

John Hancock home and Oak Ridge historic structures Part 1

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John Hancock House, Boston, which stood on Beacon Street, adjoining the State House. This house was removed, unfortunately, to make room for improvements, to the regret of the citizens of Massachusetts.

Illustration of the John Hancock House

The bold first signer of the Declaration of Independence, John Hancock, was a leader in the formative years of our nation. He was born in Braintree (now Quincy), Massachusetts on January 12, 1737 and died while in office as first governor of Massachusetts on October 8, 1793. He was orphaned at a young age and adopted by a wealthy merchant uncle. Upon his uncle's death, in 1763, Hancock inherited what might well have been the largest amount of wealth in the young nation.

Hancock became a successful merchant in Boston, where he rose to prominence in local politics and the pre-Revolutionary movement. At an early age of 17 he graduated from Harvard. At the age of 23, after proving his honesty and business ability, his uncle sent him to London on a business mission. Hancock there saw the coronation of King George III.

He was president of the Massachusetts Provisional Congress from 1774 to 1775, and served as a Massachusetts delegate and president of the second Continental Congress from 1775 to 1777. Hancock

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was among the most vocal supporters of independence for the young British colonies. The Declaration of Independence was actually circulated abroad with only Hancock's signature.

Hancock became increasingly involved in state politics and in 1780 was elected the first governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Hancock died in office while serving his ninth term.

What happened to John Hancock's home? Why can we not go see it today? Why was the grand home not preserved for history? These are questions asked about John Hancock's home, but could also be questions asked of Oak Ridge regarding our potential historic structures.

Are we in Oak Ridge making the same mistake Bostonians made in 1863? What is to become of Oak Ridge's most famous structures? Many structures are being demolished at a rapid rate. Over the past few years literally hundreds (over 500!) of Manhattan Project buildings have been demolished at both the DOE sites and in the city of Oak Ridge. What should be preserved? Once the structures are gone, the same situation will exist as that of the long gone John Hancock House.

It is called the famous John Hancock home which stood on Beacon Street in Boston and which was demolished in 1863 to make room for a new wing of the State House. The original house was erected in 1737 by Hancock's uncle, Thomas, and was a "wonder-house" in its day. The stone trim was contracted for in the "tenth year of the reign of George the Second" with one Thomas Johnson of Middletown, Connecticut. Undoubtedly, many figures of prominence in the early history of the Champlain Valley well knew the original Hancock House and its hospitable hosts.

It represented a splendid specimen of Georgian architecture that can be seen from the measured drawings made by John Sturgis before the original was destroyed, and it was fireproof, being built of Weymouth granite. Atmospheric and weather conditions have a happy effect on this stone, producing the illusion that the color tones of the building change, sometimes assuming a cast of green, again rose and at other times only a deep and very warm gray.

Why was this wonderful historic structure demolished in 1863? Was that a wise decision in retrospect? John Hancock was a wealthy merchant who helped finance the American Revolution. He was among the most influential of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He was a renowned public servant and obviously a key to the very heart of the revolutionary activities. Yet, by 70 years after his death he was not considered among the great of our nation by those in his home town to the extent that his great house was preserved. How soon we tend to forget! Is there a lesson here for Oak Ridge?

Early preservationists attempted to save the John Hancock house on Beacon Hill in Boston when it was threatened with demolition in the 1860s, to no avail. Publisher, Thomas Oliver Hazard Perry Burnham, issued a large broadside printed in bright red ink that was distributed throughout Boston urging Bostonians to "Save the Old John Hancock Mansion." But in spite of this attempt to arouse the public's attention, the John Hancock house was razed in 1863.

A large armchair was made from oak timbers and wooden pegs from the Hancock house. The chair was donated for a raffle to raise funds to save Boston's Old South Meeting House some years later when it seemed that historic structure might meet the same fate as the John Hancock house. Twenty-two-year-old Edward Silas Tobey Jr., won the chair and left it to his sister, with the stipulation that she leave it to the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston. She did that in 1954. The historical society recently donated it to Historic New England, also in Boston where many other artifacts of the original John Hancock mansion are retained.

There is a replica of the John Hancock House that was erected in 1926 and presented to the Ticonderoga, New York Historical Association by Horace A. Moses, a native son of Ticonderoga. He

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intended this donation to further the interest of the people of northeastern New York and the Lake Champlain and Lake George valleys in history and the fine arts. After careful consideration the house was constructed as a replica of the famous John Hancock home which stood on Beacon Street in Boston.

Next week I will look at the potential similarities between the John Hancock House in Boston, MA and Oak Ridge. We have a number of historically significant structures that are in danger of slipping from our grasp. Several are already demolished and others are slated for demolition. Saddest of all is The Guest House that is being allowed to deteriorate.

Additionally, I will list all the Oak Ridge structures currently on the National Register of Historic Places and that have received recognition as Landmark Facilities of the American Nuclear Society. Finally, I will publish the full list of the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association's structures that have been identified as most important historic facilities to preserve.