

10/2/85

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History of South Carolina Involvement
with the Mills Building at the
South Carolina State Hospital

Since the beginning of the South Carolina State Historic Preservation Program, we have been impressed by and concerned about the Robert Mills Building at the South Carolina State Hospital for the mentally ill.

Our first action was to nominate it to the National Register of Historic Places, where it was entered as a nationally significant property in 1973. When Denys Peter Myers was unable to complete his National Historic Landmark study of 19th Century Architecture, our small state staff produced more than fifty nominations in answer to Russ Mortensen's emergency request for assistance. One of these nominations was for this particular building -- Robert Mills's innovative Lunatic Asylum design in Columbia, S.C. As a result, the building became a registered National Historic Landmark in 1974.

During the years, the South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office has been actively engaged in trying to help the State save the irreplaceable national treasure which had come to be considered as a white elephant by the South Carolina Mental Health Commission. We have funded development grants for the building, and we have given it several Survey and Planning grants to study its preservation and possible reuses.

Most recent of these was the 1983-1984 feasibility study for the South Carolina Budget and Control Board. It is this study which has led directly to the project being appealed to you today.

The 1983-1984 study was undertaken because the Mills Building had become obsolete as a modern mental health facility and no other uses had been found for it; the Department of Mental Health had vacated most of the building, leaving it unused. To be responsible for such an important historic structure -- located in the center of the capital city, yet abandoned -- offered quite a challenge to the State of South Carolina:

1. because of its historical importance, the building could not be altered from its existing "conformation or configuration"
2. estimated costs for renovation of the building were "exorbitantly high"
3. yet the State had need for general office space in the area.

Of several possible solutions, the rehabilitation tax credits seemed the most feasible, but even this route had drawbacks when considering the Mills Building alone. (In addition to the architectural constraints would have been the impossibly high

costs of incorporating elevators, barrier-free bathrooms, etc., into the historic building. There was also the lack of sufficient square footage for office space.) An addition to the historic building emerged as the solution. This would leave the historic building unviolated; and the new building would have sufficient square footage (providing needed financial leverage by increasing the ratio of usable rental square feet) plus the capability of meeting all codes.

The solution proposed by the study, and accepted by the State, was, therefore, to make use of the ITC credits; i.e., the State would sell the building to a private developer; the developer would rehabilitate it according to plans proposed in the study (photos of the proposed model were sent to the National Park Service's Southeastern Regional Office, which gave approval - in 1983 - to proceed). Upon completion of the project, the State would lease the building back from the developer for a number of years, with final ownership reverting to the state.

Prominent business leaders were asked to take part in working out the financial details; the highest levels of state and municipal government were also involved. These included, among others, the Governor, the State Treasurer, the State Comptroller General, the Chairman of the S.C. Senate Finance Committee, the Chairman of the S.C. House Ways & Means Committee, and the Director of S.C. General Services. Also concerned, supportive, and participating have been South Carolina Congressionals, including our Senior Senator Strom Thurmond (who placed the Mills Building on the proposed list of exceptions to then-proposed legislation to eliminate tax credits under the sale-leaseback arrangement) and our Junior Senator Ernest Hollings (who showed his support of the State Historic Preservation Program most recently with his amendment to restore level funding for the states).

It should be noted that the Columbia Landmarks Commission, which is responsible to the Mayor and Council of the City of Columbia and which has local jurisdiction over all landmark buildings, has also approved the plans for the Mills Building project.

The attached copies of selected papers from the Mills Building tax act file demonstrate that, without any question, the South Carolina SHPD sought the earliest possible National Park Service involvement in this large and hugely important South Carolina project. Only because we did have NPS involvement -- and all the NPS approval that was possible at the beginning and as the project proceeded -- did we feel that we could safely proceed with our advice and guidance to the developers and the State. All of us here proceeded in good faith, confident that the Park Service was also operating in good faith, and would not tell us, two years after their original concurrence with the plans, that they had changed their minds and now find the project unacceptable. This is incredible.

The record speaks for itself that the South Carolina SHPD has handled this project with the greatest possible care, that we involved NPS-Atlanta and got the greenlight at the earliest possible time, and that NPS-Atlanta's unexpected reversal was not only a contradiction of

its previously stated approvals over a two year period but also procedurally in violation of the time requirements for review; instead of the allowed 15 days, NPS-Atlanta took 54 days to issue its shocking denial. Please note the following:

1. On August 19, 1983, the project architect contacts the SHPO and expresses desire to work with SHPO at earliest stage to arrive at a design compatible with Secretary's Standards. On Same day, SHPO calls NPS-Atlanta to describe project and ask assistance from the beginning in evaluating project; NPS agrees.

2. September 2, 1983 telephone report indicates care and concern in approaching new design, as well as intent for SHPO and NPS-Atlanta to "be in constant communication on this project."

3. September 15, 1983 letter from project architect to NPS-Atlanta requests NPS assessment of overall appropriateness as it relates to NPS approval.

4. Architect confirms in two telephone conversations in the fall of 1983 that NPS-Atlanta confirms overall design is acceptable to NPS.

5. January 24, 1984 call from project architect to SHPO to confirm SHPO and NPS opinions on proposed additions to Mills Building. SHPO confirms that NPS-Atlanta reviewers "had no trouble with compatibility of new design." Architect requests SHPO confirmation that project at this point conforms with Standards.

6. On February 15, 1984, SHPO Charles Lee writes to S.C. Budget and Control Board indicating approval of plans at this point...saying that SHPO has been consulting with project architects and NPS-Atlanta since 1983 ... and believes renovation and new construction can be completed in accord with Standards.

7. On August 24, 1984, SHPO Charles Lee reminds Budget and Control Board to keep in touch as plans develop so developers will get the tax credits.

8. January 11, 1985 SHPO meeting with developers re. new architect's improved design for new building vis a vis historic building.

9. May 14 meeting at site between SHPO, architect, and contractors re. repointing, etc. Reminder about need for NPS review as soon as plans develop adequately.

10. May 15-August 7... various details about materials, colors, mortars illustrating close and knowledgeable SHPO work with project (we believe South Carolina is only state in southeast on expedited review).

11. Two routing memos (7/29/85 and 7/30/85) referring to NPS-Atlanta visit to Mills Building on May 29, 1985.

12. Part 2 Certification Application submitted to NPS-Atlanta on July 31, 1985 (received in Atlanta August 5). SHPO recommends no conditions and no denial issues; states that project has been developed through close consultation with SHPO; also states that design of new addition is compatible with the historic building and creates minimal intrusion at points of connection.

13. On August 6, 1985 Columbia Landmarks Commission approves exterior renovation and design of additions to Robert Mills Building.

14. On August 20, 1985 NPS-Atlanta acknowledges receipt of application and requests developers to submit processing fee.

15. On September 18, 1985, we learned that NPS-Atlanta had forwarded the project to Washington for review. Glenn Keyes told Tom Hensley of NPS-Atlanta that he didn't see how NPS could possibly deny the project on the basis that they didn't like the concept after they had approved the concept last year and the year before. Glenn was told that the NPS opinions were just opinions until a project was officially received in the NPS office. Glenn told Tom that the developers and the State of South Carolina had proceeded with this project in good faith after having consulted with NPS.

16. On September 25, 1985, after receiving a call from the developers that they understood the project would be denied, Christie Fant talked with Paul Hartwig, who confirmed that he had sent the application to Washington and was considering denial unless the developers would agree to sit down and talk about new design. Fant told him she thought the developers were at the point of no return on design of the new addition. Hartwig confirmed that NPS had said the addition would be acceptable.

17. On September 27, 1985, MORE THAN EIGHT WEEKS AFTER THE APPLICATION WAS RECEIVED BY NPS, the NPS response was sent to the applicant denying the tax credit.