

No quick fixes at Independence Mall

By William C. Kashatus

“Philadelphia is a pleasant city with a rich history,” wrote Nathaniel

Willis in the Nov. 21, 1831, issue of the United States Gazette. “Everything is well-conditioned and cared for. If any fault could be found it would be that of too much regularity and too nice precision.”

Too bad Willis isn't still around to serve as a city planner. He might be able to temper the current obsession with regularity and precision in the plans for Independence Mall. Perhaps then, the National Park Service (NPS) and the city planners would allow Philadelphia's history to sell itself instead of compromising it with glitzy new buildings.

In her work, *Independence: The Creation of a National Park*, Constance Greiff suggests that the quest for regularity and precision has haunted Independence National Historical Park since its creation in 1951. The original park design was essentially the brainchild of the NPS and a committee composed of then-city planner Edmund Bacon, leading citizens and preservationists. Their objective was “to create an open park which captured the ambience of 18th century Philadelphia in the midst of a modern city.” Their thinking was shaped by “the wish to impose order on a grand scale.”

Most of the buildings that had no significance to Philadelphia's 18th century history were demolished and malls were established north and east of Independence Mall so that the remaining historic structures could be displayed like individual gems in a green oasis of lawns and trees. Reconstruction was generally accepted as long as it served the purposes of interpretation and the documentation of the historic appearance of the building was adequate.

But regularity and precision came at a price. Much of the city's historic fabric was destroyed by demolishing 19th-century buildings in order to create an artificial vision of 18th-century Philadelphia. While the major historical structures that comprise the park today were handled with care, the general design compromised the historical integrity of the city itself.

Hopefully the current generation of planners will benefit from the successes as well as the failures of their predecessors. While the wholesale demolition of historic structures is not a part of either the NPS or city plan to redesign Independence Mall — nor would it be permitted under the National Historic Preservation Act or



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the National Environmental Act — both proposals seem to contradict the original design of creating an open park in favor of “appropriately placed” and expensive new buildings.

The city's ambitious design to turn the three-block mall north of Independence Hall into a world-class tourist attraction complete with a \$175 million National Constitution Center is based on the hope that it will generate significant revenue from outside the city and offset Philadelphia's declining manufacturing base. While the NPS plan differs in the location and scale of the new buildings to be constructed on the mall, it understands the city's need to sell its history. That is why its more modest plan also includes a National Constitution Center as well as a new visitors' center and a new pavilion for the Liberty Bell. But even this plan will cost upward of \$33 million.

Having interpreted the history of Independence Park for many summers, I question whether that money will be well spent. My experience tells me that most visitors only come to see three sites — the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall and Congress Hall. Their visit to historic Philadelphia is over after three hours not because there is little else to see, but because the city's other historic sites are not well mar-

keted or preserved and because entertainment, dining, lodging and shopping are less expensive outside of the city. Not surprisingly, Reading, Lancaster and, to a lesser degree, King of Prussia inherit Philadelphia's tourist dollars.

A new Constitution center or an elaborate new visitors' center will not improve the situation, regardless of their size or location. What is needed is a more meaningful use of the historic structures that already exist and affordable accommodations so that tourists can remain in Philadelphia longer than a few hours.

Why not establish a Constitution center at the First Bank of the United States? Such a site would not only be more cost-effective but also more meaningful than a brand-new, multi-million-dollar building. After all, the Constitution was actually tested there during George Washington's administration, something that could only serve to inspire those who would visit it. If not there, why not the Second Bank of the United States? The constitutional history made there during Andrew Jackson's administration should warrant similar consideration.

The millions saved by such a move could easily be invested in historical preservation on the west side of the city. The Fairmount Waterworks, Eastern State Penitentiary and the site of the 1876 Centennial Exhibit are all examples of Philadelphia's unique 19th century urban history that have been sorely neglected, in spite of the national interest they once commanded.

In many respects, these sites have greater potential to generate revenue than Independence Park because of their proximity to other tourist attractions like the Art Museum and the Franklin Institute. Besides, we seem to forget that while history has always served as the initial drawing card for visitors, significant revenue is only realized by keeping them in the city long enough to shop, enjoy a concert, or take in a ball game.

In other words, the NPS and the city would do better to let Philadelphia's history — indeed, the nation's history — sell itself instead of looking for a quick fix that may turn out to be a financial bust. We must continue to draw from the *inherent* assets of our past rather than losing them amid the fireworks, parades and glitz of more fashionable and expensive buildings.

William C. Kashatus, formerly an interpreter at Independence National Historical Park, is a Quaker school teacher who lives in Philadelphia.