

The Colonial Theater
Pittsfield, Massachusetts
7/14/98

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
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Thank you all so much. I'm so grateful to be here, and I cannot tell you how I felt as I was traveling down the road on my way to Pittsfield, and some of your friends and neighbors were out in their yards, or in front of service stations, and I think there was a place called Jimmy's on the side of the road. Some of them were waving flags, they were holding up their babies, and I thought, "Boy, have I come to the right place."

Now you might be interested in knowing how I ended up here today. Let me just give you a brief history of that. When we launched *Save America's Treasures* a few months ago, we knew that we wanted to make the first trip to this part of our country, that is so rich with our history going back before the Revolutionary War. That has seen so much of what made America great happen, right here. And we sent out people and asked all kinds of experts, "Where should we go?" We wanted to go from Washington D.C. and then end up in Seneca Falls, New York for the 150th anniversary of the Women's Rights Convention.

As you might guess, there were dozens and dozens of places that people suggested in Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts, and we had to sort through all those, and we started sorting by looking at pictures and descriptions. Then we actually sent people out. I know the Mayor had to kind of keep it a secret because we didn't want the people from Washington coming to a community and having folks think that we would come, and not come. That would be very disappointing. So everybody was kind of sworn to secrecy. And your mayor, I like him he's really doing a good job and he understands how to get things done. And so our people who were representing the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the White House Millennium Council, they visited place after place after place and some were hard to get to and some couldn't accommodate buses and all kinds of logistical problems. But when they came back from seeing all these places, I want all of you to know, the place they could not stop talking about was Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

So Mayor Doyle, citizens of Pittsfield, citizens of Berkshire County, it is wonderful to be able to join you today, to be here at one of the great cultural centers of our country and to be standing in front of this rare jewel of architecture, the historic Colonial Theater. I want to thank everyone who has been working to preserve this theater and to revitalize Pittsfield and to understand that in today's world, one of the ways to attract economic development to attract tourism, to give people a sense of pride and a better quality of life is by taking the jewels of the past and making them shine again, so that people all over the country and world know about Pittsfield and know the Colonial Theater. So all of you, from the Mayor to the Congressman, to

the Miller family, to Bob Boland who has done so much to remind us of the importance of the Colonial Theater, to the Friends of the Colonial Theater and the Colonial Theater Steering Committee and especially to the citizens of Pittsfield. I'm here to congratulate you for your interest in preserving, not this particular site, but for what it could be to the future of this community.

As Bill Ivey was explaining, we've seen all over our country -- he saw it first in his role at the Country Music Foundation, the work he did down in Nashville. He's seen it now as the head of the NEA, one of the best ways that communities can make an investment in the future is to think about what was special about its past and then to make that live again. I just had the rare privilege of hearing music from the stage once again. It hasn't happened since 1952, I was told, but I heard the Berkshire Fiddlers, a group of young middle school students. I was amazed by their talent and I was amazed by the quality of the sound. I have read, like perhaps some of you have read, that the Colonial Theater has ranked above many, many other more famous and well known theaters as having some of the best acoustics in the world. Based on what I have just heard, I understand why experts say that the acoustics in this theater are on a par with just a handful of theaters across the world. I could almost hear the echoes, as I listened to the young people play, of all the performers who appeared on that stage all those years ago. And as the small group of people who were gathered to hear them, including some very proud parents, applauded at the end of the performance, I could sense what it must have been like sitting in that theater years ago at the end of a performance. Imagine what it was like to sit there and hear John Delacusa or Rachmaninoff or think of hearing the improvisational jazz of Eubie Blake or John and Ethel Barrymore, Sarah Bernhardt, even some of my favorites, the Three Stooges.

Yet as unique a place as this theater holds in the history of American theater, there was no guarantee that the building we are in front of today would still be standing, because we see too often many of America's great theaters and other treasures erode away, be torn down, to make way for something else. A few, like the Federal Street Theater in Boston, burned down. Most fell into disrepair and were demolished. Yet here in Pittsfield, the tradition of preservation runs deep. When the original owners sold it, they didn't want it to see it destroyed and they put it up for bid, as I understand the story, and they made a decision to choose, not the highest bid, which was to buy the building and destroy it, but instead, to choose the lowest bid from George Miller, who guaranteed he would keep the building in tact because he had a dream that one day it would be a...(inaudible)

You know there are untold stories around our country of men like George Miller and his son, Steven Miller, and I want to applaud the late Mr. Miller and Steven Miller, because they understood, even though they didn't have the resources themselves, that they were the caretakers of a great treasure. I really appreciate that because by being the caretaker of a historic site, you are preserving it for a moment such as this, where hundreds of thousands of people of this community come together to hear about this great tradition. When you can have a plan by your mayor and others, to think of how that would fit in to revitalizing this city. When we talk about preserving national treasures, many of us envision the concrete examples like the Star-Spangled

Banner that the President and I stood before yesterday at the Smithsonian. I also saw today in Newburgh, New York, the headquarters of President Washington after Yorktown and before the Treaty of Paris. We think about the Gettysburg Address, we think about statues and monuments. Yet it is equally significant as to who we are as Americans to think about our cultural and artistic heritage. It is our dance, our music, our plays, our literature that define us as a people. They lift our spirits, they challenge our imaginations. You better than most understand this, living in the center of so much artistic, musical activity.

If we could think for a moment of what America would be like without our arts and culture, whether you are an country music fan like Bill Ivey or a Rachmaninoff fan, or a Jacob's Pillow fan. This is the rich variety of arts and culture here in the United States, It's not just a luxury for the few. We know that experiences with the arts are especially important to children. We understand how significant being exposed to music and artistic opportunities are to let each individual child develop their skills and talents. Every child should have that experience. Few children would have access to a theater such as this, whose state would permit more and more young people, adults as well, to perform and attend their own artistic experiences. If we were able to preserve a theater like this Colonial Theater, we would be keeping pace with our earliest founding generation.

The first American theater was built in Philadelphia in 1756, and Americans fell in love with the stage ever since. When I read history about the predecessors who lived in the White House, I'm always struck by how so many of them sought out the theater as a way to escape the pressures of the job. While so many of us have found that same solace and refuge. And here at Pittsfield, you have an example of a place that goes far beyond what other communities could even dream of. Think about how promoting the arts year round, not just during the summer when so many people from all over the world come to enjoy the Berkshires, but keeping it going all year long, what that could mean to the development of this community.

So in 1962 when President Kennedy asked Americans for public support of the arts, by creating the National Endowment for the Arts, he reminded us that during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln ordered work to go forward on the Capitol Dome. And that Franklin Roosevelt, in the midst of World War II, dedicated the National Gallery of Art. President Kennedy said "These leaders understood that the light of the arts, far from being an interruption, a distraction in the life of a nation, is very close to the center of a nation's purpose, and is a test of the quality of the nation's civilization."

Now we are facing that test ourselves today, which is why the President and I created the White House Millennium Council. We're going to have a change of century and change of millennium whether any of us do anything about it or not. We can plan a great New Year's Eve party, and I think all of us should, but I think we should spend a little bit of time reflecting about what are the values from the past and the lessons we want to take with us to the future. And so we created a theme -- to "Honor the Past and Imagine the Future." Just think what that means to a community like this. I believe that if we stop, as we approach the change of century and

millennium, and think how do we honor the past and how do we bring forward what we honor to the present and then build on it as we imagine our future, that's a pretty good description of what we need do in our own lives, in communities like Pittsfield and in our nation.

I'm an optimist by nature because I believe that when people put their minds to something, they can solve problems, they can make a difference, they can work together. And there certainly is no reason why this great city, which has certainly a glorious past, that's contributed so much to who we are as Americans, cannot take the lessons and the values of that past and move them forward into the future in a way that does honor to them, but is imaginative, is on the cutting edge, which leads people to say to one another, Pittsfield, the Berkshires, they're showing us how we should imagine the future.

So I ask all of you, not just today, but in the days and weeks and months ahead, to work together, to be creative, to think of ways of saving America's treasures. And you all are, in addition to the Miller family, you all are caretakers of a great American treasure. A treasure that meant so much to people in the past, but can once again mean so much to all of us in the future. I would like to come back in some early part of the 21st century and attend a performance here at the Colonial Theater. Now I learned the other day, that to be eligible for National Landmark status you have to be at least 50 years old, I'd qualify. I don't think I could wait a really long time, but I could wait a while to be able to return to Pittsfield, and with all of you, celebrate, not just the reopening and rehabilitation of a great American treasure, but the revitalization of a great American city.

Thank you all very much.