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 arch and the central entry is framed by sidelights and a lunette transom beneath a pedimented porch roof.
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, 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. Witten 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 St. Louis area and using Gravois to haul loads of firewood into the city from the land that he and his father-in-law Frederik Dent owned in St. Louis County, the then-obscure farmer and retired Army captain would often visit the Half Way House. According to newspaper accounts, Grant would often visit the Half Way House.

By the time the building collapsed in 1894, it was being used as rental housing and was owned by Edward Beckerman who lived where the parking lot for Hodak’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 Harlondale Farm and moved it to the Old Ohio Avenue 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.
4

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.

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. 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. It is a wonderful example of the City’s early vernacular Federal architecture.

Woodsie, 2200 Bredeell, Maplewood
Woodsie 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, Woodsie 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 Woodsie, though demolition has 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 Woodsie 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 Woodsie in the coming years and are thrilled that another building has been removed from the Most Endangered list!

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...

WOODSIDE, 2200 BREDELL, MAPLEWOOD
Woodsie 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, Woodsie 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 Woodsie, though demolition has 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 Woodsie 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 Woodsie in the coming years and are thrilled that another building has been removed from the Most Endangered list!

Preservation Revolving Loan In-Action

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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!”

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that were slated to be demolished. While he and his friends used the mountains of demolition dollars to build a tree house on the north and of the Bissell property, he never thought that he might someday own the area.

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

As the highway was being constructed in the late 1950s, Stan Schepker, who lived a few doors down from the Bissell Mansion, showed that a retaining wall would both save the historic mansion and show its appearance from the rear. As the highway was being constructed in the late 1950s, Stan Schepker, who lived a few doors down from the Bissell Mansion, showed that a retaining wall would both save the historic mansion and show its appearance from the rear. As the highway was being constructed in the late 1950s, Stan Schepker, who lived a few doors down from the Bissell Mansion, showed that a retaining wall would both save the historic mansion and show its appearance from the rear. As the highway was being constructed in the late 1950s, Stan Schepker, who lived a few doors down from the Bissell Mansion, showed that a retaining wall would both save the historic mansion and show its appearance from the rear.
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.