

# The Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation

## October 1974 to the Present

BY PENNY SCHREIBER AND PAUL SCHREIBER

### Love at First Sight

In 1985, we were looking for a house larger than our two-bedroom Ann Arbor condominium. A friend suggested we consider a house in Ypsilanti that was about to go on the market in the Woods Road Subdivision where she lived with her husband. We fell in love at first sight with the 1938 Colonial Revival at 922 Pleasant Drive, and thirty-seven years later, the two of us are still in awe that we get to call this beautiful architect-designed house our home.

Before we moved in with our young son and daughter, our real estate agent made the excellent suggestion that we hire a fellow named Don Randazzo to inspect the house. Don, who at the time was a restoration carpenter for Greenfield Village, was also an excellent house inspector. Little did we realize that we had met one of the founding members of the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation.

Not long after we moved in, Don invited his friend Jane Van Bolt over to meet us and see the house, wondering if it might be a home tour prospect. Jane and Don were both Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation (YHF) board members, and Jane chaired the home tour committee. Soon we were attending YHF bi-monthly presentations on historic preservation and related topics. Penny became a fixture on the home tour committee and eventually president of the YHF. Paul developed an interest in architecture and the amazing and varied architectural styles lining the streets of Ypsilanti. For us, preservation of historic architecture through the YHF was a worthwhile cause. But most important, we also made friends for life.

### The City Evolves

Longtime YHF member Bill Nickels divides the city of Ypsilanti into three historical periods. The first stretched from the city's founding in 1823 to 1939. Ypsilanti was then

a quiet college town, its prosperity fueled by successful small industries. For a town its size, Ypsilanti had an unusual wealth of architecturally interesting buildings and houses representing almost every American architectural style: Greek Revival, Colonial Revival, Prairie Style, the bungalow, Queen Anne, Gothic Revival, and Italianate, among many others.

Bill refers to the years 1941 to 1973 as the Bomber Plant era. Factory workers poured into Ypsilanti during the war, dramatically altering the community. During these years, property owners milked their properties for all the profits they could squeeze out of them. These owners showed little concern for zoning or maintenance.

The era from 1973 to the present, according to Bill, has been the Jane Bird Schmiedeke and Nathalie Edmunds era. Together, these two women changed the city. In the 1960s, Depot Town was frequented by motorcycle gangs, specializing in violence and crime. All of Depot Town was on the market for \$14,000. According to Jane, Ypsilanti had hit rock bottom.



130 North Huron Street, 2021

By the early 1970s, the city was planning to remake itself. To increase its tax base, Ypsilanti drafted a master plan that included razing Depot Town and replacing its buildings with light industry. Riverside Park was going to become a parking lot. An Ann Arbor developer was planning to tear down the many buildings he owned on or near North Huron Street to build a civic center and a

county building, and there was talk of a senior citizen high rise. By the mid-1970s, the county had begun planning a major highway through Depot Town. Nathalie Edmunds remembered what ensued as “one continual battle” to save North Huron Street and Depot Town. The late Jack Harris referred to the now-restored houses on North Huron as “living architectural history.”

### Historic Preservation: The Beginnings

The historic preservation movement in Ypsilanti really began around 1969, when the State of Michigan passed enabling legislation for the creation of historic districts. Shortly thereafter, city council member Nathalie Edmunds gathered a committee to study the feasibility of creating a historic district in Ypsilanti. After researching sixteen historic

districts throughout the country, including Savannah, Annapolis, and New York City, Jane Bird Schmiedeke wrote the historic district ordinance that now protects Ypsilanti's historic houses and buildings.

Schmiedeke recalls that whatever their size or location, all sixteen districts took the same approach, basing their local ordinances on the Supreme Court's ruling that preservation is a legitimate public purpose and that governmental units are within their rights to regulate what can be done to historic buildings. Most important is that Jane wrote a damn good ordinance. She added restrictions; she put teeth in it. People fought those restrictions, but Jane prevailed. Ypsilanti's historic district came into being by Ypsilanti city ordinance in 1978, and today it is on the National Register of Historic Places.

### Towner House

The 1837 Greek Revival Towner House at 303 North Huron Street is the oldest wooden structure on its original foundation in Ypsilanti. Learning that the Presbyterian Church, the owner of the Towner House, was considering demolishing it, Schmiedeke and Edmunds asked the church if they would allow an outside group to maintain it. When the church agreed, Jane and Nathalie decided to form such a group for the purpose of maintaining the Towner House. This group, as they conceived it, would also be dedicated to the preservation of historic properties in the city. The Towner House became Exhibit A of historic preservation in Ypsilanti.

A group of prominent Ypsilanti citizens, including Schmiedeke and Edmunds,



837 Greek Revival Towner House, 303 North Huron Street, 2021



Jane Bird Schmiedeke and Nathalie Edmunds at the Celebration of Women, 2005

formed the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation in October 1974. Its mission was to encourage preservation of historic architecture throughout the city.

The core of that original group became Schmiedeke, Edmunds, and Don Randazzo. Over the years, dedicated board members have included Hank Prebys, Joe Mattiome, Jane Van Bolt, Paul Schreiber, Penny Schreiber, Bill Nickels, Jan Arps-Prundeanu, Jack Harris (who edited a delightfully quirky YHF newsletter), and many others. For example, the late architect Denis Schmiedeke created an architectural guide to historic properties

in the city, and he put together the programs for and led the architectural discussion at the YHF's annual Marker Awards Banquet. All were knowledgeable and passionate adherents of historic preservation and made immeasurable contributions over the years.

## Historic Homes Tour

In 1978, the first in-home house tour was held to showcase the east-side historic homes that were to be added to the Ypsilanti Historic District. Over the years, approximately 180 homes and businesses in Ypsilanti have been featured on the annual home tour. Proceeds from the tour have enabled the YHF to donate money to many historic preservation projects, totaling approximately \$55,000.

## Marker Awards

In addition to supporting preservation projects throughout the city, the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation encourages historic preservation by presenting historic-structure markers to the owners of buildings and houses that are preserving their exteriors in keeping with their original architectural style. The first YHF Historic Structure Markers were awarded in 1976. Since then, at least 270 buildings have been recognized. Of these, more than 100 homes and businesses were featured on the YHF home tour at least once.

The YHF Historic Structure Markers showcase the preservation and rehabilitation efforts of the owners of both large mansions and small homes. Notable examples of derelict buildings that have been brought back to life are the Gilbert Mansion, at 227

North Grove, and the Thompson Block in Depot Town, at 400 North River. Others, such as the simple Craftsman house at 913 North Congress, have benefited from the loving care and attention of their owners. Almost every one of Ypsilanti's architectural styles has been recognized by at least one marker.

The popular annual home tour was put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic, but Historic Structure Markers continued to be awarded. The Towner house is now owned by the Towner House Foundation, with funding from the YHF. In 2023, the Towner House interior continues under renovation by Don Randazzo and John Harrington. Along with many other property owners throughout the city, they continue the work of historic preservation begun in the mid-1970s.

Historic preservation remains a hallmark of the city of Ypsilanti, and it was made possible through the efforts of Jane Bird Schmiedeke, Nathalie Edmunds, Don Randazzo, and the members of the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation. We can't thank them enough.

### **A Note on Sources**

Some of the information for this essay comes from the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation newsletters and website. For more about the architecture of Ypsilanti and efforts to preserve it, go to: [https://yhf.org/?page\\_id=1101](https://yhf.org/?page_id=1101). All photographs are by the authors.

### **About the Authors**

Retired electronics engineer Paul Schreiber was mayor of Ypsilanti for eight years, from 2006 to 2014. Prior to running for mayor, Paul served on the Ypsilanti Housing Commission for ten years. He is currently president of the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation. Penny Schreiber is a retired editor, journalist, and book editor. She was managing editor of the *Ann Arbor Observer* for twelve years. She is a past president of the Ladies' Literary Club of Ypsilanti, volunteered for the University Musical Society Ambassadors for eleven years, and she served on the University of Michigan Wallenberg Committee, from 2001 to 2020.