

A Situated History of the Nathan Burnham House



by Beth Covitt

Nichols Arboretum

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This report is based on a slide lecture presented at the James D. Reader Jr. Urban Environmental Education Center at the Nichols Arboretum on March 27, 2001. The opportunity to conduct this research about the Nathan Burnham House was made possible through my receiving the Nanette R. LaCross Memorial Award in 2000.

When I started putting this report together, I thought a lot about what to relate about the Burnham house and how to tell its story in an interesting way. It was a little bit difficult because this was just a regular house. It wasn't the governor's house; there were no battles fought in the backyard, and there were no peace treaties signed at the dining room table. Instead, it's kind of a quiet story. That's why I decided to call it a situated history of the house. I wasn't able to uncover the complete story of the many individuals who lived in the house. With a few exceptions, it's mostly just their names and occupations. However, by drawing together both historical and inferred information about the house as well as accompanying stories about architecture, people, and objects of Wall Street, Lower Town, and Ann Arbor, I've created what I hope is a coherent story of the 160 years that the Burnham House stood on Wall Street. However, as you can see from this photo (Ill. 1), the history of the Burnham House is not limited entirely to Wall Street. But that part of the story comes much later.



Illustration 1: House on Move

The Nathan Burnham House was built around 1837 on lots 10 and 11 on Wall Street in Lower Town, Ann Arbor (Reade and Wineberg, 1998). Lower Town is the name given to the part of Ann Arbor just north of the Huron River, and the story of Lower Town can't be told without telling the story of Anson Brown, the original developer of Lower Town (Duff, 1962).

Like so many of the early Michigan settlers, Anson Brown was drawn west from New York State via the Erie Canal. The Erie Canal opened in 1825 and connected the eastern shore of Lake Erie at Buffalo with the Upper Hudson River at Albany. The canal made transportation of goods including timber, minerals, and grains much quicker and cheaper. Anson Brown, his father, and his brother Daniel had all worked on the Erie Canal. Soon after it opened, Daniel Brown bought a boat and began work transporting goods on the canal. In 1826, he visited Detroit and heard about the valley of the Huron River to the west. After visiting, he decided to settle in Ann Arbor and encouraged his brother Anson to do the same. When Anson arrived, he and Daniel opened a general store located on Main Street in Ann Arbor. They remained partners for four years (Stephenson, 1927).

Then, around 1830 Anson Brown bought the land north of the river from Andrew Nowland, built a dam across the Huron, and erected a gristmill (Stephenson, 1927). He had great plans for Ann Arbor north of the Huron River and quickly started putting them into action.

His plans included both commercial and residential development, and like any good developer, he had a flattering name ready for this section of town. He planned to call it "Ann Arbor on the Huron" (Reade and Wineberg, 1998). 1832 was probably the high point of Brown's plans. During this year he had the Lower Town area surveyed and platted by J.F. Stratton, Lower Town was annexed into Ann Arbor, Brown moved the post office to Lower Town, and he built a large commercial building on Broadway (Stephenson, 1927). O. W. Stephenson's (1927) book about the first one hundred years of Ann Arbor's history records that Lower Town was annexed into Ann Arbor on June 29, 1832, only four days after the Village of Ann Arbor was originally incorporated.

Brown had several reasons for believing that Lower Town would be a good place for the business center of Ann Arbor. First, Lower Town was right next to the river, which was a ready source of power. And second, Lower Town lay at the confluence of several Native American trails that had turned into emigration and stage routes (Murphy, 1997). Indeed, early on it seemed as though he might be right. At the time that it was annexed into the village of Ann Arbor, Lower Town was actually growing at a more rapid rate than the upper or hill area that had first been settled by John Allen and Elisha Rumsey (Stephenson, 1927). There was a somewhat competitive relationship between Brown and the folks south of the river, and he rather derisively called them “hilltoppers” (Stephenson, 1927). During the first decade of Ann Arbor settlement, it was uncertain whether the area that is now “downtown,” or Lower Town would become the business center for Ann Arbor.

As part of his work to make Lower Town the center of Ann Arbor, Brown wanted the post office to be in Lower Town. He was appointed postmaster of Ann Arbor in 1832 and promptly moved the post office north of the river. The “hilltoppers,” were very unhappy with this location and refused to come to the new post office. Instead, they would send message boys across the river to pick up their mail (Stephenson, 1927). Brown seems to have been intent on keeping the post office in Lower Town. To forward his case, he maintained a correspondence with Lucius Lyon, his Territorial Representative in Washington, in which he often denigrated the hilltoppers and the comparatively little development in their portion of town compared with Lower Town. It also seems that Brown was perhaps not a highly moral person. In one letter to Lyon, he mentions that he tried to influence Governor Porter to support his plans during, “the consumption of a few bottles of champaign at the Washtenaw Coffee House” (Stephenson, 1927). Stephenson (1927) also mentions that, while he was postmaster, Brown read all of the in and out-going mail to keep abreast of events in Ann Arbor.

In addition to locating the post office in Lower Town in 1832, Anson Brown also built the Anson Brown Building on Broadway in this year (Ill. 2). This building is now the oldest surviving commercial structure in Ann Arbor. The building style derives from 18th century Dutch influence that is evident in the parapet end walls. The walls are brick and the building

was framed in hand-hewn oak timber (Reade and Wineberg, 1998). Currently, the building houses the Saint Vincent DePaul store and several apartments.



Illustration 2: Anson Brown Building from LOC Archives

Another suggestion of Brown’s big plans for Lower Town is evident in his naming several of the streets after prominent New York City streets – Wall Street, Broadway and Maiden Lane are three examples.

In planning his “Ann Arbor on the Huron,” Brown took advantage of the confluence of Native American trails that had turned into emigration and stage routes. Using the meeting area of the trails, he organized the Lower Town village into lots of various sizes. Wall Street, signified by its name and the design of the lots, a mixture of commercial on the south and residential on the north, was meant to be a focus of the newly platted village (Murphy, 1997). In 1834, Anson Brown, his wife Desire, and her brother Edward Fuller began selling the lots on Wall Street and throughout Lower Town (Reade and Wineberg, 1998).

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your perspective, Anson Brown’s dream of making Lower Town the center of Ann Arbor came to an abrupt end in 1834 when he died of cholera (Stephenson, 1927). Some information indicates that cholera may have traveled to Ann

Arbor via the Erie Canal to Detroit and then across to Ann Arbor in tainted oysters (Wright, 2001).

Although some Ann Arbor historians attribute the lack of growth in Lower Town to Anson Brown's death, citing the fact that he was the major impetus for development in this area, others suggest that the true cause of sluggish growth in Lower Town throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries was the shift of transportation activity to the south of the river with the improvement of the old Chicago Road, and later the arrival of the Michigan Central Railroad in 1839 (Murphy, 1997).

Soon after Anson Brown died of cholera, his wife, Desire married Caleb Ormsby and by 1836 the new firm, now called Ormsby and Fuller, continued selling house lots to settlers streaming into Michigan (Reade and Wineberg, 1998).

Nathan Burnham purchased lots 10 and 11 from Fuller and Ormsby in June of 1837 for \$600. When he sold the property back to them two years later, he received \$1000, which suggests that he had probably built a house on the lots in the interim (Reade and Wineberg, 1998). Adjusted for inflation from 1838 to 2000 dollars, the \$400 that we think Nathan Burnham spent to build the house was worth about \$6,450 in year 2000 currency.

“Burnham built the house in an old ‘New England’ style with a high brick foundation, two fireplaces at each end, four rooms on each floor, a central hallway, and an unusual three-part window on the second floor” (Reade and Wineberg, 1998). The structure was built of locally made salmon-colored bricks, which were somewhat brittle. Although it's impossible to tell for sure because the house was altered so many times, Mary Culver suggests that the room arrangement may have been that of the “New England Large,” which was characterized by two rooms across the front of the house and three rooms across the back on each floor (Culver, 2001).

The architecture reflects the Greek Revival Style that was popular in the United States between about 1820 and 1860 (Hamlin, 1944). Greek Revival architecture is considered to be a

post revolutionary rejection of colonial architecture (Hamlin, 1944) and it's also thought of as the only thoroughly American architecture. This style represents a classic revival of the ancient architecture of Greece and Rome with an emphasis on Greek form (Major, 1926). Thomas Jefferson is generally regarded to be the father of the Classic Revival in America. He drew upon Greece and Rome for inspiration in both architecture and government. Greek Revival Architecture in the United States is often divided into four geographical regions, with Michigan being part of the Old Northwest group (Major, 1926).

In America, the Greek Revival became the nearly universal style of architecture and was adapted to all different conditions and places – people of all different means and using many varied local materials implemented Greek Revival architecture in highly diverse climates and settings (Major, 1926).

One element of the Burnham House that particularly identifies the house as Greek Revival is the flat-headed triple window on the second floor (Ill. 3). According to the architectural historian Howard Major, these windows came into vogue in 1810 (Major, 1926) and were so particular to the style that they can be used as a diagnostic for Greek Revival architecture. This is one of only two such windows in Washtenaw County (Culver, 1995).

The glass that's in the window has the wavy lines that suggest it's very old and perhaps even original. Also, the muntins on the double sash are so narrow and slender that they also suggest that the window is a very old feature of the house (Culver, 1995). Muntins are strips of material, often wood, that hold the pieces of window glass into place. In this photo that was taken during the 1968 renovation, you can also see the hole that shows where the original stairs for the house had been (Ill. 3).



Illustration 3: Flat-headed Triple Window

There have been so many changes made to the house since it was built in 1837, that it's difficult to know exactly what the house looked like in its original form and what various forms it took as it was modified over the years. In a narrated video that was recorded in 1995, Mary Culver, who is Ann Arbor's historic preservation coordinator, provided insight into some of the details of the house that were probably original or at least very early.

The size of the windows on the house is interesting. The windows on the first floor in the front of the house, which would have opened into a front parlor, are longer than the upstairs and back windows. This is probably because the parlor would have been considered a formal room worthy of longer, and more expensive windows (Culver, 1995).

In pictures of the back of the house you can see the ghosting marks of an old wing that used to extend into the backyard area (Ills. 4 & 5). It was a one or one and a half story structure that could have been a porch but that was probably a kitchen wing.

From looking at illustrations 4 and 5, you can see that the wing stretched all the way across the back of the house. Mary Culver suggested that it might have been built at the same time as the house. It is still shown in the 1899 footprint of the house. However, it had been removed by the time that Dr. Mark Hildebrandt bought the house in 1968 (Hildebrandt, 2000).



Illustration. 4: Back of house with ghosting mark



Illustration 5: Ghosting mark visible to left of stairway addition

The reason why Mary Culver thinks the wing was original is because it would have made sense for the family to have a separate kitchen wing in the back of the house. By keeping the

kitchen and the kitchen stove in a section separate from the main house, the family would be more likely to get out of the house and survive if a fire broke out in the kitchen (Culver, 2001).

The two chimneys on either side of the house are probably original as well. Mary Culver told me that the narrowness of the chimneys (each is only one and one half bricks deep) suggests that the house was probably originally heated with cast iron stoves rather than open fireplaces. At the time the house was built, cast iron stoves were both common and also a status symbol. They were the leading edge of heating technology when the Old Northwest was settled and a great many of them were manufactured in Albany and Troy (Culver, 2001). After the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, it would have been relatively easy for settlers moving from New York to Michigan to bring the stoves with them. However, Dr. Hildebrandt maintains that the house was originally a fireplace house. He suggests that stove houses were more likely to have their chimney in the center of the house rather than on either side (Hildebrandt, 2001)

Even in 1995, before the house was moved to the Arboretum, most of it had been radically altered from its original state. Many of these changes have to be inferred from a few old photos and various clues left in the house itself. Evidently, when Mary Culver made her video in 1995, the basement still contained many architectural remnants from the house. Tracey Miller, who researched the house for an Eastern Michigan University Historic Preservation Program class also uncovered some of the changes by going to the assessor's office. For instance, she found that owner Frank Wright installed the first phone in the house in 1942 and that steam heat was added to the house in 1967 (Miller, 1997). A distinct record of many of the other changes, however, is hard to come by.

After 1968 the record becomes much more clear. 1968 is when Dr. Mark Hildebrandt bought the house and converted it into two doctors' offices. Before he bought the house, it had been used for apartments (Hildebrandt, 2001). In her video, Mary Culver suggests that the house had been divided into at least four separate apartments (Culver, 1995). When Dr. Hildebrandt purchased the house, he completed a large-scale renovation that allowed him to use the house for doctors' offices. He hired architect Lyndon Pettys to complete the renovation. Lyndon Pettys was a classicist architect who worked for Ralph Hammet. Dr. Hildebrandt told me that other

designs by Pettys include the 5-sided senior housing on W. Main Street and the addition to the Women's City Club, but the only building he mentioned that I recognized was the LeDog building on Liberty (Hildebrandt, 2000).

One major change Dr. Hildebrandt made was adding an addition to the back of the building to house a stairway. This addition made it easier for two doctors to have separate offices in the building. Before this addition, the stairs had been in the center of the house. We saw the opening for the stairway in the 1968 picture of the second floor renovation (Ill. 3). And we also know the stairs use to be in the center of the house because in the 1995 video, Mary Culver recorded a picture in the basement of an original bearing wall made out of masonry that shows the ghost of stair steps coming down from the rear of the first floor.

Inside on the first and second floors, Dr. Hildebrandt changed the configuration of the rooms to accommodate reception and waiting areas, laboratories, examining rooms, and offices (Culver, 1995). Although he replaced the window and door surrounds after reconfiguring the space, the new surrounds he had made were historically appropriate. Dr. Hildebrandt had the surrounds made to resemble surrounds he had found and recovered from an old house in the area (Hildebrandt, 2001). Although in her 1995 video, Mary Culver suggests that the old door and window surrounds with ears and mitred corners found in the basement likely came from the Burnham House, they had actually been found elsewhere by Dr. Hildebrandt and only stored in the basement of the Burnham House (Hildebrandt, 2001).

When Dr. Hildebrandt bought the house there were at least two fireplaces present. One of them on the second floor was probably very old and possibly even original (Ill. 6). It had a simple surround similar to the treatments on the windows and doors. This second floor fireplace was removed during the 1968 renovation.



Illustration 6: Second floor fireplace

A second fireplace surround was retained during the renovation and this is the one we still have on the first floor (Ill. 7). This fireplace surround probably dates from between 1915 and 1930. It's a Colonial revival type fireplace that could have been ordered from a woodworking catalog like Curtis. At the time, it was very common for people to order architectural features and even complete houses from catalogs (Culver, 2001).



Illustration 7: First floor fireplace

Dr. Hildebrandt also had a lot of work done in the basement of the house. The original house supports seem to have consisted of large bearing wall columns made out of masonry holding up horizontal hand hewn oak beams that went across the ceiling of the basement. Probably out of concern for the stability of the house, Dr. Hildebrandt, installed on each side of the house a vertical metal lift post topped by a modern I-beam. Old hand hewn support beams with mortice and tenon joints that had been removed were still present in the basement when the 1995 video was recorded (Culver, 1995).

Probably the most interesting structural evolution of the house is associated with the front entranceway. The earliest information that I found about the house shows a front porch. This is evident in the 1899 plat of Lower Town showing the footprint of the house in which this porch, as well as the back addition and the smokehouse, are evident. The porch can also be seen in the earliest photo of the house.

This photo (Ill. 8) comes from Cornelia Corselius' (1909) booklet called *Some Early Ann Arbor Homes*. Mary Culver thinks this could have been an original porch for several reasons. First, because the house faced south, it would likely have had a porch to block the sun from shining directly into the front parlors. Second, the hipped roof of the porch in the photo is typical of Greek Revival architecture (Culver, 2001). A hipped roof is a roof that slopes down to the eaves on all four sides. The attenuated columns in the photo were also common in Greek Revival architecture (Major, 1926).



Illustration 8: Corselius Photo of House Circa 1909 (from Bentley Collection)

However, Dr. Hildebrandt and Susan Wineberg believe the porch was not original and did not match with the overall Greek Revival style of the House (Hildebrandt, 2001; Wineberg, 2001). According to Susan Wineberg, the porch was likely built anywhere between the 1860s and the 1890s and it would be very rare and unlikely for a house built in the 1830s to have a porch (Wineberg, 2001).

This 1968 photo (Ill. 9) shows the same porch attached to the house when Dr. Hildebrandt purchased it. Although railings have been added and the base is solid rather than latticed as it is in the Corselius photo, the porch, its roof and the columns appear to be the same. I'm not sure if there's any way to know for sure, however, whether or not the porch was original. When Dr. Hildebrandt renovated the house, he removed the porch and replaced it with a classic entrance portico.



Illustration 9: House in 1968

Lyndon Pettys made the columns for the new entryway out of hollow wood in the Ionic style. Ionic columns are characterized by scroll-like volutes at the tops of the columns. When built, the columns had ventilation holes at the top and the bottom to help keep them dry. Dr. Hildebrandt also had Pettys install a modern door based on the Greek Revival style (Hildebrandt, 2000) (Ill. 10). The usual form of the Greek Revival doorway includes sidelights and often, but not always, a transom on top (Major, 1926). Sidelights are the long narrow windows on either side of a door. The door that was installed in 1968 came from a builder's supply company. This new entranceway in the Greek Revival style fronted the house between 1968 and the mid-1970s (Hildebrandt, 2000).



Illustration 10: Entrance with modern door

Then, in 1975, the house on 1116 Broadway was torn down (Ill. 11). 1116 Broadway was another Greek Revival structure located around the corner from the Burnham House (Hildebrandt, 2000). The 1116 Broadway house had been chosen for the American Historical Building Survey on the recommendation of UM Architecture Dean Emil Lorch around 1934 or 1935 (Culver, 2001). R.V. Chadwick took these photos in the 1930s, probably for survey documentation purposes (Lorch, 1891-1963).



Illustration 11: 1116 Broadway in 1930s (Bentley Collection)

1116 Broadway had a classic Greek Revival entranceway (Ill. 12). Doric order pilasters with flat panels immediately flank the doorway. On either side of these pilasters are sidelights. The muntins in these sidelights are probably original although the pieces of glass in the sidelights had to be periodically replaced.



Illustration 12: 1116 Broadway Entryway (Bentley Collection)

Framing the sidelights is another set of larger Doric order pilasters and above the doorway is an entablature pediment with a cornice across the top, then a frieze, architrave, and dentil ornamentation. This is a classic example of a Greek Revival entryway and is similar to the entryway fronting the Cobblestone Farm, which was built in 1844 (Culver, 2001). It's also similar to the doorway of the museum house which used to stand on Wall Street and which has since been moved to Main. The museum house, which was built in the 1830s, had a five-panel door whereas the door of the Broadway House had two panels.

When he noticed that the 1116 Broadway house was being torn down (Ill. 13), Dr. Hildebrandt asked the Calvert Brothers Company that was doing the demolition if he could salvage the entryway. They told him that he could get it himself and so in exchange for a case of beer, Dr. Hildebrandt and his son-in-law Milo spent a Sunday removing the doorway (Hildebrandt, 2000).



Illustration 13: 1116 Broadway Being Demolished

They stripped off the shingles on each side, revealing the post and beam framing. First they removed the outer and upper portion of the doorway. They took out the doorway and sidelights. Dr. Hildebrandt then had the entranceway restored and installed at 947 Wall. The entablature pediment, however, would not fit because there wasn't enough room in between the floors of the house. Thus, a smaller version was constructed, and the original pediment was placed in the basement of the house and was still there for the 1995 video. Somewhere between 1995 and the moving of the house, however, the entablature and the other old architectural elements that had been stored there were taken, perhaps by the house movers.

Another great feature associated with the Burnham House is a smokehouse that was likely constructed at the same time as the house (Ill. 14). This small cobblestone and brick quoin structure was located behind the house and luckily survived up until the 1998 move. The cobblestone materials used to build the smokehouse reflect the fact that a source of these stones is a prerequisite for this type of structure. The smokehouse was probably built with cobblestones

from the riverbed of the nearby Huron River. The brick quoins delineate the corners of the structure. Brick quoins are seen on many cobblestone houses in Washtenaw County (Culver, 2001). Quoins were used both as a decorative element as well as to make sure that the cobbles stayed where they belong.



Illustration 14: Smokehouse

This smokehouse is thought to be the oldest surviving smokehouse in Washtenaw County (Culver, 2001). A New York architect named Carl Schmidt, who studied and wrote a book about cobblestone architecture in New York State and Michigan, noted a similar smokehouse in Lenawee County north of Adrian (Schmidt, 1944). He believed that the Lenawee county smokehouse was unique in that the mortar drums created a square frame around each of the cobblestones. Although cobblestone architecture was fairly common in Washtenaw County, evidently, this squared frame cobblestone treatment was very rare. Although Schmidt believed that this style was unique to the Lenawee county smokehouse, we also see it here in the Burnham House smokehouse (Culver, 2001). The smokehouse was in use as late as 65 years ago.

When University of Michigan archaeology professor, Dr. Wright conducted an excavation of the area around the Burnham House in 1996, he talked to Mr. Joseph Tarnawczyk who grew up in the neighborhood and remembered the smokehouse being used sometime in the mid 1930s (Wright, 1996). When he purchased the house in 1968, Dr. Hildebrandt recognized

the unique value of the smokehouse. While renovating the main house, he also replaced the roof of the smokehouse with cedar shakes, which are a historically appropriate treatment (Culver, 1995). Fortunately, when work was completed to save the Burnham House and move it to the Nichols Arboretum, the smokehouse was also saved and moved to the Arboretum.

As I mentioned earlier, I wasn't able to uncover a great deal of information about the various people who lived in the house over the years. Much of the information to be found is just names and occupations recorded in old Ann Arbor city directories. From these we know that most of the people who lived in the Burnham House were working class laborers. Among others who lived in the house there were students, a railroad ticket agent, laborers, machinists, woodworkers, a railroad baggage master, butchers, teamsters, a barber, a police officer, carpenters, a chauffer, a laundry machine operator, a die-maker, a florist at Nielsen's, a fireman, a watchman, a bartender, and a janitor (Miller, 1997). Women's names were often recorded as the spouse of a resident, but only a few of the women had occupations recorded.

I found little information about the original owner, Nathan Burnham, concerning his life either before or after building his house on Wall Street. For instance, it's uncertain why he sold the land and house back to Ormsby and Fuller so soon after building the house. We do know that he took over Fuller and Ormsby's sawmill along with a man named Wyatt. This is evident from an 1837 Michigan Argus advertisement for the Burnham and Wyatt mill and from a few other sources including an 1837 State Journal (Culver, 2001). Burnham also owned land that he gave to the City of Ann Arbor for a cemetery. This land, which became the first public cemetery in Ann Arbor, is located at the site where the Power Center currently stands (Culver, 2001).

A few other residents and or owners worth note include Dr. Mark Hildebrandt, Bent Nielsen, Dr. Edward Pierce, and Harry Bennet. I've already talked a bit about Dr. Hildebrandt and the great amount of work that he did renovating the house. Bent Nielsen, who owned Nielsen's Florist, owned the house from 1957 until 1961 (Miller, 1997), and probably rented it out as apartments. Dr. Pierce, who is a former Mayor of Ann Arbor, bought the house from Dr. Hildebrandt in 1987 and also used it as a doctor's office.

When I met with Mary Culver, she also told me about one other interesting person named Harry Bennett who lived in the house. Harry Bennett probably lived in the house for a short time around 1894 when he was a young child. His stepfather, Robert Winslow, was on the faculty of the University of Michigan Engineering School and worked as a molder. Harry Bennett did not achieve notoriety until later in life, but it's sort of a neat connection that he did live in the house. Bennett was Henry Ford's hatchet man and did his nasty work for him. Bennett worked for Ford between about 1915 and 1948 (Culver, 2001).

Early on, Bennett didn't seem like much of a hatchet man as he went to art school in Detroit and liked to draw cartoons. However, he joined the Navy to toughen up and eventually found a niche in boxing. He was introduced to Henry Ford in New York City and Ford asked him if he could shoot straight. Because Bennett had a marksman's rating, Ford hired him on. Later in life, Harry Bennett came back to live in Ann Arbor and built Bennett's castle near the Huron River. Although I've never seen the house, I've had some friends who have lived in what used to be his stables and what are now converted into rental units. He had the stables constructed to look like log cabins, but they are actually made out of cement. He also had streetlights made to look like trees (Culver, 2001). Bennett is definitely one of the more eccentric people to have lived in the Burnham House.

Although they weren't residents, some other folks who have had a connection to the house are Dr. Henry Wright and his students and colleagues. Dr. Wright is a professor of archaeology at the University and, along with some local residents and graduate students, he conducted several excavations around the house in 1996. The group excavated next to the smokehouse, along the rear of the house, and in a filled-in cistern behind the house. The findings from the excavations provide a great deal of insight into the lives of the people who lived in and around the Burnham House.

Professor Wright suggests that the cistern that they found was probably constructed after the house was built, perhaps in the 1840s, to catch rainwater from the roof. It was lined with a thin layer of concrete. At some point, it was filled in, and the fill included a variety of items

such as bones from deer, cows, pigs, chickens, and a large fish, which might have been a sturgeon (Rzepka, 1998).

The excavation units also revealed a much longer history of the Lower Town area going all the way back to prehistoric times. At the bottom of some excavation units they found white clay that was likely deposited 14,000 years ago when a glacial lake covered the Huron River Valley. About three feet from the surface, Wright and his coworkers discovered a line of black. This is what remains of the woods that were burned off before the house was built. The soil excavation also revealed that the site had never been plowed for crops. Before the house was built, the site had been covered with forest (Rzepka, 1998).

Above the burn line there is a layer of dirt dumped by the workers who dug the basement of the house. Finally, the topmost level is about a foot of dirt and dust. This layer is dark tinged from carbon and coal dust deposited in the backyard by coal furnaces or stoves (Rzepka, 1998).

Professor Wright had expected that the excavation would reveal evidence of a rough pioneer life. However, he and his students found many signs of affluence including glass windows and Staffordshire china. This indicates that the early residents of the Burnham House were not poor (Rzepka, 1998).

Dr. Wright (2001) has loaned a few of the artifacts to the Arboretum so that we can display them to our visitors.



(Ill. 15: Teacup shard) This is a fragment of hand-painted white ware probably made in England in the 1830s or 1840s. This shard, which came from a teacup, was discarded in the front yard of the Burnham House. It's probably an example of pottery referred to as "Gaudy Dutch China."



(Ill. 16: Staffordshire plate shard) Here's a fragment of Staffordshire red transfer print plate from England made in the 1840s or 1850s and broken and discarded in the back yard near the smokehouse.



(Ill. 17: Toys) Toys found at the site include this porcelain child's toy and glass marble. Children playing around the Burnham House during the late 19th century probably lost these. The tiny doll still has its painted dark hair and rosy cheeks. However, Dr. Wright suggested that it's possible the small doll may actually be a part of a crèche. Further research concerning this

possibility is needed. Dr. Wright suggested that the historians at Greenfield Village might know more about this topic.



(Ill. 18: Bank token) This is an 1844 Canadian Bank Token found during the excavations. It's not a piece of legal government tender, but rather a token minted by a bank in Montreal. The bank illustrated on the coin happens to be a Greek Revival structure! Coins were rare in frontier areas and bank tokens such as this would have been accepted in Michigan.



(Ill. 19: Deer jaw) This deer jaw provides insight into the diet of the people in the house. This was found in the fill in the original cistern. It tells us that the early Lower Town people still lived close enough to undeveloped areas to be able to dine on Michigan's wild fauna.

Before moving on to the house move and the Burnham House's place in the Arboretum, I wanted to touch on the story of Wall Street. It's true that after Anson Brown's death, Lower Town did not become the business center of Ann Arbor, but that's not to say that nothing happened on Wall Street during the 19th and 20th centuries. A lot of what I learned about Wall

Street comes from a report completed by students in the historic preservation program at EMU in Fall 1997. Their report, titled, *A Portrait of Wall Street*, describes different topics including Wall Street as a historic transportation nexus, various houses on Wall Street, schools in Lower Town, and the African American community in Lower Town.

In terms of transportation, the part that I found particularly interesting was the discussion of Huron River bridges. The first bridge across the Huron at Broadway was built in 1828. It was partly destroyed by high water in the summer of 1860 and was only repaired rather than replaced at that time. In 1881 the Smith Bridge Company was awarded a contract to build new bridges over the river. The “mill” bridge was made of steel and iron, crossed the river at Broadway, and cost \$5,608. The “lower” bridge was made of wood, crossed the river at the east end of Wall Street, and cost \$1,515. On August 6, 1909, the old Wall Street Bridge collapsed and in the process, injured five people (Ill. 20). A new cement bridge was then built by the Hermann Tapp Construction Company of Fort Wayne, Indiana for \$9,100.



Illustration 20: The Wall Street Bridge Collapsed in 1909

Wall Street was also the site of several schools over the course of Lower Town’s history. In 1851, George Sedgwick purchased lots 6, 7, and 8 on Wall Street from the Auditor General after they went delinquent on taxes in 1849. These lots were directly across Wall Street from the Burnham House. George Sedgwick was Ann Arbor’s first mayor after the city was incorporated in 1851. He served as mayor from 1851 until 1855. In 1856 Sedgwick gave the land that he owned on Wall Street to the Ann Arbor School District #9. The following year, in 1857, a two-story brick school building was built. The first teachers were Mr. Holden and Mrs. Mudge. The

school fronted on Wall Street, but was situated toward the rear of the lot, near Canal Street. This is visible on the 1899 plat of Lower Town. The school was constructed with a front pavilion and stairway leading to the rectangular building, which had a belfry topped off with a flagpole.

In 1861, the school became the Fifth Ward School and a part of the Ann Arbor city school system when Lower Town became the Fifth Ward of Ann Arbor (History of Washtenaw County, p. 930). The Fifth Ward School was racially and culturally integrated, and had many African American and immigrant students (Ill. 21).

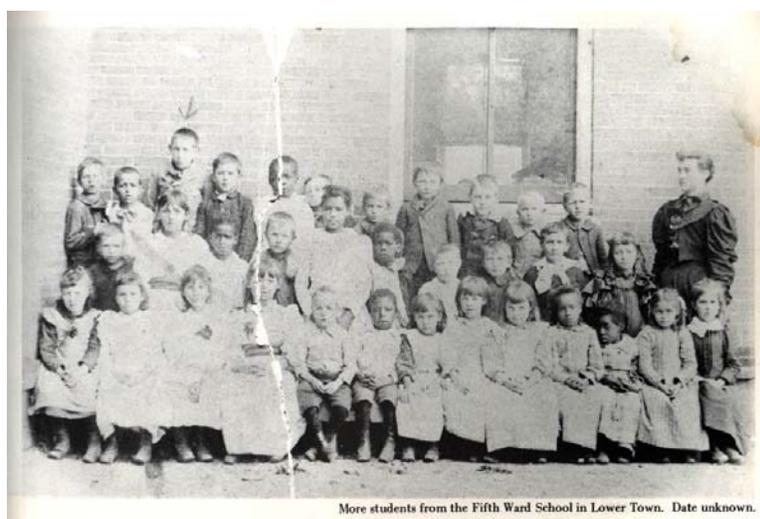


Illustration 21: Class from Fifth Ward School

The school and its building remained unchanged until some time in the early 1890s, when a small one-story frame addition was added to the rear of the building. This structure can be seen as the backdrop in some photos of the school.

In 1909, the old building was replaced with a new red brick structure with a Spanish tile roof (Ill. 22). The new school also fronted on Wall Street, but was located more toward the front of the lot. The building had a raised basement and a single story. The school was named the Patrick Donovan School in honor of a prominent local businessman who had lived on Maiden Lane. Donovan opened a dry goods and grocery store on Broadway in 1843. He passed away sometime between 1885 and 1888.



Illustration 22: Donovan School Building

In the early 1930s the residents of the Fifth Ward petitioned the Ann Arbor school board for a bigger school because the Donovan School didn't have an auditorium, a gymnasium, or a principal's office. Many felt they had been ignored by the city for years because of the Fifth Ward's "other side of the tracks" reputation. However, in 1939, the Northside Elementary School was built in the Barton Hills section of the Fifth Ward and the Donovan School was closed.

The old school remained vacant for a few years and then became the home of a children's museum for two years. After that the Full Gospel assembly moved in. Finally, in 1946, the building was purchased by Harry S. Hawkins and became the home of the Advertiser's Publishing Company for the next thirty-six years. The company printed novelty materials such as calendars, pens, and rulers. They also had various household items on which to print company names and slogans for advertising purposes. Evidently, one of their more interesting items was a 1950s meat saw. Harry Hawkins' left the building and the land to the University in his will. He died in 1982. In 1984, the University tore down the Donovan School building to build part of the parking lot for the Kellogg Eye Center.

One interesting chapter of the EMU Wall Street report was written by Karen Simpson (1997) and focuses on the African American Community in Lower Town. Simpson, in turn, drew on a 1962 report by Donald Deskins on African American Settlement in Ann Arbor. Deskins found that Wall Street was one of the oldest areas of continuous African American occupancy in Ann Arbor with residents there between the 1850's and the 1960's. Although the percentage of African American residents on Wall Street was less than 1 percent in the 1850s, by 1960 over 75% of Wall Street residents were African American. Dr. Hildebrandt told me that before he bought the house, there were four African American families living in the apartments into which the house was divided.

According to the EMU historic preservation students' research, some of the earliest African American residents of Wall Street arrived or had relatives who arrived in Ann Arbor via the Underground Railroad. Other early African American families with descendants who lived on Wall Street, such as the Richard Zebbs family, arrived in the 1880s as freed men and women. The student researchers also found that the earliest African American resident on Wall Street was a woman who arrived in 1847. This is about 15 years earlier than other sources had found.

Deskins reported that the crystallization of the African American community on Wall Street began in earnest in the 1860s. Family ties were among the major motivating factors that drew other African Americans to Ann Arbor. As with immigrant groups, African Americans who had established themselves here wrote to tell their relatives of the opportunities and encouraged them to come here to live. If relatives were slaves in the south, information was conveyed through Underground Railroad conductors that Ann Arbor was relatively safe to travel through in order to get to Canada.

Evidence of a solidified nineteenth century African American community in Ann Arbor does exist. In 1865 the *Michigan Argus*, Ann Arbor's early newspaper, reported that a large celebration for the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation was held at an Ann Arbor church and that almost all of the African American community showed up to pray and rejoice. African Americans in Ann Arbor also established a separate church in town.

Between the 1870s and the 1880s, African Americans on Wall Street were listed as laborers, farmers, dressmakers, and barbers. Black women were home and landowners. By the fall of 1915, when the boll weevils had destroyed much of the South's cotton crop, southern African Americans began to ride the trains north to cities they felt offered better opportunities including Chicago, Detroit, and Ann Arbor.

By 1920, there was a good deal of migration to the North by African Americans. This influx of what in Southeast Michigan was considered to be unskilled and semiskilled labor created a need for inexpensive rental housing. Eventually, racial and class restrictions in Ann Arbor, combined with the economic need for low rent housing drew and kept new African American migrants on Wall Street.

Like immigrant groups who largely moved into immigrant communities in the United States, African Americans tended to move where other people who were also African American resided. Yet, more so than other groups, they were also restricted to certain areas by laws and social conventions. Real estate dealers of the 1930s estimated that rent in areas that accepted African Americans ranged between twenty and thirty dollars. Rent on Wall Street ranked at the bottom of this scale. The neighborhood began to fill with what now would be called the working poor. Not everyone welcomed this. Some white property owners on Wall Street placed restrictions on their deeds barring the sale of their property to African Americans.

By the 1960s Wall Street was still a low rent area for largely African American poor. Wall Street, with dilapidated housing that had been persistently overlooked by the city, was described by civil rights and social workers as typical of residential areas labelled "ghetto." In the early 1960s, real estate developers and the University decided to raze many of the houses on Wall Street to make way for luxury apartments and the University Medical Center. This prompted complaints from civil rights groups to the city's Human Relations Commission concerning low rent housing available to African Americans. While home owners profited from the sale of their property, the predominantly Black renters suffered by having to move to other more expensive areas within Ann Arbor. Within a short period of time, University and

apartment building development ended the over one hundred year history of an African American community on Wall Street.

Of course, the development of Wall Street by the University affected both people and buildings. Most of the historic houses on the street have been razed, and in 1995 when Dr. Pierce retired and closed his practice, the Burnham House was also slated to be demolished.

The Burnham House, along with 72 other properties, had been added to the list of historic buildings in Ann Arbor in November 1994. However, according to Mary Culver, even this listing does not necessarily protect buildings. The University has a history of buying historic properties, using them for a short time as office space, and then demolishing them, regardless of whether or not they are designated as significant by the city (Culver, 2001; Wright, 2001). In 1994, the University wanted the site of the house to build additional parking for the medical center across the street.

A variety of alternatives for protecting the house were considered, but eventually through a lot of dedicated effort, a few individuals worked to have the Burnham House adopted by the Arboretum as an education center. Some of the folks who contributed to the effort to save the house included Sally Bund, Mary Culver, Liz Elling, Harry Morton, Jan Onder, Inger Schultz, and Susan Wineberg. Jan Onder was the person who actually called the Arb and encouraged us to take the House after reading about its imminent destruction in an Ann Arbor News article prompted by Susan Wineberg (Niyoy, 1995). The support of the Reader family and the Wilkinson Foundation made it possible for the Arb to both move and renovate the house for its new incarnation as an environmental education center. In addition, the University contributed the amount of money it would have spent on demolishing the house towards the cost of the move. Even after the Arb decided to take the house, there were still barriers to overcome before the house could be moved to its new location. For instance, there was contention over the question of where the house should be located.

One spot identified for the move was at the Arboretum entrance on Geddes Avenue. However, this proposed location was not made known until the evening before the Board of

Regents was scheduled to vote on the proposal. Residents along Geddes were very upset. They felt that an environmental education center would change the character of their residential area and perhaps block the view from Geddes Avenue. This site was abandoned and eventually the current site on land leased from Forest Hill Cemetery was chosen and negotiated.

Then, of course, the move itself was an exciting event. The general contractor for the renovation was J. C. Beal and Dietz Movers completed the actual move of the house. Before the move, the stairway addition in the back and the front entranceway were removed, the house had to be separated from its foundation, everything breakable had to be secured, and the house had to be lifted off the foundation. The house was very slowly raised with hydraulic lifts.

Then, the lifts themselves were lifted as the house went up on blocks and the lifts became the platforms the axles were attached to for moving the house. Before the move they also took down some power lines and telephone lines and traffic lights along the route. The main part of the move from Wall Street to the Washington Heights entrance of the Arb took place on February 8, 1999 and required a platform with about 30 wheels as well as a few extra truck tires. The only casualty of the move was one burst tire. The whole process went very slowly because the platform had to be re-leveled every time the slope of the road changed.

There was a lot of concern that the house would fall apart on the way because it is made of local brick with softer clay. Fortunately, it arrived without a crack! By the end of the day the Dietz movers were exhausted. They returned on February 11, 1998 and spent several hours positioning the house in the right spot. When the house arrived at its new location, it was actually placed up on supports. Then the basement and foundation were filled in underneath. It would have been much more difficult to build the new foundation and basement first and then try to shift the house on top of them. The smokehouse wasn't moved until the summer of 1998.

The stairway addition was replaced with a different back addition which now goes all the way across the back of the house and houses an elevator as well as stairs. The front entranceway was moved separately and later altered and replaced. The entranceway at the new location had to extend further from the house to accommodate a wheel chair access path that will be built

during a later phase of the Gateway Garden installation. Then it took over a year for the house to be completed. It was necessary to completely rebuild the interior for its new use as an environmental education center, office space for Arboretum staff, and student caretaker housing.

To find an appropriate paint color for the outside of the house we went to Cobblestone farm and adopted the color they had used for their trim. They had used spectrographic analysis of paint remnants at Cobblestone farm to determine what a historically appropriate color would look like. The creamy yellow color of the Burnham House reflects the white lead and linseed oil that were used to make paint through a labor-intensive process of the mid 1800s. Paint makers of this time would start with a block of white lead and pulverize it into powder. Then they suspended it in linseed oil and it would come out that creamy color. They had to use many layers of paint to achieve a sufficient level of coverage of the bricks and wood. Although our paint wasn't made through the same process, the color reflects what the house may have looked like when it was first built.

I moved into the house in June of 1999, which was just before the Grand Opening occurred. The Grand Opening took place in conjunction with Arbfest in 1999. Even though it is no longer in its historic location on Wall Street, it's nice to know that the Burnham House will be safe from demolition for a while longer. The Arb's lease of the land from the cemetery is for 50 years and ends in 2047, so we know we're safe until at least then, and hopefully for much longer!

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