

Taking stock of township's history

Survey looks to architecture for clues about Hamilton's past

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Most people walking down the street wouldn't stop in front of a house to analyze its roof, but for Lindsay Thivierge, a roof can speak volumes.

She notices that the home has a similar structure to one on the same street. The only difference is the style of its roof, which she observes is also steeper than others of the same type.

Thivierge is an architectural historian with Richard Grubb and Associates, a firm of cultural resource consultants based in Cranbury. Her current project is a survey of Hamilton's historic sites.

The work is very detail-oriented and requires passion, Thivierge said. She smiled as she recalled comments she has heard from people outside of the industry.

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"People all the time are like 'Who cares?' or 'Who does that?' or 'It's boring,'" Thivierge said. "You have to love it."

Richard Grubb and Associates began work on the survey in September, after another group that was also passionate about the cause contacted them, requesting a proposal.

The project is a joint effort of Hamilton Township's Historic Preservation Advisory Commission and the Hamilton Township Historical Society.

"In today's transient society, our history and our culture and our heritage are going into dumpsters at about \$50 a ton. It can never be replaced," said Gordon Konrath, a member of both historical organizations.

Konrath said that the group contracted Richard Grubb and Associates to perform the survey, using funds from an anonymous donation. Leynes said that a draft of the survey is expected to be completed by the end of December.

"There has been very little done in Hamilton Township to document anything having to do with historic properties, so this information is quite lacking," Konrath said.

Thivierge agrees.

"I think it is unusual that there is such little historic information on an area as historic as Hamilton," she said.

Thivierge visits structures and looks at their architectural characteristics. She takes photographs and completes a checklist noting things such as each building's roof type, exterior wall surface, and window details. Those features might provide clues about the age of the structure and how much it has been renovated. Thivierge also includes sketches of the structures or additional notes at the bottom of each page.

"One of the main things that we're looking to do is really to identify buildings that are worthy of more research and that may be worthy of preservation," said Jennifer Leynes, a senior architectural historian with Richard Grubb and Associates, and the project manager. "Some of the buildings we've looked at have been altered a lot and so



Lindsay Thivierge, Jennifer Leynes and Gordon Konrath stand outside of the John Abbott II house on Kuser Road Oct. 28, 2010. The landmark serves as the headquarters of the township's historical society. (Photo by Stacey Pastorella.)

those buildings probably aren't as high a priority, or not a priority at all because of the amount of change they've had."

Thivierge estimates that the survey of Hamilton includes about 100 sites, most of which are houses, although some farm and industrial buildings are included. The list includes 50 locations identified by the township, an additional 39 within the Crosswicks historical district, and 11 that were previously identified by

the state preservation office. Most structures on the survey date between 1800 and the early 20th century, Thivierge said.

Konrath said the historical organizations have compiled a list of more than 250 sites they believe are worthy of analysis, but circumstances required them to narrow their focus.

"Because the township is so huge, budget and time constraints didn't really allow

doing the entire township in a comprehensive way," Leynes said.

Konrath said the southeastern region of the township was prioritized when planning the survey. Since that area is less developed than others in the township, its historically significant structures might be the most threatened by future development efforts, Konrath said.

The Crosswicks District is one area

included in the survey. Some streets Thivierge visited are Church Street, Mill Road, and South Broad Street.

Thivierge compiles most of the information by looking at the structures from public property. Sometimes, homeowners will come out to speak with her, and Thivierge asks for relevant information, such as any names or dates associated with the property. She said she documents that information, noting that it came from the resident.

Robert Poppert, Hamilton Township's principal planner, said the kind of information included in the survey would be useful to the Division of Planning. Poppert said that when there is a request for development or the demolition of a structure, the division checks resources, such as a register of historic places.

However, Poppert said that properties in question can not always be found in the register, and it is sometimes necessary to consult several sources, such as books about the township's history.

Poppert said he has been with the planning division for about 13 years. Issues involving historic properties don't arise often, he said.

"It's not a lot, but every now and then, a property or a question comes up," he said.

Poppert said that a more comprehensive list would make it easier to research historic properties when making planning decisions.

"Any time you go to look for information,

you want something compiled and complete," Poppert said.

When her visits to the sites are complete, Thivierge uses her notes to write a description of each structure. The information is entered into a database, as well as a mapping, or geographic information system, also known as GIS.

"I think, initially, the goal is to have that database of information," Leynes said. "It's going to be linked to GIS, so that it can be mapped, so that the township can see where the buildings are."

Konrath said information obtained from the survey will go to the state preservation office, and will also be a resource for township officials.

He said one goal is for the township to eventually include historical resources in its master plans.

Another survey of Hamilton Township was performed in the 1980s.

"That survey really focused more on individual neighborhood areas and historical districts, or potential districts," Leynes said. "So, this survey is really trying to find those individual buildings or farmsteads that weren't included in that survey."

Thivierge said she is also using the 1980s survey to identify changes that have occurred since that time.

"That'll hopefully be the end result," Leynes said. "If they do this again in 20 years, they'll know what it looked like in 2010."

