

# Heritage NEWS

JANUARY 2004

January

Guest speaker Sally Bund  
assistant archivist  
Bentley Historical Library

Wed. Jan. 28 at 7:30 p.m.

Ladies' Literary Club  
218 N. Washington Street

Sally Bund, a graduate of EMU's historic preservation program, is an assistant archivist specializing in architectural collections at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library. Bund is archivist for the library's recent Albert Kahn acquisitions. On Wednesday evening, January 28, 7:30 p.m., Bund will present a talk and slide show on the late architect at the Ladies' Literary Club, 218 North Washington, Ypsilanti.

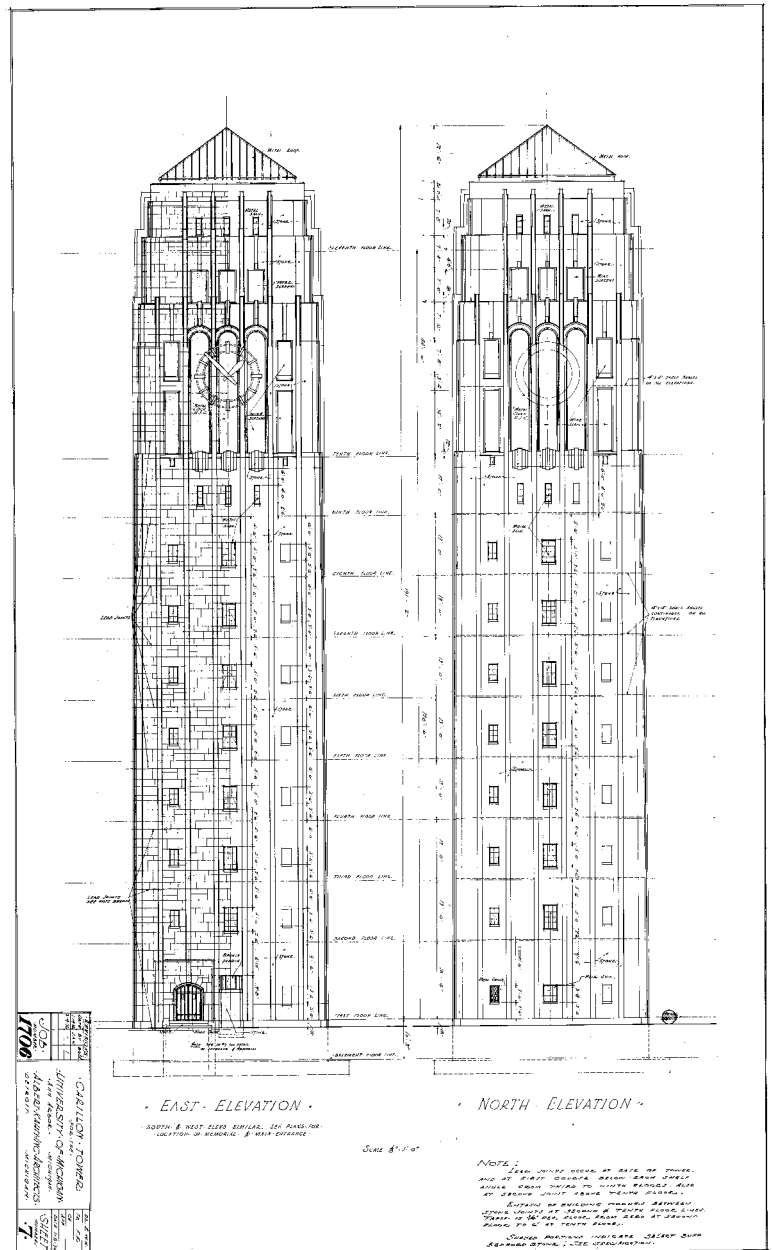
Albert Kahn left an enduring legacy throughout southeastern Michigan. Incredibly prolific, Kahn designed many buildings in Detroit, including the Fischer Building and the GM World Headquarters. He was also Henry Ford's favorite architect and the designer of Ford's world famous River Rouge Plant. In Ann Arbor he dominated the University of Michigan's twentieth-century campus. Of the seventeen U-M buildings that went up during Kahn's lifetime, fourteen remain, including Hill Auditorium, Angell Hall, and the Clements Library.



Albert Kahn

Kahn's Detroit firm, Albert Kahn Associates, recently donated the construction drawings for seventy of Kahn's most important buildings to the Bentley Library. Kahn Associates also donated a collection of construction photos, newspaper clippings about Kahn and his work from 1905 to the present, and the transcripts of many of Kahn's speeches. Sally Bund's Albert Kahn slide show had its debut in December at the U-M's Detroit Observatory, where it was a hit. Ann Arbor Observer writer and local historian Grace Shackman describes Bund's talk as "fascinating and excellent." The Kahn collection is a landmark acquisition for the Bentley, according to Shackman, and it will allow future scholars to break new ground in researching and writing about the architect. Future restorers of Kahn buildings are also going to be grateful.

Immersing herself in the Kahn collection at the Bentley "has been wonderful," says Bund, who has developed a bit of a crush on the architect along the way. Bund brings Kahn, who died in 1942, into focus as a person, says Shackman. "He was an amazing hero, a genius without flaws—lovely, honest, humble," says Bund. "His only fault is that he worked too much." Awareness of what Kahn accomplished and of how he influ-



Courtesy U-M Bentley Historical Library

enced twentieth-century architecture has been growing in the last ten years. "He was one of the greatest architects in American history," says Bund.

Please join us on January 28 for an absorbing evening with Sally Bund and Albert Kahn. The public is invited and coffee and cookies will be served.

# Follett mansion, finest in the city

By James Mann

Images from James Mann's book  
*Images of America Ypsilanti A History in Pictures*

"The eyesore of the old house on the Follett property will soon disappear," reported *The Ypsilantian* of November 26, 1903. "The buildings, by order of Mrs. F. Uhl, were sold at auction Friday, and W. L. Beardsley got them for \$200. The land will be platted and sold for city lots. The place during the life of Mr. Follett was

the finest in the city, the lawn beautifully kept, with flowers and fountain. After Mrs. Follett's health failed the place began to run down, and since her death it has been allowed to rot and drop to pieces, a sorry monument to the memory of Benjamin Follett, who was one of the most enterprising men this city ever knew. It has



Benjamin Follett

been hoped his daughter Mrs. Uhl, would present the beautiful grove to the city to make Follett Park a real memorial of her father's career in this city, but she evidently did not care to do so."

This was the sad end to a house once considered the finest in the city. At one time people in Ypsilanti would point out the Follett mansion to visitors with pride. The house was a gift in the 1840's from Mark Norris to his daughter Elvira and his son-in-law Benjamin Follett. Follett was active in banking, real estate, lumber, and many other activities. It was he who had the Follett House Hotel built in Depot Town, and it was considered the finest hotel on the Michigan Central Railroad line between Detroit and Chicago. Over the years, the couple metamorphosed the house turning it into a show-place and social center. Benjamin Follett died suddenly on December 26, 1864, at the age of 45. His wife Elvira died in September of 1883. The house then became the property of their daughter Alice, who lived in Grand Rapids.

"The beautiful Follett home," wrote Harvey Colburn in *The Story of Ypsilanti*, "was for years one of the show places of the city. It was situated on River Street in a grove of oak trees



The Follett mansion stood on River Street between Oak and Maple streets.

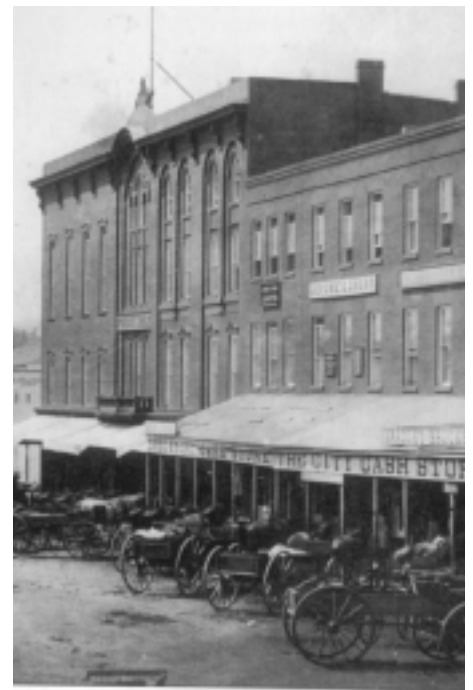
extending from Oak to Maple, a great rambling structure with big bay windows. The surrounding grounds were extensive, brilliant with flowers, and adorned by a large fountain fed by a windmill standing on the hill above."

"He (Benjamin Follett) built the first conservatory in the city," noted *The Ann Arbor Daily News* of Monday, January 25, 1904, and was one of the first to take care of his lawn and have fine flower beds. His was the first house in the city to be lighted by gas. This was in 1858 and the same day the second union school building was dedicated. All the children in the neighborhood were invited to see the house illuminated."

"In 1856," continued *The Ann Arbor Daily News*, "Mr. Follett had a fine barn built by Mortimer C. Smalley. When finished it was considered the finest barn in this part of the state and people came from all over the country to see it. A few years ago this barn burned, and to show how changed were the conditions from 40 years ago previous, the papers in referring to the fire came out with the headline, 'A Nuisance Gone'"

"A talk with Mr. Beardsley, who bought and has been tearing down the house, reminds one very forcibly of the changes that a few years make," noted *The Ann Arbor Daily News*. "How a carpenter of today would like to get hold of such timber as he took out of this house. In the frame work, several black walnut timbers, 8x10 were found and apparently as sound today as the day the house was built. And such boards

as were used in finishing—clear whitewood, two to two and a half feet wide, and not a sign of a knot in sight. The cellar shelves were made from clear walnut boards, 15 to 18 inches wide, and today a man couldn't find such lumber, even if he were prepared to pay the price that would probably be asked."



The Follett House was considered the finest hotel between Detroit and Chicago. It was opened on July 4, 1859.

# A look back at the miraculous changes

**An open letter from the  
YHF President, Jack Harris  
(March 1986):**

In a slide show with taped audio presented to the visitors at the 1979 Heritage Festival, I stated that Ypsilanti was at a crossroads. I was referring to the preservation movement, how far it had come and what the prospects for the future seemed to be. Today we have passed the crossroads and are on our way toward a revitalized community based on preservation and utilization of our best resource: our historic buildings.

No one who remembers Ypsilanti ten or fifteen years ago can deny that some pretty miraculous changes have taken place. Do you remember Depot Town in 1974, for example, when Bev and Don Shankwiler bought the Artrain building? The place inside looked like London after the blitz and tackling it had to take the courage of mighty brave adventurers and, given what the rest of that old business district looked like then, such an investment must have been taken as madness by many. Yet in 1977, when the Heritage Foundation held its September meeting in Shankwiler's imaginatively renovated building, things had begun to happen all along that part of Cross Street and a new spirit had emerged—the spirit of Depot Town. Today the spirit is very much in the flesh, and Depot Town is a vital, living area popular to thousands all over southeast Michigan.

Back in the mid-70s, North Huron Street was crumbling. The old city hall (now Old Town Hall) was rapidly decaying and all the buildings along that historic streetscape were neglected and abused—except for our museum, which stood amidst the ruins as a proud symbol of our heritage. Now that street, with nothing gone 'cutesy' as in so many revitalized towns, glows in pride in the late afternoon sun, a solid statement about a past worth remembering, preserving and using.

All over Ypsilanti, in the face of much negativism and ignorance, greed and apathy, houses have been maintained and restored. From Summit on the west to Prospect on the east, houses that were on the endangered list have been picked up, labored over, and brought back to life. From Buffalo to Forest, too, transformations have taken place. Each of us has his or her own list, but I remember admiring and lamenting the splendid gingerbread Queen Anne at 35 South Summit, which ten years ago looked like it

*“All over Ypsilanti, in the face of much negativism and ignorance, greed and apathy, houses have been maintained and restored.”*

might not survive. Houses all over the East Side needed attention, too. What is now High/Scope was not in the best of shape as an apartment structure and the wonderful Gothic Revival house at the corner of North Grove and High was in dire straits [in 2004 one of the city's crown jewels]. On the south side, I troubled over the Glover House (now Child and Family Service) at 118 South Washington, in a severe state of decay and worsening [in 2004 a superbly restored single-family home]. On the north side, there was the Stachlewitz house at 601 West Forest, almost in ruins.

When one remembers these images, it's a little easier to face the dregs of leftover winter 1986 in Ypsilanti. Everywhere one turns now one sees improvement year after year. Small projects as well as big ones contribute to the new sense of faith emerging that Ypsilanti can't lose, that the old idea that this was a town without an identity is dead, and that a new sense of community pride is spreading well beyond the city limits.

The origins of this pride go back many years to the days of Nat Edmunds' tireless battle to save five buildings along North Huron. Two were lost, but three were saved, superb examples of Richardsonian Romanesque, Italian Villa, and Greek Revival—now among our most cherished possessions. Again, Nat herself can better tell you about the six separate times she saved the Ladies Library (Starkweather mansion) from destruction.

Then came Jane Bird [today Jane Schmiedeke] and the organization of the Heritage Foundation, whose immediate purpose was to save the Towner House, the oldest building on its original foundation—now the Towner House Children's Museum on North Huron. Both Nat and Jane were influential in the beginnings of that organization and within only a few years, a new kind of pride in our architectural heritage had emerged, with the development of a historic-structure marker-award program, the heritage calendar (which annually presented a series of local historic buildings drawn by local artists), and a series of public presentations

designed to rouse interest in preservation and enlighten people about the advantages of saving old buildings. A walking tour was initiated along North Huron in 1977, and in 1978 the Foundation's first annual home tour was held, now a centerpiece for the Ypsilanti Heritage Festival.

Meanwhile, Nat and Jane were working within the political structure for preservation, aiming for a stronger base from which to protect the city's rich heritage. Through time and exacting surveys a historic district was established in 1973 and placed on the State Register of Historic places. Soon it would be on the National Register as well. A strong ordinance was written and gained City Council's approval in 1977. A historic district commission was appointed by the mayor, with Council approval, and the first historic district commission meeting was held in the small room behind the furnace in old city hall in February 1978.

Since that time, preservation has become an integral part of city policy. Meeting every two weeks, the Commission reviews all applications for building permits in the historic district for work that includes exterior change of any sort.

The district itself, soon after its establishment, was enlarged, at the petition of the neighborhood, to include a significant part of the east side beyond Depot Town. That made for an enormous district of over 700 buildings, and the work at times was grueling for the seven-member Commission, whose membership has remained remarkably stable over the years, with some seemingly permanent fixtures, alas, like myself, and some new blood (and minds), such as our most recent addition, Scott Diels, architect to Tom Monaghan. Members are appointed according to law; some with proven records in historic preservation, some who live in the district, one an attorney, one an architect or builder with preservation expertise, and so forth.

Only one who has served on the Commission since its inception can know how much work has gone into reviewing the hundreds of permits which have come before us. There have often been meetings which went on nonstop from 7 p.m. until after 11 p.m., with on-site field trips on weekends. But then, perhaps it takes that experience to know the impact the Commission has had on this entire preservation movement.

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## A look back continued from page 3

Preservation is the key word—and it's difficult to appreciate the meaning of the term when one has no idea of what might have happened, but didn't—what might have been destroyed, but wasn't—because of the Historic District Ordinance. Yet some of us can look back and KNOW that certain buildings—important buildings—would not be here today without the protection of law and the work of the commission. It's also difficult to see "what might have been" unless one knows firsthand the work of the Commission—how structures would have been changed, sometimes altered out of recognition, and property values lessened by poor workmanship.

Anyone who owns or buys an old building knows the work involved in maintaining or restoring that property. The work seems endless, but harder to deal with is the depression of seeing negative changes in buildings in the neighborhood—changes which affect not only that property itself, but reflect upon the character of the entire area and cut the value of one's own investment in sweat and cash.

The ordinance has gone far to lessen the number of such negative changes, because the historic district encompasses the entire central part of the City; and this protection has meant an enormous difference in our total image and has provided a more stable base for investors all over town.

Movement now is into Ypsilanti, not out of it. Enthusiasm is high, property is selling, people are moving in, most encouragingly into downtown. Lowered interest rates are a big help. Still, people want assurance that their investment is safe. A tight Historic District Ordinance is a major way of protecting those investments which are so vital to the continued revitalization of our city.



The Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation

## Heritage News

c/o Don Randazzo  
6101 Hitchingham Road  
Ypsilanti, MI 48197

### Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation Board Members

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## 2004 HERITAGE FOUNDATION PROGRAMS

Location: Ladies' Literary Club  
218 N. Washington  
Time: 7:30 p.m.

### **WED., JAN. 28, 2004:**

"Albert Kahn, Master of American Industrial Architecture," Sally Bund, assistant archivist architectural collections, U-M Bentley Historical Library.

### **WED., MARCH 24, 2004:**

"So Faux So Good," local decorative painters Randy and Kathy Fettes. Get an overview of the past, present and future of faux finishing. Plus a demonstration of their most popular faux finish techniques, including architectural stenciling. Learn to transform your own walls from plain to a richly glazed patina with the help of these classic decorative painting effects.

### **WED., MAY 26, 2004:**

**Annual Marker Awards Banquet**

### **SUN. AUGUST 15, 2004:**

**27th Annual Historic Home Tour**

*See you at the January Meeting - Wednesday, January 28 at 7:30 p.m.*