

# SPECIAL REPORT

## HISTORIC ELLICOTT CITY

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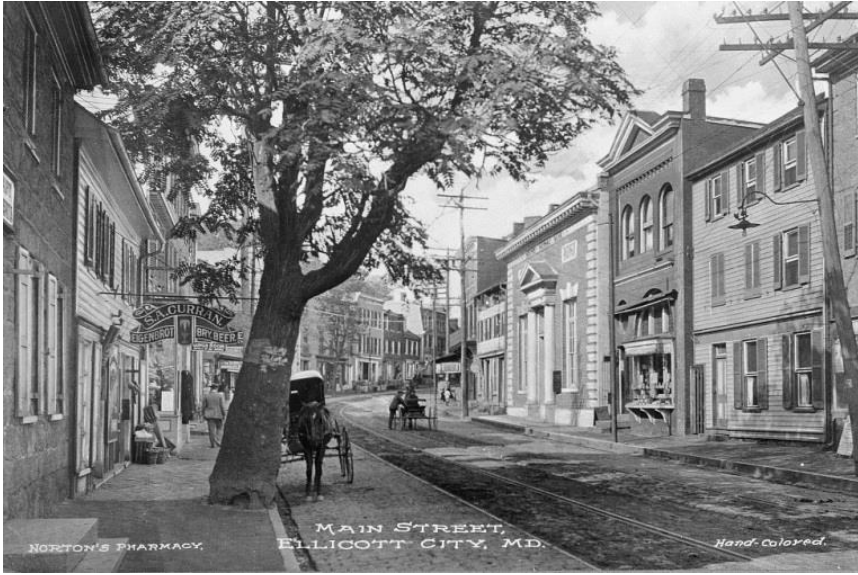
## A Place for the Past: Preserving Ellicott City's Heritage and Securing Its Future

In the wake of two devastating flash floods, the future of Ellicott City's historic district and flood prone buildings has been widely and openly debated. Following the most recent flood, on August 23, 2018, Howard County, Maryland officials announced a five-year, \$50 million plan to address flooding that includes a large-scale demolition within the historic district.

**There can be no question whatsoever that life safety is of the highest importance.** Preservation Maryland fully supports efforts to protect the lives of those who live in and visit Ellicott City. Proven stormwater management tools and scientifically based hydrologic retention efforts should be employed to reverse the damaging manmade impacts now causing these events. The most recent study that Howard County has used to support the current proposal does not, however, eliminate or even significantly reduce floodwaters on lower Main Street. By the study's own admission, floodwaters in this portion of the town may only be reduced from 6'-8' to 4'-6'. As a result, demolition of nationally significant historic structures may result in some limited reduction of property damage, but the demolition could come at an extremely significant cost to the economic well-being of the district and potentially result in the de-listing of Ellicott City from the National Register of Historic Places.

Curiously, the 2016 McCormick Taylor Hydrology/Hydraulic study did not propose or address demolition (the word demolition is not found anywhere in the document) – but the report did identify scientifically proven strategies to mitigate flood impacts in the town. Preservation Maryland and others in the community seek to understand why this study has been disregarded and supplanted by a new plan.

Fortunately, there are many examples of historic communities and places similar to Ellicott City where innovation and creativity have balanced life safety and historic preservation. There are legitimate and prudent alternatives to demolition which must be fully considered and studied before the bulldozer's blade is leveled at some of Maryland's most significant heritage.



Historic image of Main Street in Ellicott City, view North, ca. 1890. Photo from the Library of Congress.

## Authenticity Is Ellicott City's Key Asset

Historic places have power because they're real – they're authentic. Ellicott City is an example of a place that exudes authenticity. It is real and unadulterated. It has been traipsed over by Civil War soldiers, saturated by muddy floodwaters, and stained with the sooty coal smoke of locomotives. The result is a place that beckons visitors because it is unlike any other place. Here, the sameness of the interstate is replaced by the uniqueness of granite outcroppings and stone buildings built to last.

Authenticity is critical to tourism and the economic viability of places like Ellicott City. Studies conducted by the University of Florida's Center for Tourism Research & Development and many others have consistently found that tourists crave real, authentic place-based experiences. The University of Florida study, in particular, found that more than 95 percent of tourists felt it was "somewhat" to "very important" to experience authentic elements on their trip.

Additionally, a study recently conducted by the U.S. Travel Association found that Heritage Tourists – the type that is drawn to authentic, historic places like Ellicott City – typically stay 53 percent longer and spend 36 percent more than any other type of tourist. Heritage tourism pays – and pays more than any other category of tourism.

***As a result, demolition of character defining, authentic, and historic features may eliminate flood prone structures – but those same demolitions may also result in the reduction of the heritage tourists critical to the town's economy and future vibrancy.***

## **Viable Alternatives to Demolition**

*Fortunately for Ellicott City, there are many viable alternatives to consider.*

### **Preservation Option A: Full Implementation of 2016 McCormick Taylor Hydrology/Hydraulic Study**

The 2016 Ellicott City Hydrology/Hydraulic Study and Concept Mitigation Analysis was a comprehensive, thoroughly studied, and professionally reviewed plan aimed at significant reduction of flood impacts throughout the historic community. Before any alternatives or demolition plans are pursued, the public must understand why this plan has been disregarded – and the public should be given the opportunity to voice their opinion on implementation of this plan.

This study provided viable, scientifically proven alternatives to demolition of character-defining resources and concluded by noting:

*The results of this study demonstrate that construction of stormwater storage facilities throughout the watershed, combined with stormwater conveyance infrastructure improvements, can make an appreciable difference . . .*

From a financial, historical, and cultural perspective, it is both necessary and prudent to seriously reconsider adoption and implementation of this plan.

### **Preservation Option B: Public Acquisition of Flood-Prone Historic Buildings and Wetproof Stabilization**

In this scenario, Howard County acquires the most flood-prone historic buildings and begins a long-term campaign of internal structural stabilization and “wetproofing” of the structures. This could include the introduction of structural steel skeletons used to protect the buildings from collapse in the event of a flood as well as the removal of internal first-floor features prone to expensive flood damage (dry wall, electric wiring, plumbing, mechanicals, etc.).

The “wetproofing” would allow floodwaters to pass through the structure and to recede naturally without causing dangerous levels of hydrostatic pressure. Under this scenario, according to the most recent study referenced by Howard County, this “Open First Floor Model” would, in fact, also reduce flood impacts in the lower town. The resulting outcome would essentially be a historic “shell” of a building that would be designed to accept floodwaters with reduced recovery expenses.

This scenario accomplishes the following:

- Removes business and life safety concerns within the structure,
- Retains the exterior historic appearance,
- Preserves an unbroken historic streetscape,
- Protects the structure from future catastrophic collapse, and
- Potentially provides open usable interior space for special events.

The estimated cost associated with this model is expected to be similar or less than the cost associated with the proposed demolition plan. A full cost analysis could be prepared and would be supported with matching funds by Preservation Maryland should Howard County decide to move forward with consideration of this option.



After the 2016 flood, preservation engineers stabilized the interiors of 8111-8113 Main Street. Photo from Patapsco State Heritage Area.

### **Preservation Option C: Public Acquisition of Flood-Prone Historic Buildings and First Floor Wetproofing with Second Floor Reuse**

In this scenario, Howard County acquires the most flood-prone historic buildings and follows a similar plan to Option B, but instead of removing all tenancy, the county creates living and office spaces on the second floors of the structures (where applicable and appropriate) to retain some functionality and human presence in the lower town. Structural steel would still be deployed to prevent collapse, and first floor spaces would be cleared of internal features prone to expensive flood damage.

Second floor tenancy could also provide a small income stream to support the overall campaign and operating costs, and it would provide opportunities for workforce housing and artist residences to support an Arts & Entertainment district, as well as office space for startups and entrepreneurs – creating a new vibrancy for the district. Additional opportunities for second-floor reuse could include short-term vacation rentals built on the successful model of the C&O Canal Trust's *Canal Quarters* Program, which is managed entirely within the floodplain of the Potomac River.

The estimated cost associated with this model is expected to be similar or less than the cost associated with the proposed demolition plan. A full cost analysis could be prepared and would be supported with matching funds by Preservation Maryland should Howard County decide to move forward with consideration of this option.

### **Preservation Option D: Acquisition of Flood-Prone Historic Buildings for Establishment of Ellicott City State Historic Site Park**

In this scenario, state funds from Program Open Space would be utilized for the acquisition of flood-prone historic buildings with a similar long-term treatment plan to Preservation Option B, but rather than Howard County maintaining ownership, the State of Maryland retains ownership for the establishment of a new state park unit, administratively managed by nearby Patapsco State Park.

Similar to Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, the newly formed *Ellicott City State Historic Site* would manage this portion of the historic town for tourists and interpret the story of the town from establishment through the devastating floods of 2016 and 2018. Similar to Harpers Ferry, buildings could be cleared of internal features prone to flood damage, and flood resistant exhibits or panels could be installed to create a compelling tourism asset and education experience to market.

This scenario would require significant planning and political support, but it could be a game-changing opportunity for the overall historic district – and by extension Howard County – and an opportunity to establish a dynamic state park unit. The creation of this new unit of the state park system could also address the growing need for new park spaces – a need documented in a recent *Baltimore Sun* article which uncovered a 40 percent increase in park use since 2009 alone. The potential establishment of this unit also comes as Program Open Space enjoys a record appropriation – including a \$67 million increase in FY19 – which provides a unique opportunity for acquisition funds.



## Case Study: Harpers Ferry National Historic Site

Settled in 1733, approximately 30 years prior to Ellicott City, Harpers Ferry is a unique, pre-Civil War era industrial town with striking similarities to Ellicott City.

The similarities include:

- Located in a riverine floodplain at the bottom of a hill,
- Industrial history with major influence of the B&O Railroad,
- Critical strategic location during the American Civil War,
- A long history of flooding,
- Major tourist destination for both natural and historic tourism, and
- Similar building stock and styles – predominance of stone architecture.

Largely as a result of these similarities, staff of Harpers Ferry National Historic Site has long grappled with the challenges of maintaining the historic community in the face of challenging natural forces – namely floods. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing today, the National Park Service has worked to protect historic structures while balancing life safety and limiting extensive property damage.

The Restoration Museum, located on Shenandoah Street, is a prime example of this balance. The building, which has been prone to consistent flooding, was strengthened with a skeleton of structural steel and left in a raw state. As a result, the building can be flooded with little real concern and provides a unique platform to interpret and explore the history of construction and architecture in the historic town. Metal walkways within the building and interpretive signage provide visitors a passive experience that requires no permanent staffing.



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Stabilization and passive interpretation at the Restoration Museum at Harpers Ferry. Photo from TripAdvisor.

**The Restoration Museum is a vivid example of converting a liability into an asset – while avoiding unnecessary and costly demolition. This model of stabilization and interpretation provides an ideal prototype for Ellicott City as the community grapples with the challenges of flooding, history and preservation.**

## Case Study: Historic Structures of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Site

The entirety of the C&O Canal lies within the alluvial floodplain of the Potomac River – a reality that ultimately led to the commercial demise of the east-west canal corridor. As a result, when the National Park Service assumed responsibility and control of the 184.5 mile canal, flooding presented a real danger to the hundreds of historic structures located along the manmade waterway.

In the ensuing 47 years since the official establishment of the National Park unit, preservationists and historians have largely accepted the inevitability of flooding and have “wetproofed” historic structures to allow floodwaters to naturally flow through historic buildings and recede with limited property damage. The exterior of most prominent historic buildings located along the canal are maintained to provide an appropriate and authentic historic experience while many interiors are devoid of any finishes and can be flooded with little impact. Vents and louvers prevent the structures from trapping humidity and also avoid damage from hydrostatic pressure during flood events.

Concurrent to these efforts, the C&O Canal Trust, the non-profit charitable partner of the Park, has worked to rehabilitate structures along the canal suitable for rehabilitation and re-use as short-term, overnight rental locations. Known as *Canal Quarters*, the program has rehabilitated six historic lockhouses with a seventh underway. The latest project at Swains Lockhouse in Montgomery County has been purposefully designed to withstand flooding.

First floor construction at Swains incorporated many flood resistant materials including:

- Click-together vinyl flooring which appears historic but can be removed,
- Closed-cell foam insulation at interior walls,
- Removable wood wainscoting,
- Screened, cellular PVC crawlspace venting, and
- Pressure-treated wood framing members and sheathing.

Additionally, electrical outlets and switches on the first floor have been installed above the flood zone, which is up to three feet above the interior finished floor, and mini split HVAC units were installed high on the exterior walls. Outside of the lockhouse, special care was taken to create positive drainage, which will divert water from the foundation as high water recedes.

This work was done under the careful review and administration of the National Park Service, which maintains the highest standards for historic preservation.

## Path Forward

The work ahead will not be easy. Preservation Maryland fully recognizes the complexity and the challenges of this moment in Ellicott City's history. We appreciate the hard work the staff and elected officials of Howard County have put into planning for the future of this community.

Preservation Maryland does, however, believe that there is a better path forward that does not include broad and sweeping demolition. Existing studies have provided valuable insight into the work necessary to mitigate the most dire impacts of flooding – but more work is needed to understand the impact of the demolition of historic structures. The economic, historic, and hydrologic impact must be fully understood before an irreversible demolition process begins.

Preservation Maryland stands prepared to assist in that study effort. The organization is willing to pledge funds to support this effort – and the potential planning necessary to support the options proposed in this report. The organization will also continue to provide broad-based public outreach and legislative advocacy to assist the county in building the necessary political will to protect this historic resource.

Ellicott City is one of the State of Maryland's crown jewels. What we do here today will resonate for generations to come – and could, if done correctly, set a standard to which the rest of the nation strives to meet. The choice is ours, and Preservation Maryland firmly believes we must rise to meet this challenge. The future of Ellicott City depends on it.



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Contemporary black and white photograph of Main Street in Ellicott City at night. Photo by Geoffrey Baker.