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Lead Us Not Into Penn Station

A new book chronicles the long fight to protect New York City's landmarks.

By Kim A. O'Connell | *Online Only* | Apr. 1, 2008

Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks

By Anthony C. Wood

Routledge Press (in association with the New York Preservation Archive Project)

422 pp., \$45

On August 2, 1962, New Yorkers were treated to a parade quite unlike anything they had ever seen. During the evening rush hour, a couple hundred nattily dressed marchers—the men in suits, the women in dresses and white gloves—took to Seventh Avenue, not to fete a visiting dignitary or salute an ethnic group, but to protest the demolition of Pennsylvania Station. The throng included members of the city's design elite: architect Philip Johnson, art critic Aline Saarinen (widow of the late architect Eero Saarinen), and urban advocate Jane Jacobs, among others. "Be a Penn Pal," read one picket sign; "Action Not Apathy," pleaded another.



New Yorkers, including architect Philip Johnson, second from right, protest the demolition of Pennsylvania Station.

Credit: David L. Hirsch

It was all for naught. Demolition of Penn Station began the following year. From its rubble rose an enduring myth—that New York City's influential preservation movement emerged fully formed from the loss of that great building, with the passage in 1965 of the city's landmarks preservation law.

In *Preserving New York*, Anthony C. Wood sets out to debunk the myth. A professor of historic preservation at Columbia University and chair of the New York Preservation Archive Project, Wood has authored an impressively researched account of the people, places, and events that led to the landmarks law. The loss of Penn Station was a "key chapter" in that evolution, Wood writes, "but for it to be seen as either the entire or primary story ... is to rob New York City of the richer, more complex, and inspiring true story of how New Yorkers won the right to protect their landmarks."

That story, Wood contends, begins with several earlier battles to protect notable buildings—including the 1803

St. John's Chapel (demolished in 1918) and the 1812 City Hall (saved in the late 1930s). Beginning in 1939, a nascent preservation coalition successfully challenged city planner and master intimidator Robert Moses, whose proposals to construct a bridge (and later a tunnel) between Battery Park and Brooklyn would have destroyed much of the historic character of lower Manhattan. Of particular concern was Moses' plan to raze Castle Clinton, an 1811 fortification that later served as an immigrant processing facility. Led by George McAneny, who helped found the group that would become the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the coalition won support for saving Castle Clinton until the structure's 1950 transfer to the federal government and designation as a national monument. Efforts to inventory the city's historic buildings and recognize its neighborhoods continued in the postwar period, despite the loss of such significant buildings as the 1854 Brevoort Hotel in Greenwich Village, the Brokaw Mansions on the Upper East Side (1890-1911), the 41-story Singer Building (1908), and, of course, Penn Station, built in 1910.

Wood's account of these and other campaigns is compelling and even thrilling, but he clearly has an affinity for the people who waged them. He pays special homage to Albert S. Bard, an unsung civic leader and preservation pioneer whose 40-year crusade for legislation protecting buildings on a purely aesthetic and historical basis laid significant groundwork for the April 19, 1965 passage of the landmarks law.

More than 100 black-and-white photographs enrich Wood's substantive yet sometimes breezy prose. The images of buildings under demolition are the most poignant, especially the 1960 Life magazine portrait of the graceful, aging actress Gloria Swanson, posing amid the rubble of the Roxy Theatre. Two other photos late in the book—one of a 1988 reenactment of that famous Penn Station protest, organized to challenge amendments that would have weakened the landmarks law, and another of 2 Columbus Circle, whose historic modernist facade was recently demolished—remind us that preservationists must and do remain vigilant.

Despite Wood's convincing case against it, however, the myth of Penn Station is likely to persist. Most cultural movements can be distilled into a single event or iconic image: Rosa Parks refuses to relinquish her seat, and an older generation of civil rights organizers becomes a sidebar. Apollo astronauts snap stunning, galvanizing photographs of fragile Earth, and the early decades of the environmental movement are history. If future preservationists are awed by the story of how the perils of a single, monumental building led to a law, however mythical the tale might be, that is to the good. The heroes of that myth—and of all the stories that preceded it—are real, everyday people. "Can feeble little folk like me save the city from a serious blunder?" asked a humble Albert Bard in 1939. Indeed we can, and thanks to *Preserving New York*, we are reminded that such battles can be long but are always worth fighting.

[Read a book review from the magazine's March/April 2008 issue](#)

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