

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HERITAGE HILL ASSOCIATION
AND THE HERITAGE HILL FOUNDATION

In the Spring of 1968, four residents of the area which is now known as the Heritage Hill Historic District, sat down over coffee at 18 Prospect Avenue, Southeast (a site which might qualify for designation as our own "Hysterical Landmark") to discuss the problems facing residents and property owners in the neighborhood. Pat and Ed Shea, Linda DeJong and Izzy Warnock were concerned about the bad press which constantly reflected upon the area as an undesirable place to live and about the lack of mortgage money available to those families who wished to purchase homes in the area.

They decided to attempt to organize a small, but effective neighborhood "public relations" organization which would spread the word that this was a good place to live. The four of them tied up the telephone lines calling everyone they knew who lived or owned property in the neighborhood. All were invited to an organizational meeting on June 24, 1968 and encouraged to bring friends. One hundred and twenty-five people attended this meeting which was held in the WOODland Room at WOOD-TV.

That night the Heritage Hill Association officially came into being, although it was not incorporated as a non-profit charitable trust until November 19, 1968. Prior to the meeting on June 24th, the "founding mothers and fathers" met several times to discuss the potential of this proposed fledgling organization and one of the first needs was a name. In the living room at 245 Morris Avenue, Southeast Wendy Warnock christened the neighborhood and the group with the name Heritage Hill.

On June 24th, those people present elected the following temporary officers and members of the Board of Directors: President, Linda DeJong; Vice President, Wendell Warnock; Secretary, Pat Shea; Treasurer, Mrs. Ray Wagemaker; Ed Shea, David Soet, Rich Connel, Ethel Hansma, Clay Palmer, Edward McCobb, Estelle Phillips, Isabelle Warnock, Frank DeJong, Robert Shedd, John Cary, Mary Jane Morris and Geoffrey Gillis. Following incorporation of the organization, the temporary board and officers became the first official Board of Directors and officers. Frank DeJong and Rich Connel resigned in order that the Board would have the proper number of members (15) as stipulated in the By-Laws.

At the first annual meeting of the Association in 1969, the following people were elected to the Board of Directors for terms of either one, two or three years: Linda DeJong, John Logie, Robert Shedd, Pat Shea, Ed Shea, Geoffrey Gillis, Ethel Hansma, Edward McCobb, Nancy Taleen, David Soet, John Cary, Barbara Roelofs, Izzy Warnock, Wendy Warnock and Estelle Phillips. Linda DeJong was elected President, Wendy Warnock, Vice President, Pat Shea, Secretary and Robert Shedd, Treasurer.

Point of information: the logo for the Heritage Hill Association was designed by Patrick Murphy following a class project and competition at Kendall School of Design. Although chronologically out of order, the fact that the Heritage Hill Foundation's logo (which is used on almost all Heritage Hill graphics) was designed by Dale Ford is of special importance.

After the Association had been organized, its members discovered that there were immediate threats to the success of its planned "public relations program". The shadow of the wrecking ball (operated by private and governmental bodies and individuals) was threatening many of the homes of Heritage Hill. So the Association did some basic research (with the assistance of the Planning Department) and presented to the City Commission a request that a moratorium on all building and demolition in the area (temporary boundaries had been drawn which closely follow the present ones) be put into effect. The City Commission was sympathetic to the "cause" and the moratorium went into effect. Any request for demolition or alteration of any structure originally designed as a one or two-family dwelling had to be brought before the Zoning Board of Appeals. At that time there was no State enabling legislation which allowed for the establishment of local Historic Preservation ordinances and commissions.

The moratorium was to remain in effect until the area had been inventoried and evaluated by a panel of architects and historians. The Association applied to the National Trust for Historic Preservation for a grant to assist in the preparation of this inventory and received \$1,500.00. Carl Feiss and Russell Wright were retained to coordinate the entire process and with the assistance of Ethel Hansma and a "crew" of volunteers every structure in the area was photographed (photos by the Planning Department) and researched both historically and architecturally. The final results were then evaluated by a panel of architects, called by and including Messrs. Feiss and Wright, and a panel of local historians chaired by W. D. Frankforter.

The resulting report, the Feiss Report, along with documentation required was submitted to the State and the District was placed on the State Register of Historic Places. Subsequently it was submitted to the Department of the Interior and on March 11, 1971, the Heritage Hill Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The inventory cost the Association approximately \$8,000.00.

Where did the money come from? The Association held a "Happening" in the spring of 1969 where home improvement products were sold and memberships solicited (the Association received a percentage of the gross sales from the merchants represented at the event which was held in the parking lot of WOOD-TV). The first home tour was held in May of 1969 as another fund raiser and money was borrowed to pay the balance.

While the moratorium was in existence, there were several "lively" disputes which came before the Zoning Board. One involved the proposed demolition of the Mable Perkins House for a parking lot (this is now the residence of Kate and Jay Cragwell). Another revolved around the proposed demolition of the Inmen House (now the offices of Steenwyk & Thrall Architects) which radio station WGRD wished to sell to the Masonic Temple for parking purposes. In both instances, the Association was successful in convincing the Zoning Board that there were alternative buyers who would preserve the homes.

In one instance, involving the First Netherlands Reformed Church on Crescent Street, Northeast, the Zoning Board granted permission for demolition of several homes and the Association went to court. Because the Association was financially unable to come up with the funds necessary to post bonds and for other legal reasons, the Association lost its case. We carried it to the State Court of Appeals, but the homes were demolished in the meantime. This case did, however, establish the right of the Association to bring suit in matters which effect the District.

While all of this was going on, another battle was being fought, the battle of the College Park Urban Renewal Project consumed a monumental amount of time and effort. At the time that the Heritage Hill Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the City and the Board of Education were moving ahead with plans to totally demolish all of the structures located in the blocks of Lafayette Avenue, Northeast, Prospect Avenue, Northeast up to Central High School and Fountain Elementary School, between Lyon Street and Fountain Street, Northeast. The Association had lost the war against the demolition of homes for the construction of the Skill Center, but that took place before the District was on the National Register.

Under the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, no federal funds can be used to the detriment of any site, landmark or district listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Obviously, the Association believed that the demolition of three blocks of homes would impact negatively on the District. So, the Association became the first organization in the country to evoke the review process provided in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. This meant that the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, established by this Act, had to be afforded an opportunity to comment with regard to the proposed project.

A compliance conference was held in Grand Rapids in June, 1971. Representatives of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the State Historic Preservation Officer, representatives of the City, Robert Muth and Milton Miller from the Board of Education, and John Logie, Barbara Roelofs and Linda DeJong from the Association met. The outcome was that the proposed plans presented by the City and the Board of

Education were rejected and the parties were given 90 days to reach a compromise or lose the federal funds for the project. A compromise was reached. Selected homes would be preserved by moving them, others would be demolished (along the south side of Lyon Street between Prospect and College Avenues, Northeast. Following the loss of old City Hall, this was a major victory for Grand Rapids preservationists.

Concurrently, the State passed enabling legislation which allowed cities to create their own Historic Preservation ordinances in August, 1970, Public Act 169. Naturally, Heritage Hill urged the City to proceed with all possible haste to write and adopt a local ordinance. A committee, chaired by Linda DeJong, composed of representatives of the City and Association members, including John Logie and David Soet, was appointed to draft this ordinance. This ordinance known as the Historic Preservation Ordinance was adopted by the City Commission on February 2, 1972 and took effect on April 23, 1973, replacing the "moratorium", when Heritage Hill was designated as the first Grand Rapids Historic District.

One of the most emphasized points in the "Feiss Report" was that if Heritage Hill was to make a successful and continuing effort on behalf of historic preservation, it would have to go into the business of preservation on a full-time basis. It may also be noted that there was a dire need for funds and something had to be done to attract private donors who would make substantial gifts. On April 21, 1971, the Heritage Hill Foundation was organized. It was subsequently granted a 501 (c) (3) tax status which means that any gift to the organization is tax deductible. The incorporators were Linda DeJong, Barbara Roelofs, Robert Shedd, Nancy Taleen and John Logie. These five people also made up the first Board of Trustees. The officers were Linda DeJong, President, John Logie, Secretary and Robert Shedd, Treasurer.

On November 22, 1971 it was determined that effective January 1, 1972, the Heritage Hill Foundation would employ Linda DeJong as its Executive Director and open a full-time office. This necessitated that Linda DeJong resign as President of both the Heritage Hill Association and the Foundation. On January, 2, 1972 the Heritage Hill Foundation became the first organization in the state to open an office and employ a full-time Executive Director. The office was located at 21 Union Avenue, Southeast for approximately six months. In the summer of 1972, Mr. Ed DeVries offered free office space to the Foundation and the office moved to 300 East Fulton Street. On January 2, 1973 another major step forward was taken when Joyce Makinen joined the staff of the Foundation as Assistant to the Director.

The Heritage Hill Office, currently located at 126 College Avenue, Southeast, handles, with the assistance of a staff of volunteer workers, the business of both the Heritage Hill Association and the Heritage Hill Foundation.

The Association is an action-oriented neighborhood organization which assumes an active role in the concerns of the residents of Heritage Hill. It is involved in zoning, housing, preservation, planning, and a wide variety of activities which impact directly on the quality of life in the Heritage Hill Historic District. Its most important asset is its membership. It is the members who provide the Association with its "blout" and who are vital to the success of the programs which it undertakes.

The Foundation is more directly concerned with the "fine points" of historic preservation and the rehabilitation of historic homes in the District. It undertakes the major preservation/rehabilitation projects such as the renovation of derelict homes which it is able to acquire. Streetscape rehabilitation was another project.

Working together the two organizations are able to serve the residents and property owners in Heritage Hill. With the Association involving itself with the immediate day-to-day type of problems and the Foundation undertaking more long range type of projects, the future for Heritage Hill continues to look very promising.