reservation of Chester County’s rich historic character—the charm and beauty of our historic buildings and landscapes—is an enduring source of community pride. We freely acknowledge the importance of preventing the loss of our historic resources that serve as a primary connection to our past. Think about the loss of historic character in our local buildings when wood windows are replaced with vinyl and historic façades are covered by modern siding. Or worse, when that part of our history is destroyed.

It may be surprising to learn that no municipality in the county had recognized local preservation projects. That is, until recently.

West Chester—a heritage tourism destination and one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Dozen Distinctive Destinations—recently established a Preservation Awards Program. This initiative should not be surprising considering that the Borough saw a 19th-century architectural and cultural awakening, led in part by the construction of buildings designed by the preeminent architect Thomas U. Walter, and was called “The Athens of Pennsylvania.”

**Birth of a Plan**

West Chester’s preservation awards program was a local initiative. In 2008, the Board of Directors of the West Chester Downtown Foundation decided it was time to recognize local preservation efforts and established a task force to look into the feasibility of establishing an awards program. The following year, the task force recommended creation of a committee to administer West Chester’s Historic Preservation Awards Program. The Foundation’s board approved the idea and the Awards Committee was formed with members who were broadly representative of the community.

**The Purpose**

The first task of the Awards Committee was to define the purpose of these new awards. Among other things, the awards were established to encourage the physical
preservation of all our historic resources —residential and commercial—not just the monumental examples.

Preservation includes sensitive additions to historic resources and new construction that’s compatible in scale. The committee agreed that it’s important to make sure additions made to any façade of a historic resource, whether visible from the street or not, are done in a manner sensitive to the historic character. Additions that may not be visible from the street are visible to the neighbors and are often visible along West Chester’s many alleyways.

Good examples of preservation, wherever they may occur, sensitize the public to sound preservation practices and inspire them to make well-informed decisions about the preservation of West Chester’s historic fabric and character. Ideally, this becomes a cycle, encouraging sound preservation practices by honoring the best examples and thus fostering even more sound preservation practices.

The Nominations
The first year of the program was a gratifying success bringing in 14 nominations for 12 projects. Nominations covered all three awards categories: Preservationist of the Year, Preservation Service, and Bricks and Mortar Awards. For the Bricks and Mortar category, projects had to follow the West Chester Borough Design Guidelines, which are based on the U. S. Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Preservation, Restoration, and Rehabilitation. And for new construction, projects had to be compatible with the neighboring buildings and streetscape.

The Martin House, 316 South Darlington Street, won for its addition along the length of the side of the house. The addition was clad in clapboard to distinguish it from the original brick house, following the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards. The addition added much-needed interior living space while preserving exterior characteristics of a middle-class Queen Anne residence. To tie the addition to the house, the front porch was extended across the front façade of the addition.

The Mercner-Wood Building, 116-118 West Market Street, was recognized as a new office building designed to be sensitively integrated into its historic streetscape without sacrificing its modern integrity. This integration was accomplished through the use of brick and a portico, both characteristic of West Chester, and through its scale—it’s actually a five-story building constructed to look like four stories.

The Varney-Wallace House, 35 North Matlack Street, received an award for its two additions at the back of this 1912 stone Colonial Revival house. Both clapboard additions replaced earlier wood-clad construction, an entryway and a screened-in porch were replaced with an enlarged entryway and a breakfast room, without losing the historic fabric of the back wall. Original stone from the house was used in the additions’ foundation.

The Village Record Building, 15 North Church Street, was selected for excellence of the rehabilitation of one of West Chester’s oldest (1833) and most historic buildings, and because the building’s continued exis-
The superb interior and exterior renovation of the West Chester Library added much-needed space. Photos: Tom Bernard, for Frens & Frens Architects


tence was doubtful before the rehabilitation was undertaken.

The West Chester Public Library, 415 North Church Street, won for the superb exterior and interior rehabilitation of this 1888 building that successfully addressed the need for more usable interior space. The project included expansion of the basement, restoration of a Palladian window, and an expanded children’s library.

Year Two

The second annual Historic Preservation Awards kicks off April 2nd this year, with the opening of nominations, which close June 1, 2012. Nomination forms and rules will be found at the West Chester BID office or online at DowntownWestChester.com. Winners will be announced in August, with awards made in October 2012.

Please help recognize the projects that have enhanced West Chester’s historic character and integrity by submitting a nomination!

The Martin House addition, visible from the street, preserved the exterior character of this Queen Anne residence.

The Varney-Wallace House preserved the historic fabric of the back stone wall and used the stone for the additions’ foundation.