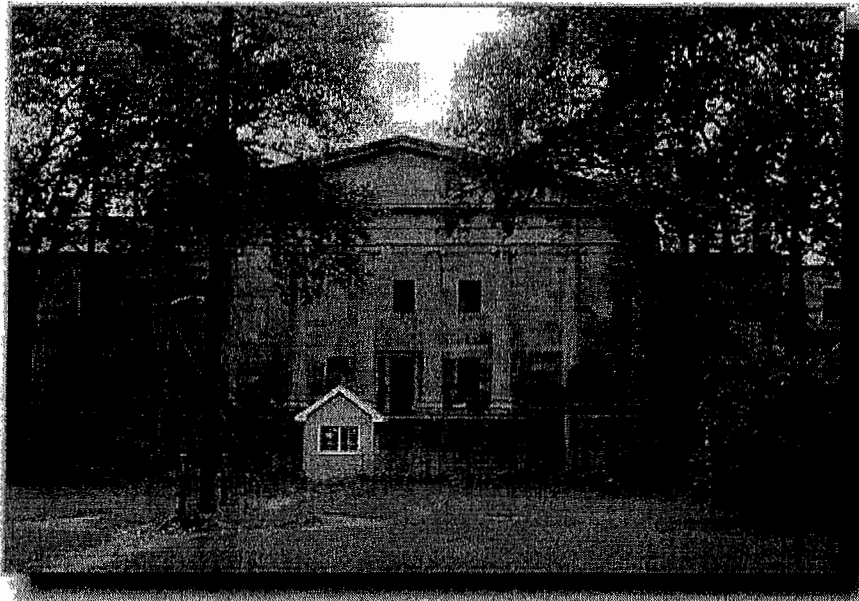


**U.S. Naval Asylum, 2420 Grays Ferry Avenue, Philadelphia, PA  
Fifteen years of demolition-by-neglect by Toll Brothers ends in five-alarm fire  
Blaze damages but does not destroy the building -- engineers say it can be saved**

**Toll Brothers' progress in restoring Biddle Hall and other historic buildings now being monitored closely by city, state, neighborhood organizations**



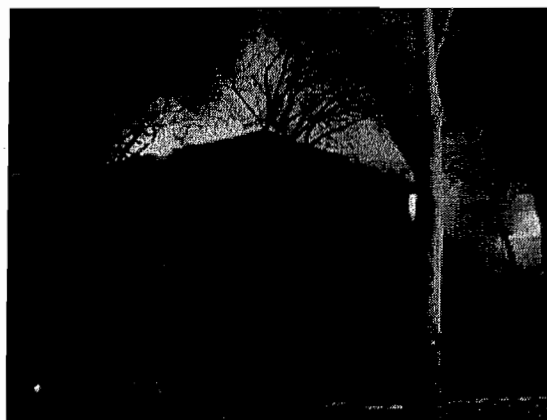
Eight hours after the first trucks arrived, firefighters were still battling this five-alarm blaze that erupted in the early morning hours of February 3, 2003. Preservation experts believe that despite the apparent devastation, much of this National Historic Landmark can be rebuilt.



After some time, several trips to court, and continued attention by the the media, the city, preservationists, and neighbors, developer Toll Brothers is working to remove debris, clear the site of weeds and brush, and begin the process of replacing the roof destroyed in the February 3 fire and restoring the building as the centerpiece of a development of luxury homes and condos. For continuing updates see the **South of South Neighborhood Association** website. This site is being maintained as an archive of the state of historic Biddle Hall before, during, and immediately after the fire.

**News Archive**

- [Continuing updates at SOSNA website](#)
- Jonathan Stein's 3/3/03 commentary piece in the Philadelphia *Inquirer*: [The Sam Rappaport Stick-it-to-the-People Award](#)
- **City has third hearing before Judge Seamus P. McCaffrey March 3, 2003** [[details](#)]
- **SOSNA plans community planning meeting** for Campaign to save the Naval Home with community updates, letter-writing stations, more. March 19, 2003, 7:30 p.m., St. Anthony Senior Center, 2309 Carpenter Street
- **Hallwatch.org sets up special faxbank on Naval Home**
- **WHAT YOU CAN DO**
- **City taking Toll to court; community meeting February 11** (Sponsored by South of South Neighborhood Association)[[meeting report at SOSNA website](#)][[meeting report at Hallwatch](#)][[Philadelphia Inquirer report](#)]
- **Additional meeting** scheduled by 30 Ward Democrats, SSWCA, EPOP Thursday, February 13 7:30, Greater St. Matthew Church -- report includes contact info for letters to the General Service Administration [[meeting report](#)]
- **Preservation Alliance calls for independent assessment**, says building is sound despite fire damage. [[details](#), [photos](#)]
- **Mayor Street agrees** "with the spirit" of Preservation Alliance position [[details](#)]
- **"Naval Home is lost only if we let it be"** [[details](#)]
- **Toll Brothers' official reactions** in this unfortunately titled article from the *South Philly Review*. Note the press release wording, which seems to indicate Toll has already written off the building. [SouthPhillyReview doesn't archive their stuff but the press release said the fire "marks the loss of a great landmark." Not so fast, guys...]
- **Toll Bros: Give Up Naval Home** (Tom Ferrick) [[text](#)]
- **Anna Verna's February 7 letter** to Ann Hoskins-Brown
- **Boston Globe spotlight on Toll Brothers** (not a pretty sight)



Above: Flames light up the night sky above the Naval Home in a fire that inspectors are calling arson. The fire, set in some debris behind the building, was not discovered until it had reached the roof. Below: Firemen cut through original 19th-century fencing to gain access with their hoses. Photos by Ann Hoskins-Brown.



[From this page as originally put up in December 2002]

First planned in 1799, the Naval Asylum was built in 1833, designed by William Strickland, who also designed the first U.S. Mint, the Tennessee State Capitol, and the cupola for Independence Hall. The facility was used as a naval home and hospital and also, until 1846, as the first Naval Academy.

Closed in 1976, it was sold to Toll Brothers in 1988 for \$1,200,000. As these photos taken December 22, 2002 attest, this magnificent structure, on the National Register of Historic Places and a National Historical Landmark, is at risk. It would certainly be convenient for Toll Brothers -- who describe themselves as the nation's leading builder of luxury homes -- if the building fell down, because then they would have twenty acres on which to build a "suburban-type development," as they once described their project.

Preservationists call what's happening to the Naval Asylum "demolition by neglect." I call it a sin and a

shame.

**UPDATE, February 3, 2003** -- It didn't take a crystal ball to predict last night's/this morning's devastating fire at the Naval Home. But some of the preservationists we talked to hold out hope that the building's historic facade and parade grounds can be saved. If you'd like to be kept informed of developments on the Naval Home, send e-mail to [savethenavalhome@southphillyblocks.org](mailto:savethenavalhome@southphillyblocks.org)

**Background:** links to historic plans and photographs found on web by area residents



Graffiti of this magnitude are a clear indication that this site is not secure. Even before the fire, vandals entered the building and damaged the stunning cantilevered staircase flanking the chapel. (For more photos of the building past and present, see the [online exhibition](#) based on Ann Hoskins-Brown's tabletop display.)



This building should be the cornerstone of a neighborhood renaissance, but is instead hampering residents' efforts to improve the



Any reasonably agile person could enter through these front gates.

**Update, February 13, 2003**--Both gates have

streetscape.

been replaced with high chain link and a 24-hour guard is "on duty" (but rarely seen).



This gap in the fence behind the property is another easy entrance...

**UPDATE February 9, 2003** -- This gap has not yet been secured. People are still entering through it.

**UPDATE March 1, 2003** -- The gap was briefly covered with 8-ft chain link, but it's open again.



As is this pair of walls with convenient low-hanging branches.

Last year, Toll Brothers' chief executive's compensation was in excess of \$7 million, and he just got a raise to more than \$11 million. Surely these guys could find a few bucks to clean off the graffiti and cut the weeds. (Imagine how they'd love an eyecore like that in *their* neighborhood...)

**What you can do:**

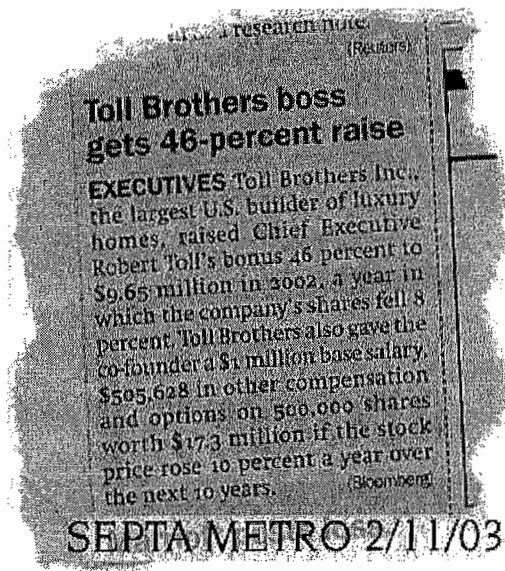
SOSNA is scheduling additional community meetings to facilitate neighborhood action. Next meeting: Wednesday, March 19, 7:30 p.m., St. Anthony Senior Center, 2309 Carpenter. Consult [SOSNA website](#) for more details.

See full [list of action steps](#)

On the immediate horizon, the most important things are;

- **attend** the Common Pleas Court hearing (the city is suing Toll Bros for multiple violations) -- Criminal Justice Center, 1301 Filbert Street, Room 1103, 12:00 noon, April 2, 2003
- **write** your elected officials, Toll Bros and the GSA
- **keep an eye** on the property. Toll's one security guard usually stays in the guardhouse on Gray's Ferry while the vulnerable rear side of the property is unprotected. Report any vandalism or security breaches to Mary Anne Mahoney in Anna Verna's office 215-686-3412 -- if you see something in progress, please also call 911.
- **spread the word** - ask people to write letters - etc.

Back to [Northwest South Philly](#)



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