

## The PRESERVATIONIST

Newsletter of  
the SPRINGFIELD PRESERVATION TRUST

*Spring 1994*



*The imposing Chestnut St. School is threatened with demolition.*

### **NORTH END SCHOOL UNDER SIEGE**

In the last issue of this newsletter, we reported that the State Department of Education had suggested that the Colonial Revival style Chestnut Middle School be demolished and replaced by a new facility. The Springfield School Department evidently intends to do just that. The department has requested a million dollars to design a 20 million dollar new facility. This action has been taken without consultation with the Springfield Historical Commission or the New North Citizens Council.

Chestnut is the City's most architecturally important school still in use and is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The Trust has written Mayor Markel and the City Council (which approves any financing) regarding alternatives which deserve public discussion such as retaining the porticoed 1901 original building which is so visible on Chestnut Street.

*Continued on page 4.*

### **ALEXANDER HOUSE WILL OPEN FOR A SPECIAL SHOWING**

The Trust will hold an open house at the historic Alexander House at 284 State Street in downtown Springfield on Sunday, June 12 from 1:00 until 4:00. This is a rare opportunity to get inside this fine building that you may have noticed as you pass by during your daily travels. Local historian Wayne Phaneuf will talk about the history of the house and the Springfield Historical Commission will have a display. Live music will be provided by the Springfield Community Music School. Light refreshments will be furnished by the Trust.

Built in 1811, the Alexander House is not only one of the oldest buildings remaining in the city, but also one of the finest examples of the transitional Federal style of architecture in the region. Although currently unfurnished, the house contains intricate original woodwork, marble fireplaces and a magnificent spiral staircase, as well

*Continued on page 2.*



*The Federal-style Alexander House on State St. will open for one showing.*

**ALEXANDER HOUSE** continued from page 1.

as a high-style Victorian dining room which was added at a later date.

The building has an illustrious past as home to a variety of important citizens: Israel Task, one of the negotiators of the Louisiana Purchase; Chester Harding, an important American portrait painter; Henry Alexander, mayor during the Civil War; and Henry Phillips, postmaster and mayor. In the 1930's, the property was given to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, a non-profit preservation organization based in Boston. The Society is currently seeking proposals for reuse of the house.

There will be a \$2 admission fee to the general public (\$1 for Trust members and free to patrons and supporters). Please stop by and indulge your curiosity!

#### **SPT CALENDAR**

Monthly meetings  
held at 7:30 P.M. in  
the **Memorial House at Mercy Hospital**  
Next meetings are  
*June 1, July 6 and August 3*

**OPEN HOUSE**  
at the  
**ALEXANDER HOUSE**  
(284 State Street)  
*Sunday, June 12, 1994*  
1:00 - 4:00 p.m.





### CAN YOU GUESS?

*What an odd building to have in the McKnight neighborhood. How could something like this have been built with such a sweeping, futuristic roofline? But wait...that brick first story and those half-round windows look strange...could they be old? Could there have been a different building here before? Turn to Page 6 and see.*

#### **The Springfield Preservation Trust**

This newsletter is published quarterly for the members of the Springfield Preservation Trust, Inc., 979 Main Street, Springfield, MA 01103

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Springfield Preservation Trust is a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of historic structures in the City of Springfield, Massachusetts.

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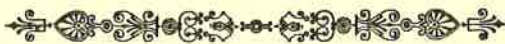


Nearby historic buildings, including Chestnut Knoll, are also threatened.

**CHESTNUT SCHOOL** continued from page 1.

The State reimburses communities for 90% of new construction cost. A new building would require an enlarged site which may threaten Chestnut Knoll and the adjacent Strong Mansion on Prospect Terrace, both properties also eligible for the National Register. Besides 10% of new construction cost, the city will also be required to pay for: demolition of Chestnut, acquisition of additional land, relocation of current occupants, and demolition of additional buildings. If site assembly for the recent Rebecca Johnson School is any example, more than a million dollars will be needed.

There has been inadequate public discussion of new construction versus rehabilitation. The School Department has made its plans without participation by neighborhood or preservation groups. The Trust supports the goal of proper educational facilities for our children but has seen no evidence that a renovated Chestnut Middle School is *not* a viable alternative to new construction, construction which will undoubtedly be less attractive than the current school.



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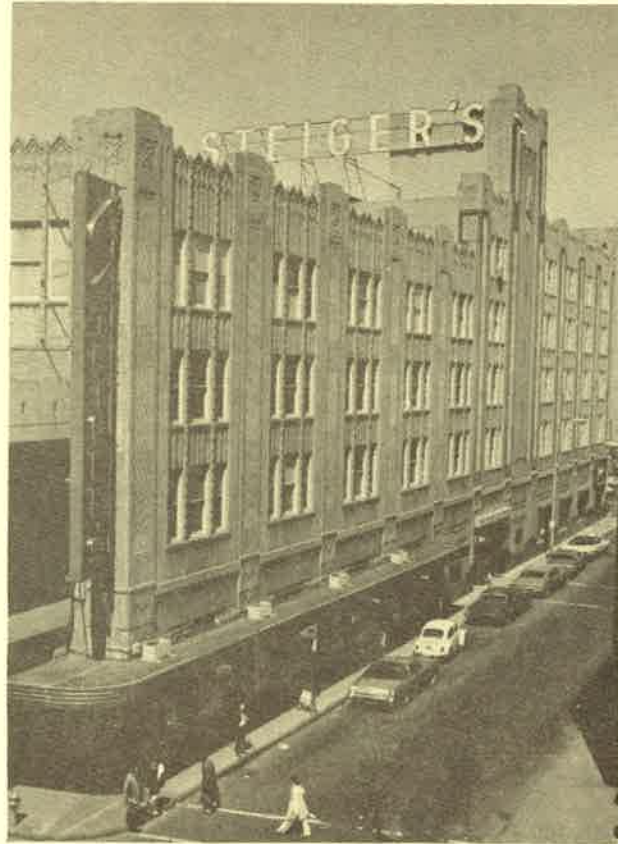
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## STEIGER'S DEMOLITION AND THE QUESTION OF GOOD URBAN DESIGN

The Mayor's *ad hoc* committee on the downtown Steiger's building has recommended that the city accept the donation of the property and then demolish the structure in order to build a convention center. Because so much of the Steiger's facade was harmed by the insensitive construction of the airwalk to BayState West and then the attachment of the unsuccessful SIS Center mall, the Trust finds that we are more concerned with good urban design than pure historic preservation.

The SPT Board of Directors has written the Mayor with several suggestions, including the following:

- No demolition should occur until the proposed convention center is funded. Springfield does not need a parking lot or another "little park for a little while" on Main Street.
- No airwalk should be constructed over Main Street once the current monstrosity is razed. Main Street needs more people on it, not over it!
- Any new building should be taller than two stories. Just as high rise buildings turn a street into a canyon, low rise buildings fail to create a true urban street.
- The art deco wall material and canopy should be saved and incorporated into the new building. Steiger's facade was the best example of art deco in the region. It was a distinctive part of Main Street and its reuse would probably be more attractive than any new design.



*The Steiger's Building is known for its impressive Art Deco facade.*



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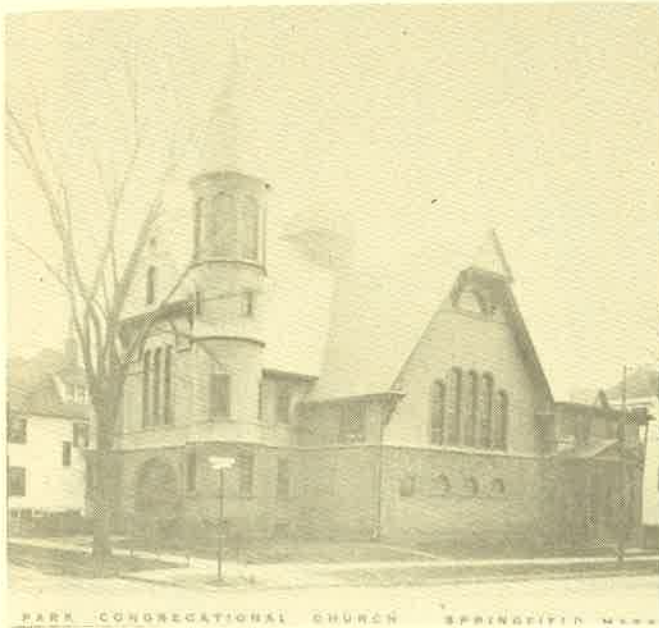
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**CAN YOU GUESS?** Continued from page 3.

*Now this is what one would expect to find in McKnight! This wonderful church with both Queen Anne and Romanesque features was built when the McKnight district was the center of social life in the Springfield of the 1880's. Tragically, the church burned in the 1970's. What is there now was built upon the remaining foundation.*



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### **WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS**

The Trust would like to welcome the following people to the membership: Ron Carle and CB Davella.

Also...we would like to remind everyone that membership renewal is currently underway. Mail your checks today if you have not already done so.

### **TO ADVERTISE IN THE SPT NEWSLETTER**

CALL  
**WILFRED STEBBINS**  
AT **735-1793**

**FOR RATES AND INFORMATION**

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## ASK THE TRUST

### Q. How are local historic districts established?

A. Local historic districts are formed through the initiative of local residents, civic or neighborhood associations, the Springfield Preservation Trust and other groups. A local ordinance is drawn up specifying the reasons for historic status, street and land boundaries of the district, and guidelines are established to which any changes come before the Historical Commission for approval.

Prior to the establishment of any historic district, a study must be made of the historical and architectural significance of the buildings to be included in the proposed district. The results of the study are reviewed by the Springfield Planning Board and the Massachusetts Historical Commission according to Chapter 40C of the Massachusetts General Laws. The proposed district is established as an official district by a two-thirds vote of the City Council.

### Q. What are the benefits of living in a historic district?

A. The purpose of creating local historic districts is to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant in the history of the city. Having the Historical Commission review any proposed changes is an attempt to maintain sections of the city known to generations of residents for the sake of many generations yet to come. The integrity of neighborhoods is protected and reinvestment in one's property is facilitated as a spin off of the pride created by living in a Historic District.



### Q. How does one find out about zoning in local areas?

A. Call the Springfield Planning Department at 787-6020 and staff can assist you with information regarding the zoning regulations for your neighborhood. You may also purchase a copy of the Zoning Ordinance of the City Of Springfield for in-depth regulatory information on each type of zoning district. Keep in mind that zoning districts do not necessarily follow the same boundaries as Historic Districts.

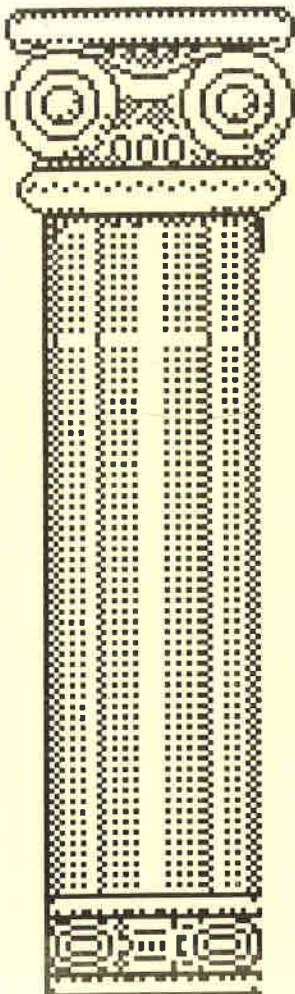


## HISTORIC HOUSE TOUR COMING UP

The Historic House Tour is planned for Sunday, October 16th. Anyone interested in opening their home for the tour or working on the tour itself should contact Jo Sarnelli at 746-9067. We welcome your participation.

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**THE ALEXANDER HOUSE**  
284 State Street

Open Sunday, June 12, 1994  
1 - 4 p.m.

Join us for this rare showing  
sponsored by the  
**SPRINGFIELD PRESERVATION TRUST**

**Admission \$2**  
*Light refreshments*

Presentation by Wayne Phaneuf, Managing Editor  
of the Springfield Union News,  
and a display by the Springfield Historical Commission  
Music provided by the  
Community Music School of Springfield

