

## THE PROJECT

Our project was to save the Old Third Ward Neighborhood in Appleton, Wisconsin....

On the north bank of the Fox River in the heart of Appleton, Wisconsin sits a neighborhood. Originally the village of Grand Chute, the area remains separated from the rest of Appleton by the main business district to the north, Fox River to the south and two major thoroughfares to the east and west. Back in 1851 as pioneers were just arriving, a block of the village was set aside for county government. This act set in motion a variety of events over the next 150 years that resulted in the chipping away of the neighborhood in the name of expansion and progress. Buildings, parking lots and roadways consumed over fifty historic homes, careening ravines, boulevards and trees. Over the years, isolated protests fell on deaf ears.

Then came the fall of 1993....

As neighbors gathered at the Appleton Police station to discuss a safety issue, they learned that county government had plans to acquire and demolish five blocks of historic homes for courthouse parking expansion. In a very short period of time over 100 neighbors met and organized to stop destruction of the area now known as the "Old Third Ward." A steering committee was formed, a mission statement was written and everyone got to work. Subcommittees began to attack the situation from two basic sides-political and historical. On both fronts our greatest initial task appeared to be educating ourselves and the community on the history of the Old Third and the intentions of the county.

Politically we did the following:

- 1) submitted a petition protesting county parking plans.
- 2) established contacts and formed relationships and allies in city and county government, including the two city alderman representing the area. Our goals were to communicate our message and keep informed of plans involving the area.
- 3) sent representatives to multiple county and city meetings.
- 4) wrote letters and made calls to county supervisors expressing concerns for historic preservation.
- 5) brainstormed and submitted ideas for destruction alternatives.
- 6) wrote editorials for the local newspaper and appeared on local TV news programs in an attempt to educate politicians and citizens on the significance of the Old Third.
- 7) calculated property values to demonstrate loss of tax revenue through demolition.
- 8) made pumper stickers and window signs asking the public to

stop the actions of the county executive and "Save the Old Third Ward."

- 9) met individually with county supervisors, the Mayor of Appleton and county and city planners to express our views.
- 10) invited East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Committee representative to talk to our committee regarding long range plans for the area.
- 11) published a newsletter to keep neighbors informed.

Historically, though many of us lived in historic homes (the Old Third claims all four of Appleton's residences listed on the National Register of Historic Places) and knew the areas citizens were pioneers of Appleton, we had much to learn about individual homes and the significant contributions made by original and subsequent home owners. We wanted to save not only houses deemed "historically significant," but also the vital residential environment in which they thrive. Therefore we:

- 1) invited preservationists to speak to our group.
- 2) contacted the National Historical Trust for Preservation and visited the State Historical Society in Madison to investigate the means of nominating a property or district to the National Historic Register. They gave us all information on file regarding our neighborhood as researched by the East Central Planning Commission.
- 3) developed a building survey and distributed it to all residents of the area asking them to fill in as many blanks as possible on the history of their homes.
- 4) assigned block of homes to committee members to research in the local library. Our goal was to develop a walking tour map.
- 5) participated in a home tour sponsored by a local house museum (located in the Old Third) by opening four homes to the public.
- 6) offered historic information to the public on radio programs and in local publications.

By August of 1994 the group had met with a lawyer, drawn up by-laws and incorporated into the Old Third Ward Neighborhood Association, Inc.--Appleton's first incorporated neighborhood. Through 1994, 95 and 96 the Old Third became a recognized political presence in county and city government. We believe we projected a unified, intelligent and logical voice to the community and made a positive impact on Appleton's future. By 1997 we accomplished the following:

- 1) convinced city officials to alter the long range Downtown Comprehensive Plan to acknowledge and save key components of the neighborhood.
- 2) successfully submitted application for nomination to the "10

- most Endangered Property List" in Wisconsin. The neighborhood was named to this list March 8, 1994.
- 3) worked with West Prospect Avenue neighbors to stop street widening plans.
  - 4) lobbied for a local Historic Preservation Ordinance, participated in drafting the ordinance and bolstered support through the political process.
  - 5) stopped county administration plans to purchase two historic homes, thus preserving street landscape.
  - 6) received representation on a county-city-neighborhood Ad Hoc committee to resolve county parking and expansion needs with neighborhood needs.
  - 7) successfully nominated one of the most endangered homes to the National Register of Historic Places in the fall of 1995.

In June of 1995 we were given a grant from the Convention and Visitors Bureau to develop a walking tour map of the Old Third. Several of us worked over the next year and a half adding to previously gathered history. We spent hours researching old newspapers, government records, abstracts, Sanborn Fire Maps, census records, and city directories. After multiple revisions, the map, containing over 60 homes, 2 churches and various sites of interest, was published in time for the 1997 tourist season.

1997 was also the year the city granted the Old Third Ward permission to post signs at 5 locations identifying the "Historic Old Third Ward" to the citizens of Appleton and visitors.

Over three and one-half years our efforts to halt all further demolition were not entirely successful as 6 homes (2 historic) were lost to parking and building projects. But this was a far cry from the planned 5 blocks of homes. The county has put additional expansion plans and acquisition of property on hold for 10 years. Our alderman is working to turn future plans away from the Old Third.

#### **WHAT NEED WAS SERVED:**

All of our efforts, culminating in the publication of the walking tour map have:

- 1) provided a wake-up call to citizens by increasing public awareness of the history of Appleton and demonstrating the fragile existence between the old and new.
- 2) encouraged, by example, other neighborhoods to organize and fight for preservation.
- 3) preserved historic homes and the pioneer stories associated with them--discovered the roots of the city.

- 4) preserved a neighborhood.
- 5) encouraged people to look for alternatives to destruction.
- 6) begun to encourage the public to be responsible caretakers of our history so the next generation can experience architectural wonders.
- 7) demonstrated working with government towards a constructive plan.

#### **WHAT IF WE GET THE GRANT?**

During its short existence the Old Third has raised money through membership dues (as many as 95 individuals representing 56 households), solicitation of contributions, neighborhood rummage sale and note card sale. Our organization would use the Hometown Pride Award to:

- 1) continue historic research, add to our walking tour map, and republish the map.
- 2) continue to educate the public about the history of Appleton
- 3) continue the operations of the organization--newsletter publication, political interventions.
- 4) sponsor additional home tours. We would particularly like to open homes to the public for Wisconsin's Sesquicentennial in 1998.
- 5) nominate additional properties or districts to the National Register of Historic Places.

We dedicate all of our past and future accomplishments to the memory of our first Association President, Frank Council who passed away July 1997. His efforts and inspiration kept us going through all of the tough times.