board Meeting
The Francis Dane House
532 Massachusetts Avenue
7:45 pm

CYCLORAMA FLEA MARKET OF ANTIQUES AND COLLECTIBLES

Saturday, December 7, 11 am-6 pm
Sunday, December 8, noon-6 pm
Over 100 dealers
Cyclorama, Boston Center for the Arts
539 Tremont Street, Boston
For more information, call 536-4445.

GIFTS OF ART

An Exhibition of Arts and Crafts by
over 70 New England artists.

November 14-December 24, 1991

Boston Center for the Arts
Mills Gallery
549 Tremont Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02116
For more information, call 426-8835.

CRAFTS FELLOWSHIP EXHIBITION

A special multi-media exhibition of works by
the 10 crafts fellowship recipients for this year.
December 10-December 24, 1991
Tremont Galleries of the Cyclorama
Boston Center for the Arts
539 Tremont Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02116
Gallery Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 12-5:30 pm
For more information, call 426-5000.

NEW MEMBERS RECEPTION AND TWELFTH NIGHT GATHERING

Wednesday, January 8, 1992
7:45 pm
Francis Dane House
532 Massachusetts Avenue

Steve Jerome will give a short talk about
Chester Square
RSVP—536-4445 by Monday, January 6.

MEMBERS' PROGRAM

"Transportation in an Historic District"
Thursday, February 6, 1992
7:45 pm
Francis Dane House
532 Massachusetts Avenue
Eric Talbot from Hartford, Connecticut, will
discuss transportation in an historic district.
Refreshments to follow.
RSVP—536-4445 by Monday, February 3.

MEMBERS' PROGRAM

"In and Around the Central Artery:
Uncovering Layers of Boston's Past"
Wednesday, March 4, 1992
7:45 pm
Francis Dane House
532 Massachusetts Avenue
Frederic C. Detwiller, AIA, of McGinley, Hart &
Associates will be guest speaker.
Refreshments to follow.
RSVP—536-4445 by Thursday, February 27.

CYCLORAMA FLEA MARKET OF ANTIQUES AND COLLECTIBLES

Saturday, March 28 11am-6pm
Sunday, March 29 Noon-6pm
Over 100 dealers
Cyclorama, Boston Center for the Arts
539 Tremont Street, Boston
For more information, call 536-4445

COMING EVENTS:

The South End Historical Society
26th Annual Ball
Saturday, April 25,
8 pm-midnight
Boston Center for Adult Education,
5 Commonwealth Avenue
SAVE THIS DATE!

New Members

Libby Blank
Mr. and Mrs. Ralph H. Clarke
Jovita Fontanez
Mauricia Geissler and Denyse Gruenke
Helen and Frank Jordan
Nan and James Kern
Laura Parker and Doug Roerden
Paul Brne Rogers, Jr.



Welcome A New Neighbor With A Membership to The SEHS

Become a part of the effort to preserve the South End, one of Boston's most unique and important neighborhoods, by joining The South End Historical Society. Your dollars and membership will help us achieve our objective of preserving the physical fabric and interpreting the history of the South End for present and future generations.

Newsletters, publications, programs, tours and numerous other activities are all part of The South End Historical Society. We hope you will support our neighborhood by joining our Society and becoming part of these activities.

Name or
Names _____

Address _____

zip _____
Telephone _____

Individual	\$10.00 _____
Family/ Dual	\$15.00 _____
Additional Contribution	\$25.00 _____
	\$50.00 _____
	\$100.00 _____

Total \$ _____
Please make checks payable to The SEHS. All
contributions are tax deductible.

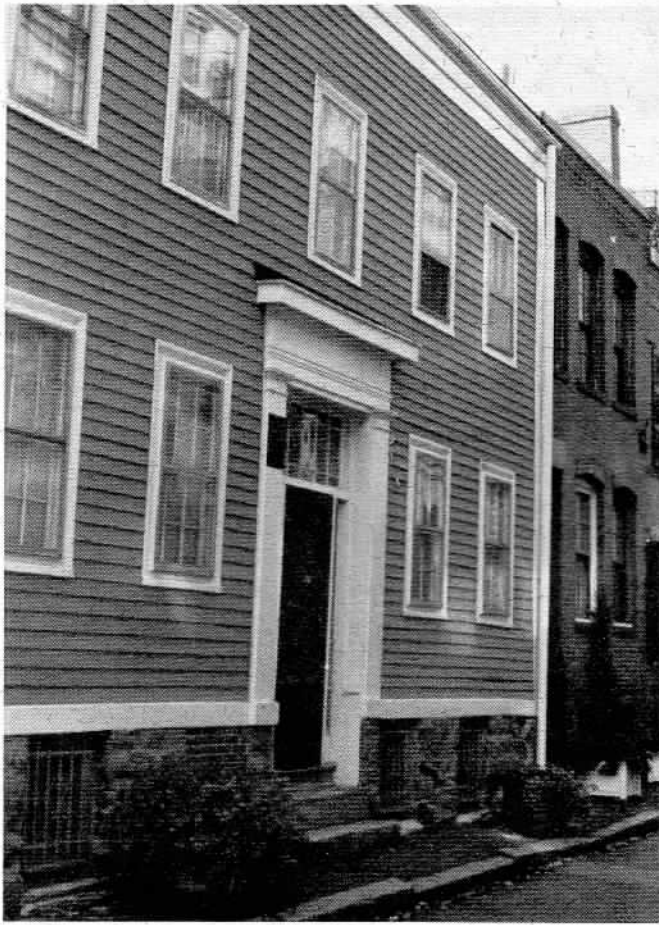


Photo by Elizabeth Sippel

Committees are forming now to plan the Spring Ball

Any South End Historical Society member interested in serving on the committees for the Spring Ball (scheduled for April 25, 1992) or the Open House Tour (scheduled for the fall of 1992) should contact Fundraising Chair Nancy Parker Wilson at 423-6673.

One of the South End's rare wooden houses: This house, located on Haven Street, is one of two remaining wood houses in the South End. The other is located on Taylor Street.

Research by the owners, Randy & Bob Lathrop, revealed that the house dates from c. 1830.



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