

Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc.

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April 4, 2023

Dear Madam Mayor and Council Members:

The Board of Directors at Historic Fredericksburg Foundation Inc. recently renewed our offer to help the City proceed with a formal National Register of Historic Places nomination for the building affectionately known as the Renwick Courthouse. We were pleased to hear this matter discussed at the Council meeting of March 13, 2023, and would like to take the opportunity to expand upon the reasons why a National Register nomination is the simplest, most cost-effective, and necessary step in planning for the future of this treasured historic asset and symbol of our community.

HFFI took the first step on behalf of the community to author a Preliminary Information Form for the Renwick complex that outlined the local, state, and national levels of significance reflected in its built environment. This form was approved by Virginia's state historic preservation office in 2020, paving the way for an intensive analysis that fully articulates the national level of significance exhibited by the courthouse property.

Why is this nomination so important? Isn't the building already eligible for historic tax credits as part of the historic district? Being on the National Register formalizes what professional architectural historians have repeated: this one-of-a-kind building and sole surviving courthouse designed by James Renwick, Jr. is a nationally significant piece of American art and architecture. Acknowledgment of this national level of historic significance through a National Register nomination unlocks additional public funding sources such as Save America's Treasures grants, which can provide up to \$750,000 in matching revenue.

The Renwick Courthouse is the most architecturally significant building in town and it has the added historic importance of being at the epicenter of local government for more than 150 years. Shortly after work was completed on the building in 1852, the town Council passed an ordinance to ensure the preservation of its use by the public (Figure 1, p. 2). Minutes from City Council meetings for nearly 100 years after its completion reflect the building's use by Fredericksburg residents as a library, armory, firehouse, school, church and congregational space for numerous local organizations. It also served as home to the Freedman's Court after the Civil War and as a War Service Community Camp after World War I.

This courthouse—like many others across the country—is a powerful symbol of community and the American form of government that so many citizens have fought to protect for generations. As the most architecturally significant historic resource in our city, the Renwick Courthouse likely carries the added weight of being a national treasure.

Preparation of this National Register nomination should not be put off any longer. It has been four years since HFFI offered to partner with the City on this work and two and a half years since the Preliminary Information Form was approved. Council shouldn't wait until the summer to get this important work underway. Researching, analyzing, and compiling a nomination for any nationally significant resource takes months to complete.

"To preserve, protect and revitalize the distinctive historic environment and cultural resources of the Fredericksburg area."

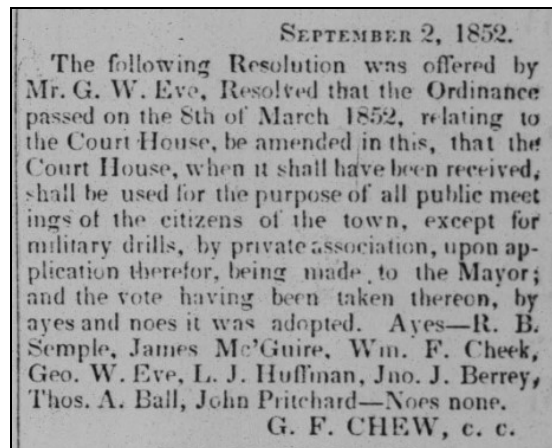


Figure 1: Excerpt from Page 2 of *The Fredericksburg News*, September 6, 1852.

Completing a nomination is a critical step to examining the building's historical significance by placing it in the context of the legacy of America's most famous mid-19th century architect. This one act would increase access to preservation grants from State and Federal sources, raise greater awareness of the building's artistic and historic value, and further demonstrate the locality's commitment to its proper preservation and sensitive reuse.

We at Historic Fredericksburg Foundation Inc. believe that the Renwick Courthouse is the most architecturally significant building in our community. We as a Board stand ready, willing, and able to support the City in this endeavor.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Kelly James".

David Kelly James

President, Historic Fredericksburg Foundation Inc.