

**SCHOOL, RESIDENTS DEBATE FATE OF
MANSION \ SHIPLEY OFFICIALS WANT IT
TORN DOWN TO BUILD SCHOOL FACILITIES.
RESIDENTS WANT TO PRESERVE THE
HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT BUILDING.**

Stephanie A. Stanley, INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Sitting, fuming, on the right side of the hearing room were Shipley School officials, their heavyweight lawyer, engineer and architectural historian at hand.

Dominating the left were angry Shipley neighbors, a few alumni and local historic preservationists, clutching speeches and statistics for their three minutes before the Lower Merion Planning Commission.

They were gathered last Monday to debate the fate of **Beechwood House**, an aging mansion designed more than 100 years ago by the then-famous Philadelphia architect Addison Hutton.

Shipley officials say they can't use the mansion and need to tear it down to make room for more modern facilities. Local preservationists argue that it is an important piece of local history and are intent on saving it.

The township's decision is pending, involving both the Planning Commission and the Zoning Hearing Board, which are considering Shipley's development plans for a new gym, dining hall and parking lot on its lower campus, where **Beechwood** sits. The township commissioners would then have the final vote.

Since news of the looming demolition broke, **Beechwood** has become a flash point in a longstanding township debate. It is one that often pits the plans of private property owners against the ideals of local preservationists, and one that also, as **Beechwood** illustrates, often leaves preservationists and the township little power to stop demolition.

Shipley's head of school, Steven S. Piltch, said the school, which teaches prekindergarten through 12th grade, has tried to find a way to keep the building. But after four years of study, engineers and architects cannot find a workable way to fit the old home into the private prep school's future.

There is no air conditioning in the building, a Shipley feasibility study said. The electrical wiring would have to be replaced; at least one additional staircase would have to be built; and the space on each floor is insufficient for the dining hall, athletic use and classroom layout envisioned in the school's master plan.

“The bottom line is, the building is not suitable for educational purposes,” said Shipley's attorney, Ross Weiss. “In fact, it is unsuitable for educational purposes.”

The best solution is to tear it down, they said. And according to township ordinances, they have the right to do it.

However, years ago, local preservationists deemed **Beechwood** a historically significant building with an important place in local history.

Built for a successful tobacco salesman in 1877, it is one of the few remaining 19th-century retreats of wealthy Philadelphians that once lined Montgomery Avenue and gave Lower Merion its Main Line social heritage. Then called “Sylvula,” its open, three-story oak staircase still stands at the heart of the building and speaks to a long-gone architectural style of elaborate design and craftsmanship. In addition, as one of the last Hutton homes in the township, the structure embodies a rare piece of architectural history.

“Such tangibles of history should not be obliterated,” said Jean K. Wolf, cochair of the township Historic Architectural Review Board and a member of the Lower Merion Conservancy. “They should be integrated into the future.”

Before it was threatened, preservationists placed **Beechwood** on a township list of more than 900 buildings that they have deemed historic, which provides a thin veil of protection.

When owners of these listed buildings - not buildings in a township historic district, which provides more protection - include them in development plans submitted to the township for approval, the plans must go before the township Historic Architectural Review Board. The review board then makes a recommendation to the township.

The review board adamantly opposed the **Beechwood** demolition, but township codes provide commissioners with little legal authority to control work on listed buildings - including the demolition of **Beechwood**, said township building department director Bob Duncan.

What the review board's recommendation provides is just additional time for negotiations, said township Planning Department Director Liz Rogan.

"There are no regulations in our code at all to provide us any leverage to control buildings on this list," Rogan said.

For years, preservationists have argued passionately - some say obsessively - to save buildings such as **Beechwood**, usually with success. But without a tougher ordinance, preservationists say, they must rely on persuasion and hope owners will compromise.

So far, that does not appear to be the case with Shipley, although the Planning Commission has sent the opposing groups to a "facilitator," who will try to broker a compromise.

Since **Beechwood**, the debate has taken on an increasing urgency as several other historic buildings, including the Gerhard Building on the Bryn Mawr Hospital campus, have been scheduled for demolition. Last week, a Frank Furness carriage **house** and a nearby matching caretaker's home were torn down by their owner, who considered the aging buildings an eyesore.

Lower Merion possesses a number of stately old residences and other buildings designed by the Who's Who of architecture - Hutton, Frank Furness, Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Durham and Louis Kahn, among others.

Many of the homes later became impractical, too large, too old and too expensive to repair or renovate for the next generation of suburbanites. Most of the children and grandchildren of original owners have moved away. The once-sprawling properties were subdivided and sold off and the old buildings were torn down.

Preservationists want to ensure that that fate doesn't befall all the buildings that tell the story of the township's past.

Next year, the township expects to develop a new ordinance granting commissioners more authority to control what owners can and cannot do with properties on the historic inventory. Until then, however, the fate of many buildings, including **Beechwood**, rests on whether owners agree to take preservationists' advice.