

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

1823-2013

No. 5—Treasures from the Past

You don't need a metal detector and you may not even need a map to find Vestal's treasures. You probably pass at least one as you drive through town each day. What are we talking about? Vestal's historic landmarks. Some people are surprised to learn that we have structures or sites that qualify as landmarks; after all we were just a farming community for the first hundred years, but the New York State Historic Preservation Office has identified properties in Vestal that meet the National criteria. Preservation is often misunderstood so let's look at what it's all about and tell you where Vestal's treasures from the past are located.

To begin, there are three levels of designation; the local landmark level, the State Register (SR) of Historic Places and the National Register (NR) of Historic Places. The local level is the most protective and requires any changes to the exterior of a designated building be approved by the Historic Preservation Commission, while the SR/NR levels offer no additional restrictions but do provide renovation tax credits and national recognition.

Local Law 3 of 2010 aka "A Local Law Creating an Historic Preservation Ordinance for the Town of Vestal" is modeled after the State law that requires the establishment of a Commission to administer the ordinance. Although several obvious landmarks were known, it was necessary to identify any other structures or sites within the town that were National Register (NR) eligible. That's a job for qualified experts so the Vestal Historic Preservation Commission obtained a grant from Preserve New York to help fund the hiring of a preservation consultant to perform a town-wide Reconnaissance Level Historic Resources Survey. The consultant drove all 132 miles of roads in Vestal to identify structures and sites meeting the criteria established by the National Register of Historic Places. The criteria require that the building or site be:

1. More than 50 years old; and
2. Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
3. Associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
4. Embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
5. Have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Thousands of photos and hundreds of hours researching Vestal's early history and development resulted in an extensive 2011 report that included the consultant's list of structures and sites meeting the criteria. The next step was for the New York State Preservation office to review the consultant's recommendations and provide a definitive list of NR-eligible properties. From this list the Commission selects properties for consideration as local landmarks. Owners of these properties who want to apply for SR/NR designation can contact the Commission for assistance.

By demonstrating a commitment to preservation, Vestal became eligible for the New York State Certified Local Government (CLG) program. The program requires the qualifying municipality to sign a contract with New York State affirming that it will work with the State to protect and preserve its landmarks. There are only 74 municipalities out of more than 1600 across New York that meet the qualifications; the Town of Vestal is one. That significant achievement provides the town with an opportunity to apply for CLG grant money and gives the town an advantage when applying for NYS and Federal grants. Attaining CLG status comes with legal requirements that, if not followed, can not only remove the designation but result in penalties and impact consideration for future grants.

With that brief overview of historic preservation let's look at Vestal's historic landmarks. Most residents recognize four structures and one district that stand out as important to the town's history; Drovers Inn, the Rounds House, the Rounds Coal Company building, the original Vestal Central High School, and Rivercrest. In July 2012, after a public hearing, the Commission designated 10 properties and 1 district as local landmarks. Here's a list of Vestal's landmarks including their designations. How many do you recognize?

Drovers Inn – Built in 1844 by Ransom Baty Sr. for John and Jacob Rounds, it replaced the former Rounds Turnpike Tavern. In 1855 it was converted to a private home for Jacob's family. Over the years it has been a funeral home, apartments, and two different restaurants. It is now the home of Prestige Portraits. (Local Historic Landmark, SR, NR)

Rounds House – Built in 1895 by Fayette L. Rounds, the 15 room house, designed by T.I. Lacey and Sons Architects, remained in the Rounds family until the 2001 death

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of Hilah Rounds. The tower on the west elevation was added in 1912. It is currently the office of Muench Orthodontics. (Local Historic Landmark, SR, NR)



Rounds House Window Detail

Rounds Coal Company Building – Built in 1908 by Fayette L. Rounds, the unique building, designed by architect C. A. Olmstead, served as a F.L. Rounds Coal Co. office until 2002. Empty dump trucks were weighed on the five-ton scale under the arch and re-weighed after filling with coal at the large tipple behind. On October 8, 2006 the building was moved to a position straddling the Rail Trail. (Local Historic Landmark)

Vestal Central High School – The 1939 building was designed by Truman Lacey of T.I. Lacey and Sons, Architects under the Public Works Administration (PWA) program. Used as a Junior High after the completion in 1960 of a new high school, it remains in use by the Vestal Senior Citizens and several other groups. The Vestal Center Elementary school was constructed in 1939 under the same program. (Local Historic Landmark, SR NR)

Rivercrest District – In 1925 Archibald MacArthur hired city designer John Nolan to design a subdivision along Vestal's eastern border. The planned community was to include "River Terrace", a row of 32 homes that backed on what remains of the Chenango Canal Extension. The homes, some designed by local architects, feature unique interior details. (Local Historic District, State Historic District)

Lustron Houses – The Lustron Company manufactured enamel-clad steel panel homes from 1947 to 1950. The futuristic homes had radiant heat, built in components, and low maintenance exteriors. Approximately 2680 were built across the U.S. and Vestal is fortunate to have two small and one large model. (Local Historic Landmarks)



Lustron House

Cold Spring Farm – Peter LaTourette, one of Vestal's earliest pioneers, built the farm between 1802 and 1816. Other well known residents such as George DuBois and Ben Sherwood have owned the home. It has received recognition from the Preservation Association of the Southern Tier (PAST) for excellence in restoration. (Local Historic Landmark)

Rounds Cemetery – Established at the southwest corner of land purchased in 1825 by Jacob Rounds, his burial in 1833 is believed to be the first. A small gate in the low stone wall gives entrance to this peaceful family cemetery where descendants of one of Vestal's early pioneers rest for eternity. (Local Historic Landmark)

Vestal Center United Methodist Church – Built in 1875 the nave of this quaint church on West Hill Road remains largely unchanged. A small prayer room added about 1896 was replaced by a fellowship hall and Sunday school classrooms. (Local Historic Landmark)

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Vestal Hills Memorial Park Cemetery – Vestal's largest cemetery was designed and constructed in 1931. The elegant gates were designed by architect G.W. McClune of Buffalo. The cemetery features beautifully landscaped serene areas and offers excellent views of the surrounding town. (Local Historic Landmark)

Vestal Museum / Former Vestal D.L. & W. Railroad Depot – Constructed in 1881, the Depot was moved in 1972 to its current position near the Library, renovated, and opened as the town Museum in 1976. The original exterior and interior architectural details remain intact. (Local Historic Landmark)

You'll find photos, Vestal's preservation ordinance, information about the CLG program, the requirements for locally designated properties, meeting minutes, and other information by selecting the Historic Commission department on the town website: www.vestalny.com.

Additional information about the programs and Vestal's landmarks can be found at the Historian's office.

Mersereau House – John Mersereau Sr., one of our earliest pioneers, owned a large portion of Vestal along the Susquehanna River. His son John Mersereau Jr. lived in the Federal style farmhouse that was built ca. 1832. The farm, occupying a large portion of what is now Twin Orchards, included a shad fishery on the south bank of the river. (Local Historic Landmark)