

Geneva Historic Preservation Commission

Preserving the historic character of Geneva is rooted in the robust economy of 1920s. At that time, “the concept of a residential business district” was considered an “accidental discovery of a thriving business potential.”

Around 1920, a local woman, Kate Raftery, combined the architectural character of the city’s old homes with a knack for selling interesting treasures from around the world. By 1925, Kate and her staff began offering buffet luncheons within the artfully-decorated confines of her shop, *The Little Traveler*.

Over the course of the next two decades, several residences along Geneva's iconic Third Street were adapted for use as boutique shops and tea rooms in an attempt to emulate and complement the success of Mrs. Raftery’s “quaint, old house boutique.” The value of Geneva’s historic buildings—from a purely economic viewpoint—had become firmly established by the early 1940s.

In 1943, dedicated volunteers formed the Geneva Historical Society to preserve local history and educate residents. With generous community support, the Society erected the Geneva Historical Museum in Wheeler Park in 1964.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, several federally-initiated programs were causing untold destruction of urban and rural communities nationwide. The Eisenhower-era interstate highway program and the Kennedy-era efforts at widespread urban renewal led to the loss of many significant historic buildings across the country.

A mid-1960s report, *With Heritage So Rich*, coordinated by Lady Bird Johnson, analyzed the irreversible effects of urban renewal. The result was a call to protect the nation’s heritage and establish a mechanism to protect properties from “unnecessary harm caused by federal activities.” Additionally, the report documented the need for a program of financial incentives as well as “an independent federal preservation body to coordinate the actions of federal agencies affecting historic preservation.”

On October 15, 1966, The National Historic Preservation Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Act sought “to preserve historical and archaeological sites in the United States of America by creating the National Register of Historic Places and State Historic Preservation Offices.

Locally, Geneva residents, concerned with the preservation of the city’s historic buildings, initiated efforts to designate an older section of the City of Geneva as a nationally-recognized historic district. On September 10, 1979, the Central Geneva Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The district encompassed an area bounded by West State Street (N); South Street (S), the Fox River (E), and Sixth Street (W).

Seeking additional local authority over the preservation of Geneva’s historic buildings, the City of Geneva established a Historical Preservation Commission on February 15, 1982.

The following year, the North Geneva Historic District was listed, on March 23, 1983, in the National Register of Historic Places. The boundaries of the new district included properties bounded by Stevens Street (N), West State Street (S), the Fox River (E), and the Union Pacific Railroad tracks (W). Less than a year later, the Fabyan Villa in Geneva is added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Beginning in 1985, a large group of residents began an effort to expand the boundaries of the two historic districts. On February 15, 1987, a local district is established within the City of Geneva, effectively combining the two national districts. The singular district boundaries stretched between Stevens Street (N), South Street (S), the Fox River (E), and the Union Pacific Railroad tracks (W).

The City of Geneva, on November 21, 1988, passed an ordinance creating an Advisory Commission on Historic Preservation. The ordinance updated the original 1982 legislation while retaining the Commission's advisory role; clarified procedures and definitions; and established standards for the review of proposed work within the District. Within the year, the Geneva Country Day School is nominated and listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The City of Geneva amended the Geneva Municipal Code thereby granting to the Historic Preservation Commission binding permit review for designated residential properties, beginning February 22, 1994. The following year, a second amendment established the U. S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation as the guidelines by which proposed work within the District would be evaluated.

In 1999, a comprehensive architectural survey of the Geneva Historic District was completed. The survey evaluated the architectural character, historic integrity, and the condition for each property within the District. The survey provided a valuable "baseline year" assessment of the District.

Riverbank Laboratories were included in the National Register of Historic Places on November 28, 2003.

In 2006, the first Preservation Planner was hired by the City of Geneva to coordinate the activities of the Commission and the Community Development Department by providing assistance to owners of individual landmarks and properties within the District.

Building on its celebrated character, the City of Geneva continues to embrace the quantifiable cultural and economic benefits of historic preservation.