

A. Roy Smith: Preservationist of the Year

Honored in 2011 by the West Chester Downtown Foundation, Smith shows us what a life of preservation is made of—and why it's good for the economy.

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Photo by Jared Castaldi

West Chester is a town with character, but it doesn't grow on trees. Rather, preservation activists like **A. Roy Smith** work tirelessly to ensure that the borough's historic charm and significance remain front and center—with plenty of low-hanging fruit, if you will. Smith's efforts recently earned him recognition from the West Chester Downtown Foundation as Preservationist of the Year. Now, if we could only clone him.

MLT: Why were you selected Preservationist of the Year?

ARS: It's in recognition of the involvement I've had in historic preservation over the past 40 years. I started in Wilmington, Del., in the early '70s and continued on in West Chester—most specifically with the Board of Historical and Architectural Review in 1989. I'm now in my third and final term as chairman of the board of the West Chester Downtown Foundation.

MLT: What efforts are you most proud of?

ARS: Back in early 2000, we got the county to reconsider its initial proposal to demolish a building for West Chester's new Justice Center, which they ultimately relocated to the 200 block of West Market Street. The National Trust for Historic Preservation named West Chester a "distinctive destination" in 2006, and this year's Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan for West Chester was funded by a grant from Preserve America. In 2008, I was an adviser for the National Trust, representing the state of Pennsylvania. I also serve on the board of the national lobbying organization, Preservation Action, in Washington, D.C.

MLT: How did you start in preservation?

ARS: In 1970, I moved to Wilmington, where they had an organization started by local women called Cityside, which was focused on getting people acquainted with the advantages of living in Wilmington. I spent three years as its chair. In 1981, I was a member of the New Castle County Historic Review Board, and then made my way to West Chester.

MLT: You're also involved in Preservation Pennsylvania.

ARS: We're celebrating our 30th year as a nonprofit that assists in rehabilitating historic properties. We have ceremonies to honor the efforts of Commonwealth organizations for a variety of advocacy, visionary and construction projects. Our prestigious Henry Jordan and F. Otto Haas awards honor local and regional preservation activists.

MLT: Why is preservation so important?

ARS: It's good business and good for economic development. It makes economic sense to save and reuse the buildings we have, as opposed to tearing them down and contributing to landfills by building something new. It's green, and it's a smart thing to do.

MLT: Any advice for preservation newbies who want to get involved?

ARS: You can start by looking at the number of buildings in West Chester individually on the National Register of Historic Places. There are some 20 or so individual properties listed, like First Presbyterian Church, the courthouse, the building where the Lincoln biography was written, and some buildings on West Chester University's campus.

MLT: What about making a difference in our own neighborhoods?

ARS: Seek out your local historic preservation organizations, where you can become more familiar with preservation efforts in your region or state.