

Behind the Furnace

The History and Development of the Ypsilanti Historic District and Commission

BY JANE BIRD SCHMIEDEKE

Remember Ypsilanti fifty years ago?

Remember how downtown looked with false facades on nearly every building?

Remember how Depot Town was a real eyesore?

Fast forward to 2000 when the Michigan Historic Preservation Network granted its prestigious Government Award to the City of Ypsilanti. The criteria for this particular award reads as follows: “This award is given to cities, agencies or institutions that by their actions have accomplished significant positive changes in the historic preservation climate and activity in the State of Michigan.”

The City of Ypsilanti was nominated for that award in recognition and appreciation of all the city officials, past and present, who made Ypsilanti’s journey to historic preservation possible.

The nomination told the story of Ypsilanti’s journey. It began years earlier when there was little appreciation of the city’s wealth of historic architecture and no understanding at all of historic preservation, and continued through the years of growing awareness to the full and committed support that city government gives to preservation today.

Strong support of the nomination came from some important sources. Jane Busch from the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office in Lansing said that she supported the nomination “in recognition of Ypsilanti’s long and exemplary historic preservation program.” Louisa Pieper, the Historic Preservation Coordinator for the City of Ann Arbor, said: “I can’t think of any city in our fair state that deserves this award more.” Lis Knibbe, historic preservation architect and former member of the Ypsilanti Historic District Commission, spoke to the city’s “consistent backing for and support for private and public investment in historic preservation.” Monika Sacks, former Ypsilanti Assis-

tant City Attorney, emphasized the statewide reputation the city enjoys for its strong support of preservation.

The nomination closed by stating: "Never was a city more deserving of recognition for its accomplishments in, and its contributions to, historic preservation."

So, how did we get from the disastrous 1960s to being worthy of that prestigious award?

In the Beginning

Let's look at how historic preservation started in Ypsilanti and how it works.

The 1800s saw the fairly astonishing growth of the small town on the Huron River. Ypsilanti's prosperous milling, farming, and railroading economy supported the construction of a great many architecturally significant buildings, both commercial and residential. Most of those structures remain today and, because of their significance, are now protected by the Ypsilanti Historic District Ordinance.

Ypsilanti is blessed with a wealth of American architectural styles including Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Queen Anne, Tudor Revival, and even Prairie. Huron Street, the major entrance to the city from I-94, is a veritable parade of American architectural styles.

But little attention was paid to this treasure trove of historic architecture until the 1970s, when historic preservation slowly gained acceptance, was given legal status, and eventually became an essential element of city planning and administration.

Things Began to Happen

It all started in 1970 when the State of Michigan, having determined the value of protecting entire historic areas and having determined that only the creation of a historic district could halt the piecemeal destruction of such areas, passed enabling legislation which allows Michigan communities to establish historic districts, pass an ordinance to protect those districts, and appoint historic district commissions to administer those ordinances.

In June 1972, under the provisions of that enabling legislation, the Ypsilanti City Council appointed the Historic District Study Committee to survey the city, lay out the area of a possible historic district, document that area with photos, determine the feasibility of establishing a district, draft an ordinance, and submit its report to city council for adoption or rejection.

There were people on that committee whose names may be familiar to some of you: Nathalie Edmunds, Foster Fletcher, Mattie Dorsey, Dottie Disbrow, Lyndle Bullard, Robert Fink, Ken Massingill, Ward Swarts who surveyed the city, Eileen Harrison who took the photos, and Jane Bird who chaired the committee and wrote the ordinance.

In December 1972, the Study Committee submitted its final report to city council.

It recommended the establishment of a historic district and included a draft ordinance. The committee requested only the designation of the district but not the passage of the ordinance because there were not enough yes votes on council. Had the ordinance been submitted and failed, study committee would have been put out of business.

Two months later, in February 1973, City Council designated the Ypsilanti Historic District. It was a good first step, but it was only a line on the map. There was no ordinance.

In the seemingly endless six years that followed, preservation proponents counted votes after every council election, spoke to anyone who would stand still, and were heartened when the Ypsilanti Historic District was placed on State Register of Historic Places in 1973 and on the National Register in 1977. These designations were a huge honor, but they offered no protection to our historic architecture. Only a local ordinance could do that.

Then, in January 1978, the ordinance was passed by city council unanimously! The only citizen to speak against it was a slum landlord. Council's action served to put the ordinance into immediate effect and created the Historic District Commission (HDC). As a result, approximately 40 city blocks and 986 structures (including 305 outbuildings) in downtown Ypsilanti and Depot Town and adjacent residential neighborhoods, were now legally protected.

Off and Running

In February 1978, Ypsilanti Historic District Commission held its first meeting in the old city hall inside a very small room behind the furnace. In one of its first items of business, the HDC received a request from the historic East Side (Maple, Oak, Prospect area) neighborhood to be added to the historic district. This annexation increased the size of the district by almost fifty percent.

The next year, the ordinance was certified by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the HDC adopted, as policy, the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Rehabbing Historic Buildings.

In 1980, four individual properties were designated as landmarks under the ordinance and, although they were all outside the district boundaries, their designation as landmarks brought them under the protection of the ordinance. These properties are the AME Brown Chapel on South Adams Street, First Ward (or Adams) School also on South Adams, the Water Tower, and the Stachlewitz house at 601 West Forest.

All Was Not Well, However

In 1983, the National Bank's application to replace its old false façade with a new false façade was denied by the HDC. The Chamber of Commerce and downtown business interests launched a full-scale effort to place a moratorium on HDC in the downtown area, make compliance voluntary in the area, remove the National Bank from the

Historic District, remove the downtown from the district, and/or abolish the ordinance altogether.

The pressure on the Ypsilanti City Council was relentless and the battle raged for months until council ultimately, and courageously, told the bank to follow the rules like everybody else.

That crisis was truly a watershed event for historic preservation in Ypsilanti. The city government had effectively said “this is the way we operate.”

Slowly, but steadily, city officials began to more fully understand preservation, to realize what it could mean for the revitalization of the city, and to give it the support it needed in order to become effective.

This Is How It Works

The Ypsilanti Historic District Commission consists of seven people appointed by the mayor with the concurrence of city council. All seven must live within the city limits and at least two members must live in the district. Membership must include also an architect or a builder with a known interest in historic preservation.

By ordinance, the HDC is required to meet once a month. However, from the beginning, it has met twice a month in order to handle the work load.

A property owner who wishes to work on his/her structure makes application for a building permit and for HDC review; no work can begin until HDC approves the application.

The commission reviews all applications for exterior work or work that will have an exterior effect. It is the responsibility of the HDC to ensure that any changes to a struc-



Historic District Commission meeting, c. 1995

ture are appropriate to that structure and to the District as a whole.

HDC does not operate arbitrarily. Its decisions are guided by the local ordinance, its own design standards, and the guideline of the U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

Commission meetings are informal work sessions with two kinds of agenda items: study items which allow for early discussion of the proposed work, and action items which result in a vote by HDC.

The same restrictions apply to everyone and ensure that changes in the neighborhood protect the property values of every property owner.

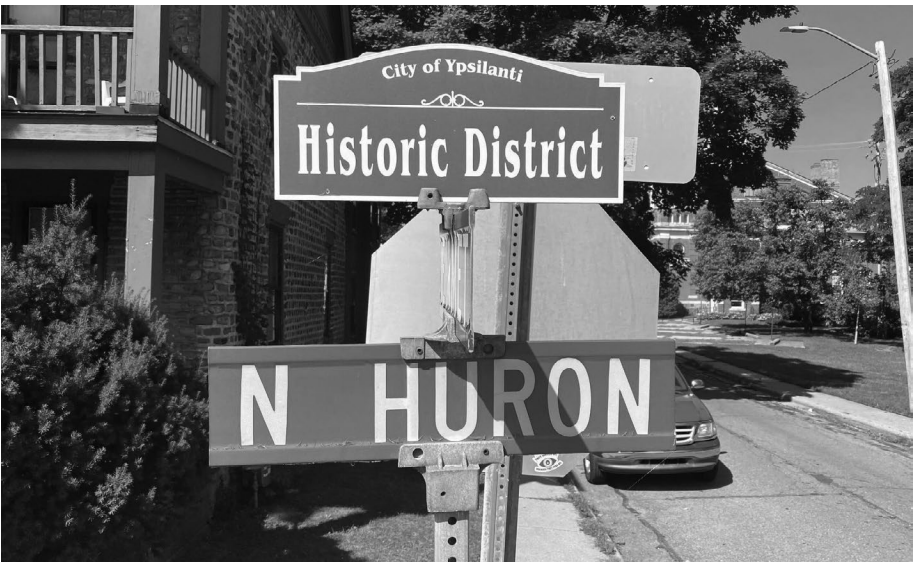
And So We Continue

Today, the Ypsilanti Historic District Commission continues to meet twice a month, much as it has for the last forty-four years.

In 2005, the Starkweather Historic District was established to protect the c.1840 Greek Revival house at 1266 Huron River Drive.

There are problems. There always will be problems with the conflicting opinions of those who resist any kind of restriction, with inappropriate proposals, with crises like the National Bank, and with appeals. HDC decisions have been appealed at least three times to the Historic Preservation Review Board in Lansing, and each time, the HDC's decisions have been upheld.

There are difficulties. It's not an easy job—commissioners need enthusiasm, dedication, special skills, and consistency. They must be able to derive satisfaction from accomplishment without expecting credit, withstand criticism, and face the threat of a lawsuit



Historic District signage

without caving in or making a poor decision.

But it works. The ordinance serves us well and has often been a model for other communities. The Ypsilanti Historic Commission continues to be staffed by qualified and dedicated people, the city now employs a professional preservation planner, and HDC no longer meets behind the furnace.

A Note on Sources

Information for this essay was taken from the author's February 2004 presentation to the Ypsilanti Historical Society. All photographs are from the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

About the Author

Jane Bird Schmiedeke served as Chair of the Study Committee, wrote the Study Committee report and the Ordinance, and served as Chair of the Historic District Commission for over thirty years.