

SECTION III

HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN OLYMPIA

Current programs, past issues

This chapter represents a summary of the existing Historic Preservation program. There may be substantial changes to the program as a result of initiatives proposed in Section IX of this document.

THE OLYMPIA HISTORIC PRESERVATION ORDINANCE

While some individual local properties were placed on the National and State Historic Registers as early as the 1970s, there was no official preservation program in Olympia until a municipal Historic Preservation Ordinance was adopted by City Council in 1983. The ordinance was inspired, at least in part, by a 1979 Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) study that suggested historic preservation as a means of revitalizing Olympia's declining downtown.

The Historic Preservation Program (OMC 18.84 and 18.12) was designed to build support for preservation by acknowledging local historic sites, providing guidance to property owners and educating the public through interpretive markers and special events. It outlined a preservation program with three primary components:

The Olympia Heritage Commission

This board of 15 volunteer citizens advises City Council on matters of local history and historic preservation. Commission members determine which properties are eligible for the Olympia Heritage Register, review proposed changes to Register properties and sponsor public events.

Historic and Archaeological Surveys

A survey is a professional study that identifies historic places through a process of research and field work. Surveys may either be comprehensive in scope or focus on specific themes.

The first comprehensive inventory of Olympia's historic resources was undertaken in 1986 as part of a larger effort to survey historic sites and buildings throughout Thurston County. There are currently 564 Olympia properties in the County Historic Survey database.

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No comprehensive archaeological surveys have been conducted in Olympia, although 14 archaeological sites (both historic and pre-historic) have been identified. The Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP) administers and maintains the Washington State Inventory of Cultural Resources, a comprehensive database of buildings, sites, structures, objects, and districts across the state that have been identified and recorded on inventory forms. Inventory forms on archaeological sites are considered sensitive documents and access to this information is restricted.

The Olympia Historic Property Inventory

The Olympia Inventory is a comprehensive list of properties that have been identified as historically valuable to the community, regardless of whether or not they have been placed on the Register. Listings are made by a qualified surveyor who has conducted research and field work on both individual properties and the surrounding area. The surveying of cultural resources is the initial step in the historic preservation process and is authorized as part of the Olympia Historic Preservation Ordinance (Olympia Municipal Code, 18.84.080). Owner consent is not required for a property to be listed on the Historic Property Inventory.

The Olympia Heritage Register

The Olympia Heritage Register is an official list of historically important structures and sites that have been officially designated through a formal hearing process before the Olympia Heritage Commission. Participation in the OHR is voluntary; owners of significant properties are encouraged to place them on the register, but are not required to do so. Currently there are 215 properties—from the Clarence and Elizabeth Lord Mansion to the historic tugboat Sand Man—on the Olympia Heritage Register.

Washington Heritage Register

The Washington Heritage Register recognizes historic and cultural properties that are significant to the history of communities in Washington and/or to Washington State. Nominations are submitted to the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Preservation. They are reviewed and officially listed by the State Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, which invites comment from the Olympia Heritage Commission whenever an Olympia site is considered.

There are currently 35 Olympia individual properties listed on the Washington Heritage Register and two districts.

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National Register of Historic Places

The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) is a listing of America's most significant historic properties. A listing on the National Register is largely an honorary designation, although some additional review is required for any federally funded project that affects National Register properties. Nominations of properties to the NRHP are submitted to the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP) then reviewed by the Washington State Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), a body of citizens with expertise in historic preservation whose members are appointed by the Governor. Following their review, the ACHP makes a recommendation on the eligibility of the nominated property to the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) who in turn, forwards the nomination to the Keeper of the National Register within the U.S. Department of the Interior for a final review and listing in the NRHP. The City of Olympia, with advice from the Heritage Commission comments on nominations of properties located within the city boundaries.

As of October 1, 2004, there are 27 individual Olympia properties listed on the National Register of Historic places and two districts.

Design Review

Changes to the exterior of a listed Register property which require a permit must be reviewed by the Heritage Commission before work begins. If the Register property is in one of the city's design districts, the recommendations of the Heritage Commission are considered as part of requirements in the overall permitting process which is administered by City of Olympia staff. Within these design districts, properties abutting Register properties are also subject to design review as part of the permitting process.¹

If a Register property is not located in one of these design districts, a review is required but recommendations are advisory only. The Heritage Commission is guided in such reviews by the Secretary of the Interior's Design Standards and Guidelines for Historic Preservation supplemented by City of Olympia Design Standards.

¹ Design Review districts in addition to designated historic districts in Olympia include: Downtown, Port Peninsula, High Density Corridor 1, 2, 3, and 4 (HDC), High Density Corridor-4 Capital Mall Area, Freeway Corridor, West Bay Drive, Residential Scale, Auto Oriented, and Infill Districts. See OMC18.100.080.

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See section on “Additional Regulations” below regarding historic district design review. Particulars on the City process and standards are available through the City of Olympia Website at <http://www.olympiamunicipalcode.org/> The Secretary of the Interior Guidelines are at <http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps.tax/rhb>. (as of September 2004)

A VOLUNTARY PROGRAM

Olympia’s preservation program relies mainly on incentives to encourage historic preservation:

- **Bronze markers for Olympia Register properties**, provided and installed by the City.
- **Free design guidance**
Heritage Commission staff can provide resources and guidance to assist property owners in renovations of historic properties. Additionally, professional Heritage Commission members provide expertise in historic preservation matters.
- **Regulation of adjacent properties to protect the historic context of registered properties.**
The city’s design review ordinance provides for mandatory review of compatibility of design for new construction and renovation of buildings adjacent to Olympia Heritage Register properties with recommendations from the Heritage Commission.
- **Flexibility in strict building code requirements**
In the interest of preserving historic character, some strict code requirements may be relaxed for Register properties as long as safety is not compromised. These exceptions are reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the Olympia Building Official under the provisions in Olympia Municipal Code. See 16.04.015 -3403.5 Amendments for Historic Buildings.
- **Special Property Tax Valuation**
An important additional incentive was approved by the Washington State Legislature in 1985 and adopted by Olympia the following year.

Owners who have recently rehabilitated/restored their historic properties are eligible for reduced property taxes (over a ten-year period) to offset the costs of approved renovations. Fifty-one Olympia properties have participated in this program since 1986, including some of the most familiar and cherished buildings of the downtown core (the Reed Block, the Mottman Building, the Chambers



Bronze Marker awarded to Historic Register Properties.

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Block, the Elks Building, the Olympia Hardware Building, the Hotel Olympian, the Old Thurston County Courthouse). These 51 “Special Tax” restorations represent nearly \$20 million of private investment.

ADDITIONAL REGULATIONS

Although the Historic Preservation Ordinance itself imposes few binding restrictions on property owners, Olympia has adopted additional ordinances and policies that strive to protect the city’s historic character.

- **The City Design Review Ordinance (OMC 18.100)** imposes stricter historic preservation standards on historic properties within the city’s design districts and on properties which are abutting or across the street from designated Olympia Heritage Register properties.
- Under the **Washington State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA)**, development proposals (land use actions) must be reviewed for ways in which they might affect historic properties. Mitigation steps may be required before a proposal is approved.
- A **rating of historical importance** has been applied to all Inventory and Register properties in downtown and High Density Corridor areas. In these locations, specific SEPA mitigation requirements are tied to the classifications of this rating system. Additional information is available by contacting the historic preservation planner for the city.

The Olympia Heritage Commission works with the City of Olympia Community Planning and Development department in conducting required reviews as part of the permitting process.

PROTECTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Information regarding the location of known archaeological resources is available from the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP) on a confidential basis. Memoranda of Agreement can be made between local governments and OAHP to provide access to such information when requested for bona fide uses. It is the policy of the City of Olympia to contact the Squaxin Island Tribe to comment on proposed land use or other actions or projects which could involve traditional areas or archaeological resources, as the tribe often has additional or different information than is available from OAHP.

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TACKLING DIFFICULT ISSUES

For most of the past two decades the Olympia Heritage Commission has focused primarily on adding properties to the Heritage Register and reviewing proposed renovations. But over the course of 22 years, the Commission has also wrestled with some complex, difficult and sometimes divisive preservation concerns.

Historic Olympia Schools

In 1987 the Commission was called on to craft an agreement between the City of Olympia and the Olympia School District concerning four landmark elementary schools. All four schools had been designed in the 1920s, in a distinctive Mission Revival style, by noted local architect Joseph Wohleb. Under this agreement the School District was permitted to demolish both Garfield School and the surviving portion of Roosevelt School in exchange for preserving the other two buildings. Lincoln School was successfully renovated in 1994. “Old Washington” School, which now houses administrative offices and Avanti High School, received extensive rehabilitation in 2003.



Lincoln School renovated in 1994. *Olympia Heritage Commission photo.*

Performing Arts Center

When a new performing arts center was proposed for downtown Olympia, the Heritage Commission favored renovating and adapting the historic 1924 Liberty Theater. Instead the old theater was razed in 1984 and replaced by the Washington Center for the Performing Arts.

Demolition of Rowland Lumber Building

In 1997, as with all Land Use Actions concerning historic properties, the Heritage Commission was asked to comment on the proposed demolition of an old lumber yard (no longer in use) located at Harrison Avenue NW and Black Lake Boulevard. While the Commission ultimately conceded the need for traffic improvements at the intersection, and raised no formal objection to demolition, members remain very concerned about the continuing erosion of Olympia’s industrial heritage.

High Density Corridor Zoning

In 1994, the City adopted new zoning that encourages denser development in key urban areas. Concerned about the effect this change might have on older neighborhoods, the Heritage Commission took on the task of inventorying historic buildings in the newly

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re-zoned areas and rating each one for importance. Based on this information, the City adopted new design guidelines for High Density Corridors that attempt to integrate new construction with existing historic character.

Urban Waterfront Housing Zone

A proposal in 2002 to create an Urban Waterfront Housing Zone (allowing taller buildings near the waterfront in an attempt to create more housing in the downtown core) raised concerns with the Commission over how such a change might affect both the historic scale and historic sightlines of downtown Olympia. Zoning in a five block area was adopted in 2002 to allow for housing and structured parking.

STAFFING AND FUNDING

The Olympia Heritage Commission is staffed through a contract with Thurston Regional Planning Council which provides professional staff, as well as administrative and graphics services to the commission.

Operation of Olympia's historic preservation program is financed by general fund monies from the City of Olympia. Additional funding for specific projects has also come from federal grants as part of the city's eligibility as a Certified Local Government, local Lodging Tax funds, the Port of Olympia, other City of Olympia Departments and numerous community associations and clubs. The National Trust for Historic Preservation through the Preservation Services Fund has contributed to the Commission's work including support for the Preservation Plan effort.

SELECTED HISTORIC SUCCESSES

1950

Local conservationist Margaret McKenny galvanizes the community to oppose construction of a parking garage on the site of Sylvester Park.

1955

Margaret McKenny spearheads a successful effort to preserve the woods of the former City watershed in southeast Olympia, now known as Watershed Park.

1987

The Olympia Heritage Commission campaigns to save the 1870 Steele House from imminent demolition. At the eleventh hour, a group of private investors steps forward and converts the old plank home into multiple-family units while retaining and restoring its important historic details.



Margaret McKenny and friends. *Photo courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society/State Capital Museum Collection.*

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1988

The Olympia Heritage Commission designates the North Rogers Historic District which includes five Tumwater Lumber Mills Houses.

1991

The Olympia Heritage Commission succeeds with the help of volunteers from the South Capitol Neighborhood Association in placing the South Capitol Neighborhood Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places. With more than 440 properties, it is one of the largest residential historic districts in the state.



4th Avenue Street Scene looking west. Postcard from a private collection

1993

The Olympia Heritage Commission, working with the non-profit Bigelow House Preservation Association (BHPA), secures a \$308,000 grant from the State of Washington to restore Olympia's pioneer Bigelow House (ca. 1860) and open it to the public as an historic house museum. The City expedites the project by purchasing the Bigelow House and re-selling it immediately, on short but flexible terms, to BPHA.

1995

The Bigelow House Preservation Association opens the Bigelow House Museum—and repays the City in full within three years.

2004

The Olympia Heritage Commission nominates the Olympia Downtown Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places, which was officially designated in September, 2004. This designation recognizes the significance of the area as well as qualifying additional properties for Federal Tax Credits for certified renovations.

SELECTED HISTORIC LOSSES

1920s

A significant number of historic properties, including numerous houses and the first Providence St. Peter hospital, are cleared to make way for the new Capitol Campus.

1925

The opulent Olympia Opera House (1890), unable to compete with new movie houses, falls to the wrecking ball.

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1928

Eight-faced clocktower of the Old Capitol Building burns and is not replaced.

1929

The Governor Isaac Stevens House (1856) is razed to make way for the campus of the new State Capitol.

1949

A 7.1-magnitude earthquake slams Olympia, destroying most of the remaining turrets of the Old Capitol Building and ripping remaining parapets, cornices and balconies from dozens of downtown buildings.

1961

The Edmund and Clara Sylvester House (ca. 1860), a pioneer landmark on Capitol Way, is moved to the east side from its original location and subsequently burns to the ground.

1960s

Scores of homes are bulldozed (along with the original Eastern sugar maple trees planted in 1871 along Maple Park) to make way for the expansion of the Capitol Campus to the east side of Capitol Way.

1965

Olympia is hit by another major quake, this one measuring 6.5. Damage is serious—including severe cracks in the domed Legislative Building—but less dramatic than in 1949.

1984

The Liberty Theatre, a movie house from 1924, is gutted to make way for the Washington Center of the Performing Arts. Preservationists had favored restoring and adapting the old cinema instead.

2001

The 6.8-magnitude Nisqually Earthquake rocks Olympia on the morning of February 28, fracturing chimneys on more than 200 homes in the South Capitol Neighborhood Historic District. Damage to downtown is visible and extensive, especially at the important corner of Fifth Avenue and Capitol Way, but no historic buildings are lost.



Damage after the 1949 earthquake, corner of Legion Way and Washington St. The Liberty Theatre can be seen at the left, where the Washington Center for the Performing Arts stands today. The damaged building in the center of the photo is the historic Reed Block—current location of Drees. *Olympia Heritage Commission Collection.*



Town founder Edmund Sylvester and his wife, Clara Pottle Sylvester, erected this solid Italianate home on Main Street (now Capitol Way) between Seventh and Eight Avenues. It was, for many years, the largest house in town. It was here that Clara Sylvester hosted the first meeting of the Woman's Club of Olympia in 1883 and housed many visiting activists during the struggle for woman's suffrage. The house was moved in 1961 and burned to the ground a short while later. *Washington State Capital Museum, Washington State Historical Society.*

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