

2 historic groups clash over Brice House walls

By Doug Struck

Annapolis Bureau of The Sun

ANNAPOLIS — A spat over two walls — two very old walls — embroiled the top officers of the state yesterday in a fued between leading preservationists.

The state Board of Public Works was asked to referee a huffy quarrel between Historic Annapolis, Inc., and the Maryland Historical Trust.

The fight is over two walls in the Brice House, a 35-room mansion in Annapolis built in 1767 by one of the richest families in the colonial town.

Historic Trust thinks they must be torn down and rebuilt.

Historic Annapolis doesn't.

"We are dismayed" that the restoration of the Brice House supervised by the Historic Trust has resulted in reconstruction of the two walls, each about 20-by-30 feet, Mary Pringle Symonds, of Historic Annapolis, told the Board of Public Works.

"Sadly, in our eyes, Brice House can no longer be considered as an original Eighteenth Century structure," she said.

"I assure you there are no problems with the Brice House," testily replied J. Rodney Little, director of the Historic Trust.

When the Board of Public Works tried to restrain the bickering that broke out before them at the meeting in the governor's reception room, Mr. Little forged on: "The professional qualifications of our agency have been put into question," he protested. "Certain allegations regarding the quality of the work have been raised."

Mr. Little said two professional

consultants' studies and his own archaeological studies have concluded that the walls are in dangerous condition and must be torn down. That work is being done by using the original bricks whenever possible, he said, or replacement bricks similar to the originals.

But Mrs. Symonds, waving the motto "it is better to preserve than restore, better to restore than reconstruct," pressed on. She asked the board to give Historic Annapolis, Inc., equal legal authority with the trust in approving further work.

"I would find that professionally unacceptable," replied Mr. Little, in what sounded close to a threat to quit. It would be "a very dangerous precedent" to give the private organization "veto power" over the work supervised by the public Historical Trust, he said.

Mrs. Symonds countered that Historic Annapolis deserves the credit for originally saving the house, and for winning protection easments on it from the International Brotherhood of Bricklayers, which outbid the group and bought the home in 1982 for \$1.4 million. It will take over the Brice House when the restoration is completed for use as a bricklaying craft museum.

The Historical Trust "failed, despite our requests, to cooperate" in those efforts, Mrs. Symonds asserted.

But the Board of Public Works balked at the request, and decided instead to send a letter they hoped will help smooth things over, directing the Historical Trust to consult with Historic Annapolis.