

Blue Grass Trust Weighs In

The Historic Implications of the CentrePointe Proposal

by Julie Good

The Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation observed with interest the presentation of the new hotel plans at the LFUCG Council work session [on March 4]. As we have stated on previous occasions, the development of the Dame block is welcome news.

We are, however, disappointed that the plans call for the complete destruction of every building on this block. The developer, the Mayor, the Council and public should know that there are several buildings on this block that have substantial historical significance. It is unwise and short-sighted to dismiss these structures as ugly or unimportant or unworthy of saving. The contrary is true.

The row of buildings along Upper Street beginning with Mia's and including Rosenberg's was known as "Morton's Row." These were constructed in 1826 by Lexington's most prominent 18th and 19th century businessman, William Morton. Imagine. These buildings had already been in operation for 20 years when Abraham Lincoln visited Lexington in 1847. Lincoln or his wife, Mary Todd, may have shopped in the grocery store that the 1836 city directory shows as being operated in this building. Lord Morton himself is a giant in Lexington history. He opened his first general trading store in 1787. He had an interest in Lexington's first bank. He founded Lexington's first Episcopal church and donated some of the property on which Christ Church Episcopal (where Henry Clay worshipped) now stands. And, he left money in his will for the establishment of Lexington's first public school. These buildings within Morton's Row on Upper Street are a living memorial to one of Lexington's most important citizens.

The buildings housing Buster's and The Dame date back to the early 1900s and are both historically and architecturally significant. Long-time Lexington residents will recall that these buildings have been occupied by, among other businesses, Kresge's Department Store, Lexington Utility Company, City Ice Company and the Lexington Chamber of Commerce.

And all of these buildings—The Dame, Buster's and Morton's Row—are in surprisingly good shape for their age. Sure, their facades aren't pretty and need some work to restore them to the beauty of their proud historic past. The interiors could also stand

some repairs and care. But, this hotel project has hovered over these buildings' and businesses' heads like Damocles' sword for the past three years, with the property owners not being willing to invest much for their basic upkeep. Given a deserved new life, one can imagine how exciting the next 200 years for these buildings could be.

This corner at Main and Upper has long been a vibrant and important hub of downtown Lexington. Currently, the corridor framed by The Dame, Buster's and Mia's on the east side of Upper and Hugo's, Harvey's and McCarthy's on the west side, provides an exciting, welcoming and compact pod of food, drink and entertainment that is unmatched in Lexington. Everyone should visit this area around the midnight hour—actually get out of your cars and hit the sidewalks—to fully appreciate the extent of the social commerce that occurs here. To completely wipe out one-half of this entertainment center would be bad enough, but to destroy the almost 200 year old brick and mortar legacy of one of Lexington's finest first citizens would truly be tragic.

Other buildings on the block have historical significance as well. Ordinarily, the Blue Grass Trust would advocate for the preservation of these other structures and, depending on how the hotel plans proceed, we will do everything that can be done to insure that these other buildings are not needlessly sacrificed to the wrecking ball. However, the Trust recognizes that the irregular hole left by the demolition of the Woolworth building makes an infill project that preserves all of the current structures on this block difficult if not impossible.

The Trust is a reasonable organization made up of reasonable people. In the spirit of another of Lexington's notable citizens, we understand that compromise is necessary. Just as the total and complete destruction of all of the buildings on the block is indefensible, so probably is the preservation of all of the structures.

We believe there is potential for a win-win situation that allows for most of the vision of the CentrePointe team to be realized and most of the history and vibrancy of the block to be preserved. We will support any informed effort to find that win-win solution. ■

Julie Good is Executive Director of the Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation.



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