

PRESERVING OUR PAST IN Praise OF BLOOMINGTON RESTORATIONS

BY Nancy Hiller | PHOTOGRAPHY BY Steve Raymer

Close your eyes and try to picture Bloomington without its historic buildings. No courthouse on the Square. No Buskirk-Chumley Theater. No Showers complex at City Hall. Now try to imagine the town without its picturesque old neighborhoods—the dignified homes of Elm Heights, the eclectic houses of Prospect Hill, the modest cottages built for railroad and factory workers on the Near West Side.

Can't do it, can you? Without its old buildings, both public and private, Bloomington just wouldn't be Bloomington. But historic Bloomington is no accident. Those buildings, many of which have come to symbolize what's best about our town, have been preserved through conscious civic decisions. No discussion of historic preservation in Indiana would be complete without recognizing the contributions of Bill and Gayle Cook, whose generosity has saved numerous properties in Bloomington and around the state. At the same time, the character of Bloomington's built environment has been quietly—and inestimably—affected by a grassroots organization, Bloomington Restorations, Incorporated, devoted for the past 34 years to preserving historic architecture from the humble to the grand.



By the late 1970s the Morgan House, at the corner of 10th Street and Walnut, was completely overgrown. A large hole in the roof exposed the interior to rain and snow, which had severely damaged plaster on the walls and ceiling. The front porch, not visible in this picture, was rotten and on the verge of collapse.



One Story

Like many other IU students in the 1960s, Guy Loftman routinely traveled by Greyhound bus between his hometown of Newark, Delaware, and Bloomington. Loftman, who later settled here, spent many hours in the Greyhound station waiting room, where he gazed through the windows at the intersection of 10th Street and Walnut.

An old house with elaborate wooden siding stood on the corner across the street to the east. "I remember looking out the window one day, waiting for the bus to go home for spring break, and seeing it," Loftman recalls. "It was the first time I had ever really looked at a building as an adult. I really saw the architecture. Over the years I would notice it from time to time. As I watched it deteriorate—the paint peeling, the porch collapsing, the windows cockeyed—I thought, 'If somebody doesn't do something, that place is going to be gone.'"

A few years later, he noticed a giant hole in the roof over the front entry hall, where a large section of the structure had simply caved in. "That's too bad," he thought. "That place is a goner."

Fortunately, Loftman was not the only one who'd had his eye on the once fine house. In the early 1970s there was considerable public disagreement regarding the best way for Bloomington to encourage downtown development. The prevailing ethos—not just here, but across the nation—was "out with the old, and in with the new." North Walnut, which had formerly been lined with stately homes, had been especially hard hit. The Morgan House looked likely to find its site in the crosshairs of a developer's transit.

Many area residents who appreciated historic buildings were concerned by the number of old houses and commercial and institutional structures being razed. While they wholeheartedly agreed that economic development was desirable, they questioned whether it really required the loss of so much historic architecture. The former Carnegie Library, a 1918 Beaux Arts building constructed of local limestone, had been proposed for demolition, its site to be used as a parking lot pending the requisition of funds for a modern structure to house government offices.

Connie and Guy Loftman have operated the Loftman Law Office on the ground floor of the Morgan House since 1984, when it was newly restored. The upstairs rooms are rented to other professionals.



In the reception area of the Morgan House, the original oak staircase, doors, trim, and walls have been restored.

(insets) The restored exterior stands in sharp contrast to an earlier view of the porch, circa 1981.



with cedar shingles, and the front porch was reconstructed, its new fretwork patterned on paint outlines visible on the original clapboard siding. Windows were restored, siding was repaired, and the house was painted in a simple Queen Anne palette of cream and buttery yellow, with black window sashes, following the original paint scheme discovered below the layers of white.

In 1984, Bloomington Restorations sold the property to Andrew Szakaly, who agreed to restore the interior. Guy Loftman, who by then had married his wife, Connie, leased the first-floor rooms for his law practice. In 1989, they purchased the property—which was especially fitting, not just in light of Loftman’s long interest in the house, but also because his father, Rick, a mechanical engineer, had been one of the volunteers who helped with the restoration. The Loftman Law Office has been there ever since.

Even the courthouse, which has since become iconic of Bloomington and Monroe County, was the subject of extended, heated public hearings amid a series of proposals to demolish and replace it.

One result of those tumultuous times was the establishment of the city’s Historic Buildings and Districts Study Committee (later renamed the Historic Preservation Commission) in 1974. That was followed in 1976 by the formation of Bloomington Restorations, Inc., a private 501(c)(3) nonprofit foundation for historic preservation in Monroe County. The city’s committee and this private organization both fulfilled a need for standing advocacy and fund management on behalf of historic preservation.

Within its first few years, the organization’s members, working together with other groups and dedicated individuals, helped save the Carnegie Library (now the Monroe County History Center). They also campaigned strenuously to help save the courthouse, which the county commissioners finally voted to restore in 1983.

Using Community Development Block Grant funds from the City of Bloomington, and with the assurance that loans would be available from the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana (now Indiana Landmarks), Bloomington Restorations established a fund that would

enable the purchase, exterior restoration, and resale of endangered properties. As it happened, the first project would be the Morgan House—the building at the corner of 10th Street and Walnut that Guy Loftman had so long admired.

When Bloomington Restorations bought the house in 1981, it was about a century old. Despite the large section of missing roof, the house’s elderly owner was still living there, along with numerous dogs and cats. She had lived there since she was a little girl and for her, the house, whatever its condition, was home. But because of the hole in the roof, the state of the interior was fast catching up to that of the increasingly derelict outside. Piles of debris from the fallen roof lay on the floor, where they were regularly soaked by rain and snow. Water had seriously damaged broad swaths of wall and ceiling, dislodging platter-sized sections of plaster, the decorative wallpaper still attached. The staircase had become unsafe, and the homeowner’s pets had caused their own types of damage. The sale of her home allowed the elderly woman to move to a habitable house, where she lived many years.

The restoration was done by hired tradespersons, with help from Bloomington Restorations members who volunteered their labor and expertise. The roof was repaired and covered

More Stories

In the years following that first project, Bloomington Restorations has helped save 81 properties in Bloomington and around Monroe County, including the home of onetime state governor Paris Dunning, located at the intersection of West 3rd and Jackson streets. Duncan Campbell, director of the graduate program in historic preservation at Ball State University, points out that while this number by itself may not sound impressive, the relatively small amounts of Bloomington Restorations’ loan funds invested have translated into millions of dollars in property value, and the cumulative effect of those restorations has been substantial.

Prospect Hill is one example. Many of the picturesque houses on North Rogers and West 3rd streets were restored to their present glory because of pioneering projects initiated by Bill Sturbaum. A high school teacher, Sturbaum used loans from the revolving fund when commercial banks would not lend money on those structures because of their dilapidated condition. Sturbaum’s early successes gave others the confidence to invest in their own homes, and as a result Prospect Hill changed from a rundown eyesore to an attractive, vibrant neighborhood. Inspired by this transformation, residents of other neighborhoods, including McDoel Gardens, Bryan Park, and Maple Heights, have completed their own restorations, thereby multiplying Bloomington Restorations’ influence many times over.

In more than three decades, Bloomington Restorations

has helped save some of Bloomington’s most beloved historic landmarks—not just the courthouse, the Paris Dunning residence, and the Monroe County History Center, but the Princess Theatre and the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center among others. By encouraging individuals to restore their homes and revitalize their neighborhoods, it has demonstrated that historic preservation can also have economic benefits. Bloomington Restorations is considered a model around the state—the envy of many small- to medium-size cities. Yet here in Bloomington, its influence on the built environment has dramatically outstripped its public recognition.

Until now. To celebrate its 50th anniversary, Indiana Landmarks, the nation’s largest state organization devoted to historic preservation, chose to honor one local nonprofit preservation organization with a prize for lifetime achievement. “Bloomington Restorations, with its enviable record of continuous accomplishment, emerged the winner,” said Indiana Landmarks President Marsh Davis in a formal statement citing the group’s advocacy on behalf of endangered landmarks, its success in demonstrating the reuse potential of seemingly unredeemable properties, and its salutary impact on downtown neighborhoods. “From a preservation perspective,” Davis concluded, “Bloomington Restorations does it all.”

Saving Small Homes

Among the organization’s most enterprising strategies is the Affordable Housing Program, which restores homes many consider too modest and too rundown to be worth preserving. The program not only keeps these simple structures out of the landfill, it also helps low-income residents of Bloomington and Monroe County buy homes of their own.

Jacqueline Daniels first heard of the program in 2006 through the City of Bloomington’s Home Buyer’s Club (bloomington.in.gov/homebuyersclub) when Bloomington Restorations Executive Director Steve Wyatt gave a presentation. A licensed clinical social worker and a would-be homeowner with an appreciation for old houses, she was thrilled at the prospect of buying an affordable house that would be rehabilitated before she moved in.

At that time, Bloomington Restorations had several houses available—some in Bloomington, others in Stinesville, 14 miles to the northwest. Daniels was not put off by the idea of a half-hour commute, and when she



Two homes on West 7th Street restored by Bloomington Restorations’ Affordable Housing Program.



first visited Stinesville, she found its village character a positive delight. "I felt I was driving into a storybook!"

That, however, was before she saw the house. It needed a lot of work. Undaunted, Daniels signed the papers. Once her application had been accepted, she drove back to Stinesville and spent a day helping Wyatt and Bloomington Restorations board members with the preliminary clean-up that had to be done before the contractor arrived.

In the course of the restoration, the house was re-roofed, rewired, re-plumbed, and fitted with a furnace and central air. When the interior was gutted to remove plaster that was beyond repair, the walls and attic were insulated. Every piece of original woodwork that could be reused, was, including the pair of ornately carved front doors, the interior trim, and the old pine floors. The original windows were fully restored and fitted with storm windows, which bring their insulation value up to that of many replacement windows available today. Finally, the exterior was painted in colors Daniels chose, amber with purple trim, and the interior was outfitted with Energy Star appliances. She moved into the house in 2008 where she now lives with her husband Billy, whom she married this past spring, and his 9-year-old son Bailey.

Since Bloomington Restorations' first Affordable Housing project in 1998, the program has restored 21 homes in Bloomington, Ellettsville, and Stinesville and built three new houses with appropriate historic detail in older neighborhoods. Thanks to subsidies from the City of Bloomington's Housing and



Neighborhood Development Department and the Indiana Housing & Community Development Authority, the organization has been able to offer homes for sale in the \$43,500 to \$94,900 range. The program is open to buyers with household incomes at or below 80 percent of the Monroe County median.

(top) Jacqueline Daniels and her husband Billy, with 9-year-old son Bailey and basset hound Elvis, in front of their restored home in Stinesville.

(inset) Before restoration, the original chimney had fallen through the roof onto the kitchen floor, allowing major weather damage to the house's interior.

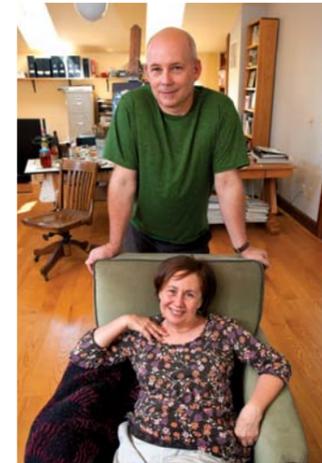
(bottom) Daniels styled her kitchen after an old-fashioned diner, complete with vintage table and chairs. Kurt Wheeler was the general contractor for the restoration.

House Tours

Bloomington Restorations' most widely known program is its annual tour of historic homes. Every tour takes a specific architectural perspective as its organizing theme; in recent years, these have ranged from Mid-Century Modern ranches to the bungalows of Bryan Park, the homes of Prospect Hill, and the limestone mansions of Elm Heights. Though some of the tour homes have been restored through Bloomington Restorations' programs, most were restored by others; the featured homes simply provide a way to educate the public about the character of old houses and what it can be like to live in one.

"Not only can you be nosy and poke around in other people's houses," says Bloomington Restorations' president, Jan Sorby, "the tours show possibilities for what people can do with older homes." Possibilities that Bloomington Restorations has made reality over the past 34 years by saving many of our finest buildings—large and small. For that, all of Bloomington is thankful.

For more information visit bloomingtonrestorations.org. ✱



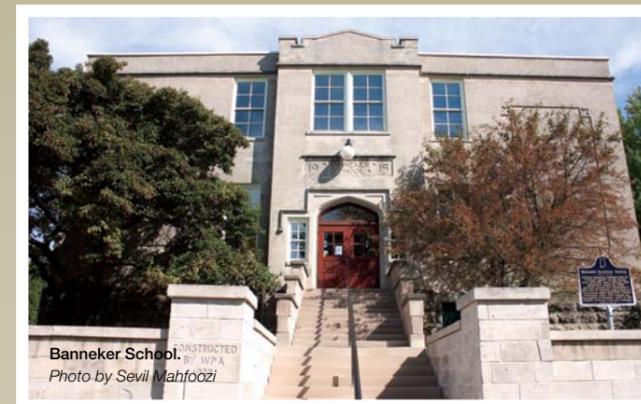
(bottom) The home of Jan Sorby and Jon Lawrence is one of many older properties that have been included in Bloomington Restorations' annual tour of homes.

(left) Jan and Jon hired builder Michael Shoaf to add a second-story studio where Jan, a graphic designer, spends her days working.

(below left) The kitchen, with cabinets by Tim Graber, was opened up to the dining room by builder Jim Wright-Kaiser.



What's so great about being old?



Banneker School. PHOTO BY SEVIL MAHFOOZI

Part of what's special about old buildings is their distinctness compared with more recent architecture. In terms of character, old buildings, like old people, have an advantage, simply by virtue of having survived so long. "Old buildings fill your senses," says Talisha Coppock, executive

director of Downtown Bloomington, Inc. "They have a texture you can feel, detailing that you can see, and sometimes even a distinct smell." Often they bear the peculiar marks of the families they've sheltered or the businesses they've housed, which make them unique.

The vibrancy of downtown Bloomington is directly attributable to the strong sense of place fostered by well-preserved historic architecture. "Older buildings help set apart downtown from other communities," Coppock notes.

A fine example is the Banneker School, a limestone structure on West 7th Street built in 1915 to provide a school for African American children. The building was named for Benjamin Banneker, a free African American who, in 1791, assisted with the first survey of what is now Washington, D.C. By the mid-20th century, the structure was no longer used as a school, and in 1955 it was renamed the West Side Community Center. In 1994, its original name was returned, and over several years the city's Parks & Recreation Department restored the building, thereby making a commitment to remember for all time the history of racial segregation and the struggle for justice embodied in the school's structure.