

"Federation Corner" column
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Preserving the Cider Barrel

Germantown landmark needs consideration in master plan
by Kathie Hulley, member, Germantown Historical Society

Whenever the master plan for an area of Montgomery County is revised, the preservation of elements of that community's past is very important. An update of the Germantown master plan is now being considered for approval by the County Council. It is proposed to provide 23 million square feet of commercial and business space, together with 8,500 more residential units, mainly in multi-story buildings along I-270 and the transit center along Middlebrook Road. The area will look very different when this is all in place.

Progress is all very well and good but the past heritage and history of Germantown must neither be ignored nor displaced. The Cider Barrel is located along Maryland Route 355, which is named Frederick Road from Rockville north to the county line, and the structure is the physical embodiment of an aspect of Germantown history worthy of preservation.

When the Cider Barrel was given historic designation in 1989, it was assumed that the county government was committed to its protection in place. It is an iconic reminder of the 1920s, the era of prohibition and a time when baseball great Walter Johnson retired to his farm near the current site of Seneca Valley High School in Germantown. Folks would come from far and wide for its renowned fresh apple cider, a recipe made from several different types of apples that were supplied by local farmers. Other seasonal fruits and vegetables were also available for sale to eager buyers.

Whenever a newcomer travels The Great Road (MD 355 was one of the first public roads to the West), the Cider Barrel stands out and invites the question "what is that building and what is it for?" The answers give the new resident or passer-by a glimpse of the past, a connection with the town and, hopefully, a desire to know more. Germantown is very fortunate to have such a visual piece of history.

People returning to Germantown feel warmth and continued connectivity from seeing this icon in its familiar and rightful place. Parents can show their children this site which was around during their own childhood, and can say it has been around so long that their grandparents or great grandparents knew and visited it. Maybe these forbears were the farmers who cooperated with their neighbors and provided the apples, or maybe they just went on excursions to buy the cider. The resources of the past connect to the present and future, and everyone is the richer for it.

After the Cider Barrel was given its historic designation, an apartment complex was planned and approved to be built adjacent to it. These apartments do not use all of the available parking spaces, and some are labeled "for future residents." There is an abundance of parking located less than ten feet away, with a ramp leading to the historic structure--more parking, in fact, than when the Cider Barrel was formerly in business. But now the county is recommending the re-location of the Cider Barrel on the grounds that there is insufficient parking at the current site and, thus, it could not be made functional again.

If it is not practical to leave the Cider Barrel where it is now, then why on earth did Park and Planning allow it to be protected in such a way years ago? Nothing has changed with the functionality and parking. Shared parking is always desired, and the maximum requirement for resident parking is at night long after any operational hours for the Cider Barrel. Everyone believed the intent was to make the historic retail building functional again, and that is certainly still possible on its traditional site. Moving it to a new location would greatly diminish its significance, even if a nearby site were to be available. This is a singular

Germantown treasure and should not leave its appointed place and context as the epitome of the classic roadside stand.

Montgomery County officials and representatives seem not to fully comprehend the importance of retaining historical resources and preserving such rare and unique structures in their original locations. Are we to be surrounded by buildings for which there is no durability or unique quality? In most cases, for a building to be deemed worthy of historic designation it has to be at least fifty years old. It is difficult to imagine anything which is being built today that will survive that test. Also, if buildings are destroyed before they reach that age, there will be a great void for the future.

It is not a lot to ask to keep the Cider Barrel, a physically small building that has had a large impact, in its appointed place. In fact, the history of the Cider Barrel would come alive and be made even more meaningful if it were opened for business once again. The reason for its preservation has not changed, and parking availability is not reduced. So why would one want to move this structure or, even worse, relegate it to oblivion by hiding it in some small backwater "interpretive center?"

The proposal to move the Cider Barrel is indicative of a county government which is paying lip service rather than making a true commitment to historic preservation. The proposal should be removed from the Germantown master plan by the County Council.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net