

PICKET FENCES

Fall 2009

Volume Six No. One

"THIS PLACE MATTERS"
NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
2009 THEME

WHAT'S OUTSIDE COUNTS TOO: PRESERVING HISTORIC DISTRICT OUTBUILDINGS

Although often overlooked, historical district outbuildings offer great value to their properties. They give us a glimpse into the lives of the original property occupants and highlight the progress made throughout Portage's history. Outbuildings on historical district properties include barns, root cellars, smokehouses, well houses, sheds, silos, privies, and carriage houses.

Outbuildings require the same regular maintenance and preservation efforts that the main buildings do. However, when properly cared for, they can bring a sense of a property's history to its current appearance and can be used for an owner's modern needs as well. The Commission appreciates property owner's efforts to preserve all of the aspects of their piece of local history.

See pictures on Page 3

WHERE THE TRAILS CROSSED BOOK AVAILABLE NOW

The official Portage Historic District photographic tour book is available for sale and makes a perfect holiday gift or stocking stuffer. Books are \$7 and are available for sale at the City Hall and the Portage Senior Center. Included are photos and historical descriptions of each site, current and historical maps, as well as information about the city's history and architectural styles.

Historic District in Action *2009 Renovations*



9426 South Westnedge, an Italianate home built in 1870, owned by Dan and Lisa Bogema, winners of the 2009 Historic Preservation Award



The Beacon Club at 5830 Portage Road, built in 1850 by David and Mary Smith is an elegant example of the Greek Revival Style that was so fashionable in its era



2106 Forest Drive, owned by Tom and Elizabeth Reaume, was built in 1870 by Henry and Ellen Ames

We commend these homeowners for their efforts to preserve their historic homes and enhancing the Portage community.



“The History of the Portage Historic District”

ADAPTED FROM MAY 14, 2009 REMARKS BY MARK REILE, PHDC CHAIRPERSON,
AT THE TENTH ANNUAL GATHERING

The advertised title is definitely a tall order. Where to start? Back to 1846 and the oldest house in Portage? Then provide a house by house or year by year recap of district activity? I think that would test our attention spans. The idea for this presentation grew from a casual remark by one of our new commissioners, “Say, just how did we get started?” It seems good for our twentieth year to tell the story. Let’s think of the title ‘The History of the Beginning of the Portage Historic District’ instead.

All of the information to follow was found in the resources of the Heritage Room files at the Portage District Library, gleaned from meeting minutes, handwritten notes, newspaper articles, summaries by others and various collected documents. The point to this approach was to use what is available to anyone with a little time and a measure of interest: a test of our archives so to speak. Here are one man’s findings:

During the 1980’s, commercial development in Portage expanded at an explosive rate and extensive residential plats were built all over the city. As expansion occurred, many old houses and structures of historic importance to Portage were either razed or moved to other locations.

A new Portage resident, Kristina Moran, noticed houses being demolished. Having come from a city with a historic commission, Kristina attempted to contact Portage’s historic commission for an explanation. She was surprised to find none existed, and began her own research in the basement archives of the library. She soon saw significance in many houses still standing and the need to preserve them. Kristina and others like her were being heard in the community. (Kristina later served on our historic commission.)

Concerned over the steady loss of Portage’s history, in September 1988, the Portage City Council appointed a Historic District Study Committee made up of seven citizens. The committee was charged with the responsibility to: survey the City and identify structures of historic significance to Portage, and prepare an ordinance that identifies these sites and establishes procedures for preserving the sites as part of a Historic District. In 1988, Portage was marking the 25th anniversary of the City and the 150th anniversary of the founding of Portage Township. The study committee was a natural way to honor those anniversaries.

This is a good spot to address one of the most often asked questions about the PHD. Why isn’t the district made up of contiguous houses or neighborhoods? Our historic homes were built when Portage was a rural, agricultural area, an early township. They were literally built tens or hundreds of acres apart, not clustered near a downtown, business, or industry. The sites here are naturally scattered; however, their importance is not decreased because of distance.

The study committee met for the first time in December 1988. For the next year, it met two or three times per month in meetings or work sessions. In the work sessions, the committee researched the area to find potential historic sites, conducted numerous site visits to gather data and photographed structures for reference purposes. The committee used city assessment rolls, area maps dating from 1855 through 1913, county history books, plat records, directories, resource books, and even a master’s thesis written about old

homes in the city. Members created their own common forms and worksheets to organize their work. The data included facts and subjective descriptions of houses’ conditions and architectural styles.

I found one typed write-up particularly interesting reading. A house style was identified as ‘Italianate’ followed by ‘oriaform shpae’. Was this an Italian phrase or style I wasn’t familiar with? I’m an architect and this was a new one to me. A few documents later in my research I came across the same house, now described as having a ‘cruciform shape’. Mystery solved, lesson learned: It helps to have good penmanship for recording your research.

The initial survey identified 150 sites and structures for possible inclusion in the PHD. The committee focused on those from 1920 and earlier, being surprised that there were 65 built before 1900. After further research and several more site visits, 95 on the list were eliminated from further consideration. Many had been extensively altered or added-on too much from the original structure. The final study report submitted to Council in December 1999 recommended 55 sites and structures for inclusion in the PHD. The report stated the criteria for inclusion:

- Cultural or community significance (heritage, event, development, person)

- Architectural significance (distinguishing type or style, detail, or craftsmanship)

Judy Shehigian, chairperson of the committee, presented the report. In her remarks, she stated, “What better thing can we do for a generation frequently referred to as rootless than to share a knowledge about, an enthusiasm for, and respect for



LEFT: The beautiful Greek Revival home at 3821 West Milham dates back to the late 1850's and includes several outbuildings.
 RIGHT: The interesting cobblestone structures surrounding 2663 Mandigo are believed to have been built by the original owner, Hiram Allen, who built the home in 1860, and likely were used regularly on what became a Michigan Centennial Farm.



The barn at the 3221 West Milham property was believed to be built by Isaac and Amelia Brooks in the 1850's. It was originally farther away from the house, but was moved by teams of horses in the early 1900's.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

our mutual past, its people and its places.” (Judy later was the first chairperson of the historic commission).

The next steps toward becoming an ordinance required reviews by the planning commission and in public hearings. The report was also sent to the Michigan State Historical Commission. Planning commission discussion raised concern about pre-empting homeowners’ rights. A motion to allow owner veto power, to voluntary opt out of the district, was defeated 4 to 2. Eventually it was unanimous to accept the recommendation of the study committee.

The public hearings were often emotional, sometimes volatile. Opponents asked why it was mandatory, protesting that they were not consulted, questioning the motives of the council, remarking: “will create financial hardship; lower property values; my house’s style is not unique; can I sell my house?; detriment to business; seven people dictate use of my property?; just another layer of administration.” Proponents, smaller in number at the hearings, expressed support: “property values will increase; someone needs to stop the destruction; an appeal process is built in as a safeguard.” During the period of public hearings, two houses under consideration were razed, with one owner stating, “Whose business is it if we want to tear down the house?”

It appears there were two camps: what’s in it for me versus what’s in it for our community.

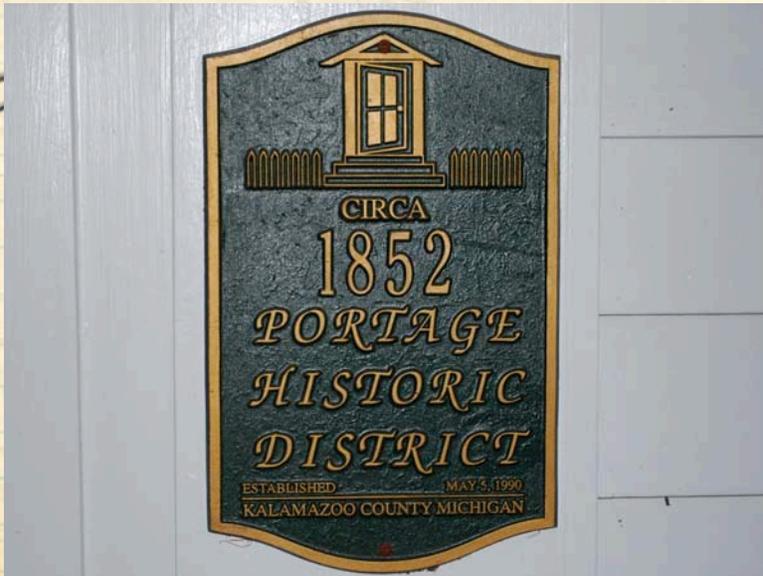
Based on input received at two public hearings, a further thirteen sites were removed from the proposed district, which had a big impact. For example, of eight houses proposed on Schuring Road, the largest concentration for the district, only one remained in the final forty-two. In doing so, homeowner’s wishes and plans for their property were balanced with community interest in preserving particular historically and architecturally significant structures for future generations. The City Council took it up for action in March 1990 with similar expression of support and reservation. Discussion led to two important modification to the ordinance: 1. included three homeowners on the historic district commission in lieu of one, because one’s peer’s should decide; 2. deleted the 90 day(!) jail term for violations. (Note: penalties may be a civil fine up to \$5,000 and the cost to restore unapproved work.) The PHD and ordinance was then approved by Council, with one dissenting vote favoring making inclusion in the district voluntary.

The following year, 1991, the PHD guidebook *Where the Trails Crossed* was published to record the properties of the district. It contains a brief history of Portage, and histories of each district site, with photographs.

Please call the
 Portage City
 Hall at (269)
 329-4400 to
 apply for a
 Certificate of
 Appropriateness
 before starting
 any projects to
 your historical
 home.

If you have ideas for
 Picket Fences or
 feedback for the
 commission, please
 contact Mark Reile,
 Chairperson, at (269)
 327-5699.

Historic Home Plaques



If you are interested in obtaining a Portage Historic District plaque customized for your historic home, please contact Jeanette Field at (269) 342-4969 for more information. It is our goal to to display a plaque on every historic home in the district.

PICKET FENCES

FROM:

PORTAGE HISTORIC DISTRICT
COMMISSION
Portage City Hall
7900 South Westnedge Avenue
Portage, MI 49002
(269) 329-4400

Fall 2009

Building History

We are looking forward to celebrating Preservation Week with you in May 2010!

HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

MAIL TO:

Mark Reile	Chairperson
Kathy Fosmoe	Vice Chairperson
Jeannette Field	Co-Secretary
Ann Marie Kreuzer	Co-Secretary
Katie vanLonkhuyzen	Commissioner
Robert El Henicky	Commissioner
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