

The House That Launched the Savannah's Preservation Movement: *The Isaiah Davenport House*

By Jamie Credle and Melissa Jest, May 2006

The famous Lady Nancy Langhorne Astor¹ said Savannah, Georgia was like “a beautiful woman with a dirty face,” during her visit in 1946, according to local historians. The Lady recognized that underneath the city’s grime and decay lay something extraordinary. The planned city of squares and wards was designed by the colony’s founder, General James Edward Oglethorpe, in 1733 and was England’s 13th colony. By the 1950’s, the city’s historic downtown, rich with character and beauty, had been all but abandoned as residents and businesses left for the new suburban development occurring on Savannah’s southside. Two years after Lady Astor’s comments, a newspaper article reads, “One of the city’s former beautiful residences which has been left to fall into decay is the **Davenport House** Unimproved for over a half century, it faces an impoverished, unimproved square. Local lovers of beauty and of Savannah have long sighed over its plight. Now they weep”²

Like most of downtown, the Davenport House has lost its luster. The Isaiah Davenport House is situated on Columbia Square, one of the historic squares which give the city its distinct, garden-like character. Built by master builder Isaiah Davenport in 1820 for his growing household, the Federal-style home “is a high point in Savannah architectural development,”³ wrote Walter Hartridge, architectural historian and native Savannahian. But in 1954, it had become a rundown tenement building targeted for demolition to make room for much needed parking for the busy funeral home across the street.

Today, the Davenport House hosts thousands of visitors each year who come to experience the history preserved in this 19th century home, which is now a house museum and interpretive site. Savannah no longer has a “dirty face,” instead, it is a model of historic preservation which drives the city’s growing tourism and hospitality industry. The Davenport House is a 2005 *Preserve America Presidential Award* winner for its privately-funded restoration and creative interpretation committed to historical accuracy as well as for its role as the birthplace of Savannah’s historic preservation movement. So, what happened, you ask?

By 1954, a significant number of important, 18th and early 19th century buildings had been torn down and replaced with modern, commercial buildings that was hoped to bring shoppers back downtown. U.S. Congress launched its urban redevelopment program, also known as urban renewal that same year which encouraged cities to “be cleansed of their ugly past and reclothed in the latest modern attire.”⁴ In 1954, the Savannah city government approved the demolition of the Old City Market, built in 1870 on Ellis Square to serve as the central marketplace for Savannah. Ellis Square was one of the original six squares laid out by Oglethorpe and held four public markets between 1733 and 1954.⁵ According to the City of Savannah, the Ellis Square Market sets an all-time record for total income in 1940, thanks to the automobile for transporting purchased goods. But ironically, the lack of parking spaces sparked plans to raze the historic building.

With the new threat to demolish the Davenport House, local residents awoke to the need to protect what was historic and unique about their city. It would take a local group of dedicated

citizens to move beyond just wishing something would be done to protect the Davenport House. In 1955, seven Savannah ladies founded the Historic Savannah Foundation, Inc. and kicked off a grassroots effort that would help save more than 300 historic buildings. Now organized for action, these seven ladies raised the \$22,500 necessary to buy the home and began planning for its rehabilitation and reuse.

Saving the Davenport House was the catalyst for a movement. Once the building's future was secure, Historic Savannah Foundation had the confidence, commitment and experience to save other buildings. No local zoning laws existed in Savannah at that time to protect historic structures, thus the Foundation developed a comprehensive strategy to promote preservation through private sector involvement.

The widespread loss of historic places and growing citizen awareness led to a national preservation system developed in the 1960s. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 created the National Register of Historic Places and a review process to evaluate federal government projects that threatened nationally significant resources.⁶ In fact, it was this same year (1966) that Savannah's historic downtown was listed on the National Register as a National Landmark. Savannah's grassroots preservation campaign also led to the 1970 statewide referendum that amended the Georgia constitution and empowered Georgia cities to enact preservation laws.

Over time and with trial and error, Historic Savannah Foundation has become an innovator in the preservation movement. The Foundation and its members supported the listing of seven other historic districts in the city of Savannah on the National Register. These historic districts each hold their own collection of buildings and sites found to be historically significant and worthy of preservation by the federal government.

While the Foundation has moved far beyond its initial endeavor to save the Davenport House, committed Davenport House supporters continue to make the house museum their primary concern. The Isaiah Davenport House Museum opened to the public in 1963 and in the late 1990s and early 2000s the museum was restored and reinterpreted to more accurately depict the life and times of the builder, Isaiah Davenport, and his household. It is a vibrant historic site which stands as a beacon of civic concern and group action. When asked what he likes most about the Davenport House, one museum supporter noted, "Because its symbolizes what a group of determined people – the seven ladies – can do and how they made a major difference in our community."⁷

Notes:

¹ Lady Nancy Witcher Langhorne Astor was the first woman to serve as a member of the British House of Commons. Lady Astor married into the Astor family, the wealthiest family in the United States during the 19th century. She was also an American, born Virginia in May, 1879.

² Lillian Bragg, "Historic Davenport House is Suffering From Neglect," Savannah Morning News, February 26, 1948.

³ Walter C. Hartridge, "Davenport House Has Place of Honor In U.S. Architecture," Savannah Morning News, May 13, 1956.

⁴ Jon C. Teaford, "Urban Renewal and its Aftermath", Housing Policy Debate, 2000; Vol. 11, Issue 2; pp. 443-465 (see page 43).

⁵ City of Savannah Ellis Square project website, www.theellisproject.com, chronology.

⁶ David Listokin, Barbar Listokin and Michael Lahr, “The Contribution of Historic Preservation to House and Economic Development”, House Policy Debate, 1998; Vol. 9, Issue 3; pp. 431-478 (see p. 435)

⁷J. Wiley Ellis, The Column: Davenport House Friends Newsletter, March 2006. Mr. Ellis is former president of Historic Savannah Foundation (1975-76), former Davenport House Endowment Director (1999 – 2005) and Davenport House Committee Vice-President (2006 to present).