



THIS WEEK'S SPEAKER

April 6, 2021

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Jack Thomson, Executive Director, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission

By Elly Clary

Connection to culture is a concept Americans need to understand and embrace and the local landmarks leader told Rotarians that's what historic preservation promotes.

Criticized for tearing down historic sites, Charlotte actually has compiled a strong preservation record, said Jack Thomson, executive director of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Landmarks Commission.

Thomson took over in December 2019, succeeding longtime director Dan Morrill. Unlike Morrill, a historian and story-teller, Thomson called himself a real estate professional.

"I can talk to you about the importance of saving real estate to have a tangible connection to our past and move forward with our future," he said.

"When you walk down the streets of a community that has preserved its buildings, you are automatically connected to a culture that's hundreds of years old," Thomson explained. "This is a sea change that the American population needs to understand and embrace."

It's especially true, he said, in a city like Charlotte that's in love with its future. But he added a caveat.

“When I meet with my colleagues in the preservation world, Charlotte’s vilified because we’ve torn so much down,” he said. “There are more plaques to buildings that once stood than historic buildings that stand today. I point out to these folks that we actually have the most productive and successful landmark program in the state.”

Asheville, for example, boasts historic sites such as the Biltmore and Thomas Wolfe houses. Thomson is familiar with those, having been executive director of the Preservation Society of Asheville & Buncombe County. But in all of Buncombe County, there are 38 landmarks. And while Raleigh has in excess of 200, Charlotte-Mecklenburg boasts more than 350 designated sites.

Architecturally significant examples include Latta Place, Biddle Memorial Hall at Johnson C. Smith University, First Baptist Church (home to Spirit Square), Fourth Ward’s Berryhill House and the first Charlotte Coliseum (Bojangles Arena). Other landmarks are significant for associated history. Local examples are the Mecklenburg Investment Company building (in the razed Brooklyn section) which was Charlotte’s first purpose-built office structure for the Black community, and the Reginald Hawkins house, target of one of several bombings during 1960s civil rights unrest.

America’s first publicly operated historic site was George Washington’s headquarters, Thomson said. Early on, he added, women made a big impact, including those in Savannah and Charleston and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association.

But the spark that ignited great fervor came in 1963 when New York City permitted demolition of elegant Penn Station. Thomson called it an “indictment of American culture as a young nation” that had “a hard time embracing our tangible connection with the past.”

Finally, Thomson invited consideration of a brick, which he called “the profile of embodied energy.”

The brick was instrumental in converting energy from the time its clay was dug, to being fired in a kiln, through transportation to a construction site, to a mason securing it with mortar in a wall.

If its structure is demolished, a truck expends energy to haul the brick to a landfill.

“All the energy is still in that brick,” he said. “That’s the importance of historic preservation.”

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/534039545>

Jack’s introduction begins at the 19:55 minute mark.