“SOMEBODY AROUND HERE WANTS TO START A FIRE”: THE O. HENRY HONEYMOON COTTAGE CONTROVERSY

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The smell of burned wood cuts through the dry winter air; it is Christmas Eve 1956. As the sun rises over the hill, its light reveals the fire-ravaged remains of a cottage. Two stubborn chimneys, disembodied relics, stand over a crime scene of stones and charred lumber. It is a quiet morning, but the sirens of six fire engines still haunt the park from the night before. The residents in the houses overlooking the site unknowingly sleep easier now that the O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage will no longer be a nuisance.

In 1888, before William Sydney Porter became the famous short story writer, “O. Henry,” he and his new wife, Athol, rented a small wood frame cottage on East 11th Street in Austin, Texas. Porter came to Austin in 1884, having moved to Texas from his hometown, Greensboro, North Carolina. After working briefly as a pharmacist, bookkeeper, and General Land Office draftsman for four years, he became a teller for the First National Bank of Austin in 1891. For Porter, the job was a temporary position while he continued to submit short stories to national publications. Ironically, the position had profound implications on the rest of his life; the poorly managed bank came under federal indictment in 1896, and the court found Porter guilty of embezzling funds.¹ The sensationalism of the local scandal publically disgraced the young writer, and he fled the city.

Porter returned to Austin in 1897 to care for Athol, who was dying of tuberculosis. After her death the following year, a federal jury sentenced him to a five-year prison term in Columbus, Ohio. During his prison stay, Porter found he had more time to devote to writing and took the pen name “O. Henry.” After an early release in 1901, O. Henry moved to New York City, where his fame as a short story writer grew. By the time of his death in 1910, he had published over 600 stories and gained international praise.²

For many people, O. Henry’s literary acclaim overshadowed Will Porter’s alleged improprieties. Trueman O’Quinn, an attorney and judge, was the foremost authority on Porter’s life and writings for the city of Austin. As an avid collector of O. Henry artifacts, O’Quinn purchased the home Porter and Athol rented at 505 East 11th Street in 1949 with a business partner. He designated the dilapidated structure the “O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage” because it was the first home the newlyweds shared together. Although Porter rented several homes during the time he lived in Austin, O’Quinn recognized its significance as the home where Porter fathered two children and published his first commercial writing, and in which he lived longer than other homes he rented.³ The two buyers intended to preserve the O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage, damaged by years of neglect, and repurpose it as a business and shrine to the late author. Although their purchase saved the home from impending destruction, the cottage sat deteriorating for six more years.
In June 1955, the nascent Heritage Society of Austin ambitiously decided to include the O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage as one of its first preservation projects. The organization's first official bulletin, published that summer, included a picture of the property along with an outline of the organization's statement of purpose. The group envisioned civic-minded projects in which the historic preservation of manmade and natural resources would "perpetuate those customs of the people, their traditions and folklore that seem to beautify and enrich the community life." In this way, the Heritage Society structured itself as the principal educator for Austin's history. Although the cottage was not yet part of a proposed plan, the idea of the Honeymoon Cottage adhered to an agreed notion on the significance of cultural resources to the fabric of local and community history.

At that time, the city of Austin already had an O. Henry house well known to locals and tourists alike. In 1934, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas donated a house O. Henry had rented from 1893 to 1895 to the city. In exchange, Mayor Tom Miller, an enthusiastic fan of the writer, agreed to restore the home as a museum for the city. Although some later believed having two homes, both occupied by O. Henry, was redundant, the museum was included in the future preservation plans for the Honeymoon Cottage.

The idea to preserve the Honeymoon Cottage as a historic center and its proposed location originated from within the society's ranks and municipal connections. In December 1955, Mr. Beverley S. Sheffield, the Recreation Director of the Austin Parks and Recreation Board and member of the Heritage Society, suggested to the board the creation of a historic center in Austin. The center would consist of several historic structures, including the Honeymoon Cottage and the O. Henry Museum. Sheffield expressed hope in a financial and curatorial partnership with the Heritage Society of Austin. He stated the organization "was interested in moving O. Henry's honeymoon cottage," and that its owner and society member, O'Quinn, might be willing to donate the structure. Sheffield's suggestion reveals the Heritage Society's earliest known aspirations for the Honeymoon Cottage and the origins for the preservation plan published the following year.

By the fall of 1956, the Heritage Society had created a cohesive project proposal, and through its implementation, it unintentionally sparked a controversy. Zachary T. Scott, a founding member and society director, bought the cottage from O'Quinn and donated the aging structure to the Heritage Society. The society's November bulletin proudly described the group's objective for the preservation of the Honeymoon Cottage. Along with the O. Henry Museum, the two buildings would form the nucleus of a new historical center devoted to the writings and life of William Sydney Porter. The original architectural designs for the center show the cottage and the museum attached to a new structure, the "Austin Historical Trove," that would open up to a stone patio. In fitting with the natural preservation aims of the Heritage Society, the members hoped to place the O. Henry shrine in a public park.

The Heritage Society approached the City Council, under the guidance of Sheffield, to ask for approval to place the center in what was then-named Wooten Park. For the Heritage Society, this location was ideal for two reasons: the park provided a beautiful natural setting next to Shoal Creek, and its location made it easily accessible to travelers along Austin's main thoroughfare, Lamar Boulevard. In October, Mayor Tom Miller and the City Council approved allowing the society to "use the described land . . . for the purpose of locating, restoring and maintaining in its original condition as a public museum
or library . . . the ‘O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage.’ Despite having the support of Recreation Director Sheffield, the City Council’s decision came under fire by the Parks and Recreation Board. It requested the council reconsider its actions because the placement of the cottage encroached upon one of the city’s few greenbelts and breached the deed of the park from its donor, Dr. Goodall Wooten. The disagreement between the Austin City Council and the Parks and Recreation Board reached the *Dallas Morning News*, which noted the council’s disregard of the Parks Board recommendation.

With the approval of the City Council, the Heritage Society of Austin began to arrange for the move of the Honeymoon Cottage to its new site in Wooten Park for the third week in November. In response to the approval, residents of the neighborhood adjacent to the park organized against the project and voiced their opinion on the matter at a City Council meeting on November 15. They argued that the planned historic center would adversely impact the value of the neighborhood. The City Council responded by saying it was up to the Heritage Society to decide whether or not to change the location for the O. Henry Shrine. In a private meeting at the home of society president Elizabeth Gardner, the members voted to proceed with the move. Upon hearing the decision, attorney Wright Stubbs, the husband of one of the opponents, announced he would file an injunction to abate the nuisance, hoping to deter the society from moving the Honeymoon Cottage.
The local papers, *The Austin American* and *The Austin Statesman*, expressed daily the fervor of the controversy. What might have been an innocuous disagreement between upper-middle class Austinites became tabloid fodder reaching news outlets in Dallas, Chicago, and New York City. Stubbs made it easy for journalists to angle the group of residents opposing the Honeymoon Cottage as uppity adversaries compared to the relatively quiet and conservative Heritage Society members. For the papers, Stubbs’ colorful language describing the Honeymoon Cottage as “an old, worn-out, vermin-infested junk heap” coupled with the threat of injunction made for front page stories. These brash quotes immediately fueled the intensity of the controversy and became pullouts for almost every article subsequently written.

Between the lines, Stubbs and the opposition simply did not agree with the Heritage Society’s impression that the cottage held historical significance and believed its presence in Wooten Park would adversely affect the natural environment and possibly the value of the neighborhood. However, Stubbs’ stubborn manner dismissed discourse in favor of public affronts. He equated the moving of the cottage to illegal dumping and questioned Porter’s character when he said, “The way I hear it, Porter moved every time the rent was due.” For Stubbs, the Heritage Society could find historical significance and “make shrines out of half the dumps in East Austin.” After a couple of logistical delays, Mobilized House Movers, Inc. picked up the house and made the slow trek one and a half miles, relocating the timeworn cottage to its new home in Wooten Park. In a telephone conversation with Jenny Lind Porter, a cousin of O. Henry, she recalled that Stubbs’ threats heightened the spectacle of the move. Stubbs filed his promised injunction suit following the delivery, calling for the removal or destruction of the Honeymoon Cottage.

In the early night of November 26, witnesses saw two males entering the Honeymoon Cottage carrying a flashlight and a candle. A police officer driving along Lamar Boulevard spotted the ensuing fire and was able to alert the Austin Fire Department before the cottage could suffer any significant damage. Small piles of burning paper and embers lightly damaged the walls, floors, and ceilings of several rooms. Fire Marshall W.L. Heaton believed the scene evidenced suspicious conditions but declined to define the act as arson, preferring to equate the fire to pranksters. Three nights later, however, a second attempt to burn the cottage altered Heaton’s verdict; he believed that it was possibly the work of a serial arsonist.

While the commotion of the fires briefly deflected public attention towards finding the perpetrators, the Heritage Society continued to face legal opposition from the Wooten Park neighbors. The opposition consisted of Wright Stubbs and nine other residents who lived in upper middle class homes along Gaston Avenue, immediately west of the site. On December 18, the opposition reorganized under attorney Andre Gerard and filed an original petition with the 53rd Judicial District Court in Travis County. The plaintiffs’ primary argument lay in the legality of the City Council’s authority to grant permission for the placement or construction of a building on designated parkland. They charged the City Council did not have the power to “sell, convey, lease, mortgage, or otherwise alienate any land which is now, or shall hereafter be, dedicated for park purposes” without special election. Throughout the controversy, the Heritage Society attempted to assuage fears that it would fail to restore the home into a presentable cottage. To this end, it arranged for the construction of a new roof on the cottage for December. In the petition, the plaintiffs argued that the original agreement between the City Council and the society stated that the
cottage was to remain in its original condition as a rundown, hazardous structure. Thus, restoration would violate the terms of agreement. Finally, they contended that the Heritage Society could not say that the structure “is vested with a cultural, and/or literary, and/or public interest,” because O. Henry lived in at least six homes during his residency in Austin.¹⁹

Through the local newspapers, the public voiced its attitude toward the controversy and targeted the alleged snobbery of the plaintiffs. For one writer, the physical separation between the Gaston Avenue residents, whose houses stood atop a hill over the cottage below, served as a figurative separation representing class privilege. They attacked the civility of the plaintiffs for putting their wealth ahead of their civic duty to protect history. Many Austinites proclaimed their admiration for the Heritage Society in preserving O. Henry’s legacy. One resident believed it “to be an honor to live so close to the shrine of such a noted Texan.”²⁰ Further, some accused the Gaston Avenue residents of indirectly starting the fires.

One of the more poignant opinions from Austin’s citizenry came from Jenny Lind Porter. Only an observer to the controversy, Porter could not believe the objections to the creation of an O. Henry shrine and expressed her frustration in a poem. She published “A Plot of Green – within the Wood” in the Austin American a few days before the first fire broke out:

‘This old, worn-out, and vermin-fested heap
Of junk is fit for burning,’ cry the sheep.
– Remember, in these walls a constant flame
Was long ago a human heart and name,
Was beauty and was human love and thought,
And such as these to ashes are not brought.

“We cannot have O. Henry on our street!
And if you bring his cottage here, we’ll greet
The eyesore with a neighborhood of wrath!”
O. Henry strolled a universal path,
And in these shabby rooms may humble men
In silence marvel at the wealth of pen!

‘It will defile our wooded plot of green
And stand a nuisance on the quiet scene,
And we will make Will Porter’s shack withdraw
By all resources in the courts of law.’
– And yet among mankind the artist stood
A little plot of green within the wood.²¹

The Gaston Avenue residents, appalled by the public scrutiny, used the local papers to respond to the negative characterizations. Dr. George Stumberg writing to the American-Statesman, rejected the implication “of the residents of Gaston Avenue as a group of ‘rich’ people who live in a ‘swanky’ neighborhood” and asserted his stance against the placement of the Honeymoon Cottage as an effort to preserve the natural integrity of Wooten Park.²² Stumberg’s neighbor, Peggy Taylor, revealed her disbelief at the emotional intensity of the controversy and explained that their angle was not a malicious attack against the legacy of O.
Henry. These small efforts of self-defense went unheard under the cacophony of the upcoming events.

On December 23, six fire trucks responded to an alarm for the third reported fire at the O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage. In twenty minutes, the blaze leveled the house, leaving only two chimneys intact. The destruction of the O. Henry cottage the day before many families would gather to read his short story, “Gift of the Magi,” was an ironic affront. Mayor Miller illustrated the sentimentality for the author when he placed a holly wreath upon the smoldering remains. After the Christmas holiday, the American-Statesman reported Miller’s declaration for an “all-out arson probe” in which he demanded Austin’s entire police force, from “rookie patrolmen to its veteran detective,” would work to capture the guilty parties. Even historian Walter Prescott Webb offered financial support for the investigation.24

The Heritage Society of Austin’s O. Henry Committee, originally organized to oversee the preservation project, regrouped to take an inventory of its losses and handle the pending lawsuit filed by the Gaston Avenue residents. The chairman of the committee and attorney for the Heritage Society, Fred Morse, first filed a response to the plaintiffs’ original petition. The response argued semantics, saying the Heritage Society never had any interest in the preservation of a home owned by the man they called “O’Henry.”25 Morse clarified for the court the society’s interest in a home lived in by William Sydney Porter but asked for the dismissal of the case in light of recent destruction of the property. In January, Heritage Society President Gardner requested the dismissal of Stubbs’ original lawsuit saying, “the plaintiff’s prayer has been answered in that under cover of darkness . . . the house was destroyed by fire.”26 Gardner’s dismissal request infers a dislike for the attorney and evidenced Stubbs’ grammatical and semantic errors for the judge’s consideration. Despite the complete destruction of the Honeymoon Cottage, both Stubbs’ and Gerard’s suits would remain on file for two more years until they felt assured the society would discontinue any future plans for Wooten Park.27

The investigation of arson played out like a gossip rag in the Statesman and the American through February 1957. Austinites used the paper again as a sounding board for their opinions of the Gaston Avenue residents. Some pointed accusatory fingers saying that although it would be difficult to prove residents were guilty, “people who read these papers . . . will know.”28 Other letters to the paper suggested keeping the destroyed remains as a type of memorial reminding people of the controversy. Journalists kept the city abreast of promising leads investigated by local police. In February, two anonymous letters mailed to the American and local police provided the surnames of three alleged culprits. In an effort to examine the investigation and provide guidance as to whether the District Attorney could use the surnames as evidence, the Travis County grand jury set aside time to hear the facts of the case. In the concluding investigation, it appeared that many of the rumors proved true.

On March 5, 1957, three teenage boys appeared before Travis County grand jury to admit their guilt in burning down the O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage on December 23. Despite a lack of physical evidence, the insistence of their parents and the statement of a fourth boy, merely an accomplice, encouraged their confession.29 Although the oldest boy lived in Dallas, he was visiting his mother and younger brother who lived on a street near the plaintiffs’ homes. The third boy, the son of a local grocer, also had indirect connections to the Gaston Avenue residents. The defendants’ attorneys substantiated the indirect influence of the controversy on the boys’ decision to burn the cottage. The Austin American reported
that upon taking the stand, the eldest boy “related how he had heard adults talking about the heritage society’s relocation of the house,” but that he was guilty of coming up with the idea.30

The influence of the “intemperate statements of adults” also factored in the boys’ penalization.31 The grand jury recommended the presiding judge and Gardner seek leniency in punishing the boys. The boys’ parents paid the Heritage Society for losses accrued by the fire, and the oldest boy, an adult in the eyes of the court, received only probation. Following the controversy, Jenny Lind Porter became well acquainted with the cottage’s one-time owner, Trueman O’Quinn. She later recalled that O’Quinn concurred with the attitude of the grand jury.32 The angry remarks of adults, not understanding the weight of their words, influenced the boys’ actions. Although the loss of the O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage saddened O’Quinn, he was satisfied with conclusion of the ordeal. The minutes for the Heritage Society’s annual meeting in 1957 demonstrate the organization’s wish to move forward as the members sought to thank the project sponsors and collect damages from insurance.33

The majority of contemporary Austinites do not remember the controversy surrounding the preservation of the O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage nor its subsequent destruction. Its legacy lies in the intentions shared by all historic preservation projects and the mistakes made by the organization. The Heritage Society of Austin’s “Shrine of O. Henry Memorabilia” was a civic endeavor, influenced by a meeting in 1956 with Dr. Richard Howland, President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In that August meeting, he advised the Heritage Society that the preservation of historic houses is intended for “the public’s use and enjoyment,” an outlook they shared with society members in a monthly letter. For the Heritage Society, enshrining O. Henry reinforced and preserved local and community history.

Initially, the Heritage Society disregarded the sentiments of the Parks and Recreation Board despite the society’s written purpose to preserve natural, as well as historic, resources. When confronted with a legal dispute, it pushed forward in its belief that the structure would eventually hold historical significance for all of the project’s opponents upon its completion. Although the opposition, particularly Wright Stubbs, was unfaltering in its position against the location of the Honeymoon Cottage, some did acquiesce to the significance held by the structure. The Heritage Society, acting as the cottage’s manager, failed to take into consideration the effects its project might have on the parkland. The group believed that the perceived significance of the cottage overrode the opinions of a minority group of people.

In retrospect, the society’s preservation plan seems outdated, and today the project would have faced the scrutiny of state and federal legislation. In spite of this, it illustrates contemporary issues faced in the field of public history. Current standard practice acknowledges there are often opponents, for one reason or another, to historic preservation projects and there should be some effort to mitigate the differences. However, standard practice can often overlook compromise for the fear of losing precious historic resources to the interests of people unconcerned with historical significance. By making the mediation process between opposing interests an integral part of the practice of historic preservation, it may be possible to preserve and save more historic resources.

The case of the O. Henry Honeymoon Cottage is a dramatic example of a failure to consult with the public on historic preservation. However, it offers a valuable cautionary tale
about the undesired outcome when professional historians and preservationists ignore the proper channels of communication. When practicing historic preservation, the intention of the historian is often not the reality of the outcome. Many historic resources are lost for reasons beyond the control of preservationists. History may not repeat itself, but examining the circumstances of failed preservation efforts can inform the future practice of historic preservation by learning from mistakes made in past efforts.

2 Ibid.
6 The City of Austin Parks and Recreation, Minutes of the Parks and Recreation Board Meeting, December 7, 1955, Austin History Center.
11 The City of Austin Parks and Recreation, “Minutes of the Parks and Recreation Board Meeting November 7, 1956,” Austin History Center.
13 Garth Jones, “… Gets in on The Fight,” Austin American, November 22, 1956.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Jenny Lynd Porter, telephone conversation with author, March 5, 2012.
19 Ibid.
24 “All-Out Arson Probe Demanded by Mayor,” The Austin Statesman, December 27, 1956.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Jenny Lynd Porter, telephone conversation with author, March 5, 2012.