

LANDMARKS LETTER



Read about this *Lost Landmark* on page 2.

Bissell Mansion, 4426 Randall Place



Bissell Mansion, 1936

LEWIS BISSELL WAS BORN in Manchester, Connecticut in 1789. In December of 1808 he was commissioned an ensign in the U.S. Army and deployed to what was then considered the “far west” arriving in St. Louis in the spring of that year. He traveled in the company of his uncle Daniel Bissell who had been ordered to assume control of Fort Bellefontaine. Earlier, Lewis’ father (and Daniel’s brother) Russell had been stationed at the fort and had briefly acted as commandant until his death in 1807.

From Fort Bellefontaine, Lewis Bissell was ordered to Fort Osage in present day Jackson County, Missouri

where he remained until 1813 when the fort was evacuated during the War of 1812. During the war he saw service from Niagara Falls (where he was wounded in combat) to Fort Clark (Peoria, Illinois), to Portage Des Sioux where he observed the signing of the peace treaty that ended hostilities in 1815. Following the war he became a sutler and supplied goods to the troops stationed at Fort Bellefontaine and in partnership with Colonel John O’Fallon to troops stationed at far flung military posts in the west. The difficulties of the sutler trade and failing health prompted his return to Connecticut where he married Mary Ann Woodbridge in 1824. That same year, he purchased 677 acres, including the future site of the family home, in what was then north St. Louis County.

Various construction dates between 1820 and 1830 are assigned to the mansion at 4426 Randall Place in College Hill. The original land grant that encompassed this portion of Bissell’s holdings can be traced back to Gabriel Cerre, who received it from the Spanish Crown in 1798.

An 1827 county tax roll provides a solid terminus post quem for the home’s construction, as no taxes were assessed for buildings on the property in that year. According to Bissell himself, his family returned to St. Louis in 1830 (although they were in Connecticut long enough to be recorded by the census there in that year). These two pieces of evidence suggest that the home was probably built between 1828 and 1830 in preparation for the Bissell’s return. This puts the Mansion in the running with the c.1829 Emmanuel DeHodiamont House (951 Maple Place) to be the oldest known standing house in St. Louis City.

The centerpiece of Bissell’s large farm, the home reflects Federal and Greek Revival influences. There are four rooms on each floor divided by a central stair hall. The public facades are laid in Flemish Bond and the primary façade (facing the highway) is five bays wide. Each window bay has a gauged brick camber arch and the central entry is framed by sidelights and a lunette transom beneath a pedimented porch roof. Because



Bissell Mansion, 1875. From Pictorial St. Louis.

IN THIS ISSUE...

- 2 **Lost Landmark: The Half Way House**
- 3 **Greenwood Cemetery**
- 4-5 **Preservation Update**
- 5 **Preservation Revolving Loan In Action**
- 6 **Bissell Mansion, Continued**
- 7 **Landmarks Membership**
- 8 **Thank You, Ruth!**
- 8 **Erratum**

Volume 51 Issue 1

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Lost Landmark

THE HALF WAY HOUSE aka The Farmers' and Coal Miners' Retreat, Corner of Victor and Gravois

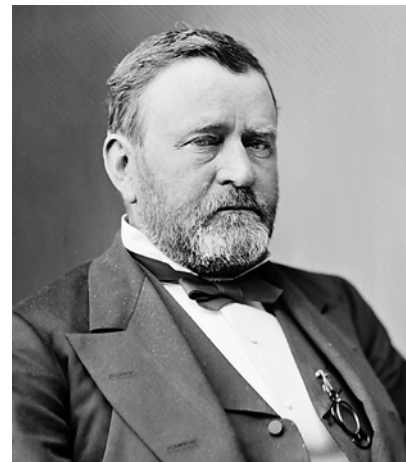


IN SEPTEMBER OF 1894 an article appeared in the *Post Dispatch* about a looming historic preservation issue. The roof of a small log cabin at the northeast corner of Victor and Gravois had recently collapsed and, just as would happen today, a deputy Building Commissioner had pronounced the building unsafe. Owner Edward Beckerman was in the process of building a fence to keep people out in advance of a planned demolition. Written on the wall of the condemned building was a sign proclaiming it the "Half Way House," which was the name by which the building was locally known. Estimated to have been constructed prior to 1820, the cabin's name referred to its location approximately halfway between the heart of Downtown and the coal mining area in the vicinity of south Kingshighway and Arsenal. According to the article, the cabin had been built as a tavern and way station by coal miners whose heavy, oxen-drawn wagons took two days to travel back and forth to the city.

The area was quite rural in the early days of the Half Way House, but it enjoyed steady patronage from coal diggers and farmers who used today's Gravois Avenue to bring their goods to market. Also known as the "Farmers' and Coal Miners' Retreat" through the decades the rough-hewn country tavern gradually improved with the addition of a well, a more extensive bar, and in the 1850s a bakery that was renowned for its ginger bread. Between 1854 and 1860, the years when Ulysses Grant was living in the St. Louis area and using Gravois to haul loads of firewood into the city from the lands that he and his father-in-law Frederick Dent owned in St. Louis County, the then-obscure farmer and retired soldier became a regular patron.

Henry Luft, whose grocery and butcher shop were across the street from the tavern remembered playing cards with Grant regularly along with the tavern's proprietor Jacob Beucker. He stated that Grant would water his oxen at the pump at the intersection of Victor and Gravois and then have whiskey and crackers or ginger bread for lunch. After eating, he would fill his pipe from the tobacco barrel in the corner and chat or play "seven up" placing bets for drinks or pieces of fried liver.

By the time the building collapsed in 1894, it was being used as rental housing and was owned by Edward Beckermann who lived where the parking lot for Hodack's Restaurant is today. By that time the log building was an unusual survival in the midst of a dense brick neighborhood and the *Post Dispatch* referred to it as an "historic landmark." Of course, such a distinction at the time conveyed no protections from demolition, so after the roof collapsed, the building soon followed. It's interesting to note that the reporter thought that news of the building's passing was worthy of reporting, though no call for its protection was made. Public interest was no doubt assumed based on association with Grant rather than with concerns about historic preservation. Perhaps the author or the owner of the building thought there might be some commercial interest in salvaging the property. After all, three years earlier real estate developers Edward and Justin Joy had purchased the cabin that Grant had constructed at his Hardscrabble Farm and moved it to the Old Orchard area of Webster Groves in an effort to draw attention to the community. Then in 1903, the cabin was sold again to C. F. Blake, who hauled it to Forest Park to serve as the centerpiece of his coffee, tea and spice company's display at the World's Fair. In the end, no such fate awaited the Half Way House at Victor and Gravois where the future general and President stopped to rest in the years before the Civil War.



Ulysses S. Grant, a frequent visitor of The Half Way House

Greenwood Cemetery, 6571 St. Louis Avenue

by Etta A. Daniels, Greenwood Cemetery Historian

GREENWOOD CEMETERY was established in 1874. It was the first commercial African American cemetery in the St. Louis area. With its rural location, Victorian setting and well-kept grounds was a welcome burial option for the small but growing black middle class of late 1800's St. Louis. Typical burial cost during the early years ranged from \$2.50 for children to \$5.00 for adults.

Established in response to segregation policies, which in many cases applied to African Americans in life as well as in death, Greenwood's burials reflect many aspects of social and cultural life as well as commitment to community service at the local and national levels. Graves from the late 1800's and early 1900's bear witness to membership in Masonic and other fraternal organizations—Prince Hall Masons, Heroines of Jericho, Order of Eastern Star, The Mosaic Templars of America, International Order of Odd Fellows are all represented. Graves of Civil War veterans and Buffalo Soldiers as well as veterans of WWI, WWII and subsequent conflicts document African American service in the United States military. Especially moving are the large number of gravesites of persons born prior to 1865 when the vast majority of blacks in the state of Missouri were slaves. The early civil rights struggles of St. Louis' African Americans are represented by activists such as Charlton Hunt Tandy and Harriett Scott. The list of burials includes the final resting places of musicians, physicians, businessmen, preachers, teachers, an author and an inventor.

Greenwood is home to wonderful examples of funerary architecture and traditions including elaborate, professionally carved Victorian stones and monuments dating to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, hand made concrete markers, planter style boxes, simple "house" markers made at the cemetery after 1910, as well as markers that have been obviously appropriated from other uses to become grave markers. Evidence of southern burial traditions with deep roots in African cultures such as conch shells and white gravel can also be found

Greenwood was an active burial ground from 1874 to 1993. The cemetery was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2004.

Greenwood was a viable enterprise until the 1970's. After that time, the cemetery's aging infrastructure and the fact that people now had the option to be buried in formerly segregated cemeteries led to a decline in burials, profitability and conditions. For many years, no one cared for the cemetery and eventually no one cared about it.

Due to decades of neglect the current situation at Greenwood is grim. For years it has been used as a dumpsite, most of the roads through the cemetery are impassable, headstones have fallen over and in many cases are now underground. Some stones are being lost to the elements; bushes and trees planted years ago as memorials have become impenetrable undergrowth.

Despite current conditions, Greenwood is a significant historical and cultural resource for the St. Louis community. It has enormous potential for education and tourism, it is a source of data for research on African American life in the St. Louis area during the late 19th and 20th centuries and since it is not open for new burials, once restored, it will be a 32-acre greenspace in a community where such resources are limited.

Help from the community is needed to preserve the history and culture that Greenwood represents. Volunteers are needed to research head stones, map cemetery lots, mark graves with no headstones, make signs and informational markers, adopt a small section of ground to maintain, rake, chop weeds, cut down trees, write grants, solicit support, write letters, lobby on behalf of Greenwood, decorate for special occasions, and help with programs. We need donations of things such as hauling and trash disposal, spraying for weed control and printed materials. We welcome groups and organizations looking for community service projects.

Watch for a notice this fall when we are planning to organize a tour and service opportunity for Landmarks members to help maintain this important historic site!



ABOVE: Before and after cleanup by volunteers

JOIN US!

**Interested in
getting involved?**

please contact us through our website www.greenwoodstl.org or Facebook on the "Greenwood Cemetery Discussion" page.



Volunteers from Edward Jones

Preservation Updates

ST. MARY'S INFIRMARY, 1528 PAPIN

The main building of St. Mary's Infirmary was designed by Aloysius Gillick and constructed between 1887 and 1896. Gillick completed a number of projects for religious orders in St. Louis including much of the Convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (6400 Minnesota) and also the chapel that the same order added to the Clemens House (1849 Cass Avenue) in 1896. Most of St. Mary's closed in 1979 though limited portions of the complex continued to be used until 1994. After closure, at least one plan for redevelopment came and went, but in recent years the building became a popular destination for explorers, vandals and graffiti "artists." The building made Landmarks' Most Endangered list in 2009 and its description began with the sentence "The condition of St. Mary's Infirmary is frightening—anyone who has seen the side facing Chouteau Avenue lately has seen the ongoing collapse of the rear wall." After seven more years of vandalism, neglect and arson, the City issued an emergency demolition order citing public safety concerns. At the end of June, the crumbling south wall of the main building was demolished and the building will probably be gone by the end of the summer.



WOODSIDE, 2200 BREDELL, MAPLEWOOD

Woodside was constructed c. 1849 by attorney and state senator Charles Rannells and his wife Mary. It was also likely constructed in whole or in part by the Rannells' slaves. Perhaps the oldest surviving home in Maplewood, Woodside is a remarkable physical reminder of ante-bellum agricultural life in St. Louis County and the outstanding amount of historical documentation the home and its former occupants enjoy make it a rare and valuable part of St. Louis' history. For years local residents and the City of Maplewood have protected Woodside, though demolition has been threatened many times. The biggest problem has been an inability to find a developer that was willing to take on the substantial work of rehabilitation. That problem has finally been solved. On June 22, new owners closed on Woodside and are planning a major rehabilitation. Landmarks Director Andrew Weil reached out to the new owners and has provided information about the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Historic Rehabilitation and put them on the path toward an application for historic rehabilitation tax credits. We anticipate being able to report additional news as the rehabilitation gets underway and also will work to organize a tour perhaps as early as fall 2016. We look forward to receiving a Most Enhanced Award application for Woodside in the coming years and are thrilled that another building has been removed from the Most Endangered list!



911 N. TUCKER

Built c. 1840, this home is a city landmark that is recorded on the official list of such designated properties simply as, "A 19th Century House." This home is among the very few (you can count them on one hand) surviving residential buildings in the central business district. It is a wonderful example of the City's early vernacular Federal architecture and the story of its residents exemplifies changing patterns of immigration and settlement in the neighborhoods that once surrounded the riverfront commercial district. Owned first by a German family, it was then purchased by a Jewish family from Poland, and then an Italian couple who operated a speakeasy and boarding house in the early 20th century. In 1979, Alderman Bruce Sommer purchased the home and briefly operated a restaurant known as the "Sommer House" in the building. Later it was renovated as headquarters for the St. Louis Mounted Patrol. In recent years it has served as an art gallery, but it was offered for sale recently and major structural problems with its south wall raised questions about its future. Fortunately, in recent months a company called "Develop STL" has rebuilt and tuckpointed the damaged south wall and done major work on the home's foundation. While the intended new use for the building is unclear, these important repairs have ensured many more years of life for this unique remnant of the residential districts that were all but destroyed by the westward expansion of downtown in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



Preservation Revolving Loan In-Action

THE IMPOSING CORNER commercial and residential building at 2801 Magnolia Avenue in Fox Park has been vacant and problematic for many years. The building's scale and condition have intimidated developers and it's hulking, deteriorated presence has depressed the value of adjacent properties. But this is all about to change. The Board of Directors and staff of Landmarks Association are proud to announce that we have awarded our inaugural revolving loan to support the rehabilitation of this building! Over the course of 2015, Landmarks raised over \$100,000 from several foundations and many individual contributions to capitalize this new fund, which will be used to support important neighborhood rehabilitation efforts. Our goal is to eventually grow the fund significantly through future donations, but for the time being, we are excited about this pilot effort and our new ability to play a role in an important neighborhood redevelopment plan.

While our 0% interest loan is going specifically to support the rehab of 2801 Magnolia, this building is a component of a larger collaborative project that has been put together by RISE Community Development and Messiah Lutheran Church. Over the course of the next year, this building along with eleven more of the worst buildings in

the Fox Park and Tower Grove East Historic Districts will be rehabbed and put back into productive use housing recent immigrants in close proximity to the International Institute. Thanks to everyone who donated to support the creation of our revolving fund. We hope that you are excited to see your donations being put to work rehabilitating historic buildings and improving neighborhoods. If you haven't already made a donation to grow the revolving fund, we hope you will consider making a gift and helping us to grow our capacity! Stay tuned for updates on the progress of this project, and thanks again to everyone who made this effort possible.

To donate to the revolving loan fund, please visit www.gofundme.com and search for 'Landmarks preservation revolving loan fund.'



Preservation Update Continued...

THIS PLACE MATTERS! ROUTE 66 MERAMEC RIVER BRIDGE

On Saturday, May 14, a large group of people turned out to support the preservation of the bridge that once carried Route 66 over the Meramec River near Fenton. If enough money can be raised to repair the bridge by the end of this year, MO DOT will turn the bridge over to Missouri State Parks to restore so that it can serve as a bicycle and pedestrian connection between the east and west halves of Route 66 State Park. To donate to the effort to save the bridge, visit www.gofundme.com and search for "Meramec River Bridge."



Friends of the Bridge Turn Out to Say, "This Place Matters!"

the highway was cut so close to the home's front door, most people only know its appearance from the rear.

Lewis' Bissell's wife Mary Ann (Woodhouse) died in 1834 leaving him alone in the new home with three children. Four years later he remarried Mary J. Douglas who bore eight more children, five of which survived to adulthood.

Despite having grown up in the abolitionist stronghold of Connecticut, the 1840 and 1850 censuses recorded six enslaved African Americans living on the Bissell farm in addition to a couple of servants. The 1850 census recorded Lewis (age: 60, occupation: farmer), Mary (wife, 29) son James (merchant, 29), daughters Ann (16), Cornelia (12), Sophia (7), Louisa (3) and sons Lewis D. (10) and Taylor (1). Also in the household were William Curren (25), a gardener from Ireland and George Gethage (20) a laborer from Germany. The enslaved people enumerated were a 60 year old man, three women aged 45, 28, 26, a four year old girl and an eight year old boy. As was unfortunately typical of slave censuses, no names were recorded.

In 1868, Lewis Bissell died and was buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery. His widow Mary moved to Virginia. Five years later, their Daughter Cornelia Provines and her husband Alexander purchased the home from Mary. The 1875 Pictorial St. Louis Map shows the home as it appeared when they lived there and interestingly shows the rear (west) kitchen addition, which is usually attributed (apparently mistakenly) to a later occupation.

The Provines moved to California in 1877 after which the home had a succession of renters before butcher Frederick Kraft bought it in 1882. The Krafts lived in the house in the late 19th century and retained ownership until 1925 when they sold it to Dr. Marie Randall and Dr. Edward F. Randall for whom the street on which the home sits was renamed "Randall Place." The Randalls owned the property until 1943 and were living in the home when it was recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1936.

In 1958, the home was threatened by the proposed plan for the Mark Twain Expressway (I-70). The initial plan was for the steep hillside (known for more than a century as Bissell's Point) to be truncated by the highway and for the slope to be graded westward undercutting the house. Many St. Louisans found this idea intolerable. Among those opposed to the plan was an engineer named Frank Hilliker. Hilliker proposed that the highway could build a retaining wall at Bissell's Point rather than grade the slope through the mansion, an idea that was initially rejected by highway planners because it was apparently too sensible. Undeterred, Hilliker obtained cost estimates for his plan that showed that a retaining wall would both save the historic mansion and cost less than the existing plan. Armed with these numbers, he and other early preservationists and neighborhood activists proceeded to make enough noise that the Highway Department finally capitulated. Many of those activists were founding members of Landmarks Association of St. Louis, which was organized that same year and incorporated the next.

As the highway was being constructed in the late 1950s, Stan Schepker, who lived a few doors down from the Bissell Mansion, enjoyed riding his bicycle on the right of way and exploring the homes that were slated to be demolished. While he and his friends used the mountains of demolition debris to build a tree house on the north end of the Bissell property, he never thought that he might someday own the home.



Stan and Barb Schepker, current owners of the Bissell Mansion.

Stan along with his parents Jacob (Jake) and Sophie Schepker moved to Randall Place from north 20th Street around 1948. Stan's father Jake had come to north St. Louis with his two brothers in 1945 after service as a Marine in the Pacific. Active in politics and community service, he cared deeply for his adopted community and had always admired the Bissell home for its history and beauty. While the home had been protected from demolition for the highway years earlier, by the mid 1970s it was again threatened by creeping blight as people left the neighborhood for western suburbs. After the home went vacant, Mr. Schepker along with his brothers Ben and Bill, and other area residents like Werner Born, Angela McCabe, and Catherine Schwartz created the Grand Bissell Towers Corporation, which bought the home in 1976. With assistance from Mercantile Bank, the Small Business Administration and Landmarks Association, the building was renovated for use as a restaurant. "Gabriel Cerre Inc." was registered in February of 1977 for the purpose of operating a restaurant in the home and Landmarks Association helped to celebrate its grand opening by holding a Mardi Gras party there in 1978.

In the 1980s there was still enough business and industrial activity along nearby north Broadway for the restaurant to support lunch and dinner crowds. One such industry was Ryerson Steel where Stan and Barb Schepker met. Married in 1973, Barb left the steel company in 1979 to raise the couple's children, but her connection to the restaurant at the Bissell Mansion through her husband's parents led her to begin waiting tables there part time in 1981. In 1982, she became the floor manager and in 1986 one of the other employee/owners suggested that they try to attract customers with a dinner theater experience. Gradually both Barb and Stan became immersed in the operation of the home and the rest is history.

The tradition of the Bissell Mansion Murder Mystery Dinner Theater has been carried on for thirty years by Barb and Stan Schepker and a core of dedicated staff and actors. Stan's father Jake was a constant presence at the house for most of that time and his mother Sophie even worked as a baker and prep cook in the kitchen for more than a decade.

After all this time, Stan and Barb are getting ready to retire. The home and restaurant have truly been a family business and a labor of love for these wonderful people. They have kept this critically important building occupied, maintained, and protected through many difficult decades. While plans to close are not imminent, the Schepkers have reached out to Landmarks Association to help them find a new steward for the property. Their primary wish is that a new owner will love and respect the building as much as they do. It is time for someone else to write the next chapter in the long history of the Bissell Mansion. Maybe it's you? Spread the word, it's time to save the Bissell Mansion all over again. For more information, please call our office or email Andrew at aweil@landmarks-stl.org.



Historic American Buildings Survey Drawing of the Bissell Mansion.

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Bissell "Red" Water Tower, courtesy of "Distilled History."

Dear friends,

As you know, Landmarks Association relies heavily on the support of our membership to meet our humble financial needs. We would like to thank you for your continuing support, and encourage you to pass this newsletter along to a friend with an invitation to join! Becoming a member is easy. Simply call the office at 314-421-6474 or visit landmarks-stl.org and click on the "join" tab.

Thanks!



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Thank You, Ruth!



AFTER SIX YEARS OF dedicated service, Preservation Specialist Ruth Keenoy is moving on to a new position. She will be managing the measures that have been selected to help offset the adverse effects on historic resources in the footprint of the new National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) on behalf of the City. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires that, if a Federal “undertaking” will have an adverse effect on buildings or sites that are listed in- or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, a plan to mitigate those effects must be implemented. Unfortunately, while the NGA staying in St. Louis is a great thing for the city, there will be some adverse effects on historic properties and the lives of some people living in the area where the new

facility will be built. Ruth will be working with local community groups and other stakeholders at the state and federal level to document the history of this area before the presence of the NGA begins to write a completely new chapter. Ruth’s enormous wealth of experience as a historian, writer, teacher and businesswoman, along with her compassion and sense of humor will be greatly missed. Thank you Ruth for your service to Landmarks Association.

Erratum:

In the previous issue of the Landmarks Letter, Volume 50, Issue 4, it was erroneously stated that McKinley High School and Yeatman (Central) High School were William “Ittner’s only high schools...” in St. Louis. This was an error. The sentence was intended to read that these two schools were Ittner’s first high schools in St. Louis. The editor regrets causing any confusion.



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