

Challenges of Historic Preservation: The Demolition of Ormond Beach's Union Church

by Randy Jaye



*Union Church - Northeast Exterior View.
(Photograph taken on January 14, 2020 by Randy Jaye).*

During the summer of 2021, the Ormond Beach Riverside Church (Union Church) located at 56 North Beach Street, Ormond Beach was demolished, despite many objections from residents and community activists. The Union Church was built in 1960 in the mid-century modern architectural style, which was a significant design movement that lasted for only a brief period from around 1945 to 1969. The Union Church was purchased by the City of Ormond Beach in 2018 for \$729,000.

Renovation ideas to repurpose it into community center or other public use building never materialized. The City of Ormond Beach decided to replace the once impressive and historic building with a parking lot of only 26 spaces. The structure was surely one of the area’s most unique and recognizable landmarks.



The loss of such a significant local historic structure makes most people think about the challenges of historic preservation. The Union Church’s demolition also proves the point that once a historic structure is razed it is physically gone forever and only survives in memories and photographs (if any exist). Fortunately, many pictures of the Union Church survive today.

The National Park Service defines historic preservation as, “...a conversation with our past about our future. It provides us with opportunities to ask, ‘What is important in our history?’ and ‘What parts of our past can we preserve for the future?’ Through historic preservation, we look at history in different ways, ask different questions of the past, and learn new things about our history and ourselves. Historic preservation is an important way for us to transmit our understanding of the past to future generations.”

Positive Attributes of Historic Preservation

Preserving historic structures can benefit communities as they can attract both locals and visitors, maintain a community's history, boost property values, contain higher-quality and even scarce and extinct materials, and benefit local businesses as they can add appeal and local character to many business models.

There are several ways a structure can be recognized as being historic at local, state and national levels. Locally, structures can be included on local historic landmarks lists. Statewide, structures can be registered as a state historical landmark and recognized with a state historical marker. Nationally, a structure can be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. However, none of these designations can guarantee that an historic structure will remain standing.

Challenges to Keep Historic Structures Standing

No matter the historic importance of any structure, there are many challenges to maintaining its structural integrity and keeping it standing. A historic structure can be demolished for many valid reasons including the beneficial repurposing of the land on which it stands, if it falls into disrepair and becomes beyond economical repair, if it becomes dangerous to the community, and if it gets associated with an appalling history where many communities would rather demolish it rather than leave it standing so people are not reminded of a disreputable past.

Preservation or Demolition

The decision to preserve or demolish a historic structure is many times far reaching, complicated, and can become very emotional. The owners usually make the final decision, and if the structure is owned by a government their elected officials must decide if it is worth preserving. In the case of the Union Church, the Ormond Beach city commissioners voted 3-2 in May 2021 in favor of demolishing the structure.

The bottom line decision usually comes down to money. If an historic structure has the potential to be economically beneficial it usually has a good chance of surviving. However, if an historic structure proves to be a liability with no feasible economic solution or benefit to a community it will most likely meet the wrecking ball sooner rather than later.



Postcard ca. 1990s - the caption reads: Union Church – Ormond Beach (United Church of Christ, Congregational) – Organized in 1883 – Re-built in 1961. (Collection of Randy Jaye).