PRESERVATION RACINE, INC.

NEWSLETTER
WINTER 2014

RACINE'S CONNECTION TO THE CHRISTMAS TREE SHIP

Oh Papa, come look! Oh Mama, can you see?
I've been waiting so long for this to come to be.
Oh Papa, come look! Oh Mama, can you see?
Here comes the Christmas Ship with all the Christmas trees!

Lee Murdoch, *The Christmas Tree Ship*

Captain Herman Scheunemann's Christmas Tree Ship John Mee with his second ship Geo L. Wrenn docked in Chicago, 1909. Photo: Chicago History Museum

Many of us are familiar with the story of the ill-fated schooner *Rouse Simmons*, popularly known as "The Christmas Tree Ship" that sank in Lake Michigan during a fierce storm just off Two Rivers Point, Wisconsin on November 23, 1912. Captained by Herman Schuenemann, the aged schooner was carrying a load of ten thousand Christmas trees from Michigan's Upper Peninsula to Chicago. The *Simmons* disappeared without a trace taking her captain and crew with her. Herman Schuenemann, a first generation German-American, had a cheerful disposition, a booming voice and a talent for marketing. Since 1887, Captain Schuenemann had made 18 voyages, the last two with the *Rouse Simmons*, hauling Christmas trees from Michigan to Chicago. The voyages were risky given the unpredictability of fall weather on Lake Michigan, but there was money to be made in the Christmas tree trade and Schuenemann was entrepreneurial and confident. To Chicagoans, many of whom were European immigrants, Schuenemann epitomized the best of their old world traditions and America's new world of opportunity. His arrival in Chicago, usually around Thanksgiving, was a cause for celebration as it signaled the start of the Christmas season. He sailed up the Chicago River, slipped into a berth along the pier by the Clark Street Bridge, strung electric lights from sail to sail and hung up his sign proclaiming "Christmas Tees for Sale—My Prices are the Lowest" Thousands of trees, along with wreaths and garlands made by his wife and three daughters, were sold from the deck not only to whole-salers, but also to the public who he warmly welcomed aboard. The Christmas Tree Ship was a Chicago icon and her master much revered in his role as "Captain Santa." When the *Rouse Simmons* went down many in Chicago felt as if Christmas would never be the same as "an element of the 'old fashioned' in Chicago's Christmas had disappeared along with the ship." Over the years, the story of Captain Schuenemann and his Christmas Ship has become an enduring legend inspiring books, songs, poems, paintings and a successful Broadway musical called *The Christmas Schooner*. But, the first chapter in the story of the

"Christmas Tree Ship" is often overlooked. The very first Christmas tree ship on record sailed 36 years earlier in 1876, its destination…Racine.

The story begins with August Schuenemann who was born in 1853 to Frederick & Louise Schuenemann, German immigrants who settled in Ahnapee, Wisconsin (now Algoma) on the shores of Lake Michigan, eager for the opportunity to start a farm in the middle of virgin wilderness. Sadly, their dream was interrupted by the Civil War into which Frederick was drafted in 1864. After contracting a serious bacterial infection that led to partial blindness, he returned to Ahnapee unable to do the hard physical labor that farming required. August was 12 and new baby brother Herman, born in 1865, was less than a year old when the family was forced to sell their land and move into town. Although Ahnapee was founded in 1834 it wasn't until the early 1850s when several men, who came to Ahnapee by way of Racine including Abraham Hall, Henry Harkins, William Henry and David Youngs, permanently settled the town. The harbor built in 1856 at the mouth of the Wolf River, served as the heart of the community and soon Ahnapee was a bustling port town with sawmills, fish shanties, store-houses and docks. Ahnapee benefitted from the age of sail power which reached its peak on Lake Michigan in 1868 with more than 1800 sailing vessels populating the lake. The dominant boat was the sturdy schooner, a wooden, flat bottomed vessel, most commonly with two masts, built to haul heavy loads in and out of shallow harbors up and down the coast of Lake Michigan. Their main cargo was lumber, shingles and stone which fed the high demand for building materials in growing urban areas such as Chicago and Milwaukee. The schooners were run by men known as "short-haul sailors." They were not professional sailors with formal training and licenses, but rather those who learned their skills from an early age, on board boats owned by family or neighbors. They became captains whenever the boat's controlling owner thought they were experienced enough to be given command. Dozens of towns on the coasts of Wisconsin, Michigan and Illinois were home to short-haul sailors who spent their entire careers on Lake Michigan. They were individual entrepreneurs who were in charge of everything having to do with their boat from maintenance to negotiating shipping contracts.

In 1873, 20-year old August Schuenemann, found himself among the brotherhood of the short-haul sailors, when Captain Johnny Doak hired him as crew for his scow-schooner, the *Ella Doak.*

Captain Herman Scheunemann with W. L. Vanaman (left) and Mr. Colberg (right), Chicago, 1909 Photo: Chicago History Museum

Although Johnny lived in Ahnapee he often sailed out of Racine. Captain Doak was driven and while other captains pulled their vessels out of the water for at least four winter months, he kept the Ella Doak sailing. In December 1871 the *Racine Weekly Journal* observed, "The Ella Doak is the only vessel that never furls her wings…all seasons are alike to her." As a member of Captain Doak's crew, August Schuenemann not only learned the basics of sailing and the business of short-haul, but he also absorbed Doak's qualities of self-reliance and steadiness of nerve. In 1875, Captain Doak bought an old, hard-used schooner the *William H. Hinsdale* and asked Schuenemann to be a member of its three-man crew.

In the years after the Civil War, large numbers of northern European immigrants settled in cities at the south end of Lake Michigan including Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha and Chicago seeking new lives, but unwilling to leave traditions of their old lives behind. As a result, a niche market began to develop for short-haul sailors willing to risk the treacherous waters on Lake Michigan in November and December. Immigrants, who valued the traditions of Christmas, began clamoring for Christmas trees especially in the Midwest where large populations of Germans had settled. As the middle class grew, more and more families were bringing trees into their homes to become a focal point of the holidays. Electric lights and glass ornaments replaced candles and dried fruit and gifts were becoming more elaborate and more expected. Christmas was developing into an industry and the short-haul sailors were happy to capitalize on it. Once dockside the trees could be wholesaled to merchants who would sell them to local retailers including grocery stores, coal yards, candy stores and department stores.

In the early years of the Christmas tree trade, the short-haul sailors of Ahnapee had a distinct advantage. The forests of Kewaunee and Door County regions in Wisconsin, later known as "the Christmas Tree Coast" offered a seemingly endless supply of trees in all sizes, smaller ones for homes, larger ones for churches and hospitals and giants for city squares and department stores such as Marshall Fields. The first published report of schooners hauling Christmas trees appears in the *Ahnapee Record* on December 7, 1876. The paper reported that the town had sent two vessels south with Christmas trees on board. The scow-schooner *Lady Ellen* was destined for Chicago but her captain, John McDonald, found the tree market glutted when he arrived. The other ship was the *William H. Hinsdale,* owned by Captain Johnny Doak, which transported 1300 trees to Racine where they were sold from the *Hinsdale's* deck in Racine's harbor. History indicates that August Schuenemann was likely on board as crew, giving him the distinction of being the first Schuenemann to deliver Christmas trees by ship and Racine the distinction of being the first city to receive them! Soon after, August Schuenemann bought the *Hinsdale* from Johnny Doak and would go on to command eight more Christmas tree voyages earning the name "Christmas Tree Schuenemann."

August Schuenemann made his final Christmas tree run in 1898 when he traveled to Sturgeon Bay to purchase not only a load of trees but also a vessel in which to haul them. For $200 he bought the *S. Thal*, a 31-year old flat- bottomed schooner that was in poor repair and unequipped for travel on Lake Michigan in November. The *Thal* made it as far as Glencoe, Illinois where, on November 9, a violent storm blew the vessel onto a sandbar and it broke apart in the heavy waves. Captain August Schuenemann and two crew members were lost. In 1898, the Schuenemann Christmas Tree Ship was not the icon that it would be 14 years later when the *Rouse Simmons* was lost and its sinking received no special attention. However the tragedy, which deeply affected the Schuenemann family, served as an impetus for younger brother Herman to transform their small family business into one that would dominate the Christmas tree trade in Chicago for years to come. Although there is no official record of how many Christmas tree ships plied their trade on Lake Michigan, newspaper searches have identified 91 trips made by vessels between 1876 and 1920. Together the Schuenemann brothers either made, or arranged to be made, 26 of the 91 known Christmas tree voyages on Lake Michigan, cornering the market not only in volume but with their spirit.

Carrie Bergs

Much of the research for this article was obtained from Fred Neuschel's book *Lives and Legends of the Christmas Tree Ships* (2007) and the book *The Historic Christmas Tree Ship* by Rochelle Pennington (2004), both which I highly recommend for further reading. There is also a wealth of corroborating information on-line if one is willing to search for it.

HE PLAYED HIS PART

Don Rintz, 80, passed away on September 9, 2014. Historian, preservationist and author, his enthusiasm for all things Racine benefited his neighborhood and the city he adopted in midlife. Born in Chicago, Don grew up there exploring the city and exercising his curiosity about its history and culture. Probably, his love of architecture, especially that of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, was founded there. After a stint in the Army, he came to Milwaukee to attend Marquette University, achieving a BA in 1955. Later, he earned a doctorate from the University of Wisconsin. Married in 1963, he and his family moved in 1969 to what would become the Southside Historic District of Racine when he accepted the post of Professor of Speech and Drama at UW-Parkside.

Upon retirement, he was able to indulge his interests and he joined the Preservation Racine newsletter staff in 1982, serving until 2005. Oh, he could form a beautiful sentence. His work was always carefully researched, precise and immensely readable. His newsletter articles were diverse from "Caroling in Rochester - 1843" to "Wright In Your Own Backyard." For years, he researched and wrote text for PR's annual historic tours. Our Century Building program, begun in 1988 and continuing, was Don's brainchild. He served as our vice president from 1987 to 1989 and as president from 1989 to 1991.

Don's work in conjunction with the Racine Landmarks Preservation Commission, written under contract with the city and the commission, included researching and preparing nominations to the National Register for the Old Main Street and Sixth Street Districts. He also wrote the text for the RLPC's tour guides for the Southside, Old Main, Sixth Street, and Frank Lloyd Wright and Prairie School Architecture. His interest in Racine's northside cream brick workers' cottages led him to research and prepare "Workers' Cottages in Racine, Wisconsin, 1860-1914."

Don always said he wasn't going to throw himself in front of a bulldozer to save an historic building, however he did everything but. In 1985, when PR moved the Walker House from 845 Lake Avenue to 406 Sixteenth Street, he volunteered to stay in the house overnight to protect it from damage until we were able to find someone else to stay there until renovation was complete. In 1989, when the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad Depot on State Street was threatened with demolition, he and other members of an ad hoc committee traveled to the railroad company's offices in Chicago to discuss preservation of the building.

The closest he did come to a bulldozer was in 1996, when a developer purchased the DeKoven Center and Lake Oaks with plans to build a 40-unit housing complex on the DeKoven property. Don felt strongly that the DeKoven buildings are the most important structures in Racine and must

be preserved in their current setting. He became a member of the DeKoven Cultural Center Board that was formed to prevent the development and to try to purchase the property, preserve it intact and operate it as a cultural center. The group was not able to purchase the property but it did prevent the development, which gave the DeKoven Foundation time to work out a plan to buy back the property from the developer.

Longtime PR members and friends will remember Don as a tall, lanky man, hair dark and too long, with a booming and eloquent voice---a passionate, strident voice that could, sometimes, drive his audience around the bend. I think we will forgive him that small shortcoming and consider the huge contribution he made in his lifetime to our organization and to the city he loved. We will remember him as a gifted storyteller who often showed up to work our annual historic tour in a sports jacket with a PR sweatshirt underneath. His example inspires us all.

Jim and Roberta Fiene and Mary Whitman

CENTURY BUILDINGS

On May 4, 2015 Preservation Racine will host its twenty-eighth annual presentation of Century Building Certificates in honor of National Preservation Month and Wisconsin Historic and Archaeology Month. The Century Building Committee looks for nominations of buildings that are at least one hundred years old, well maintained or restored and located in the city or county of Racine.

If you would like to nominate a building, please contact the Century Building Committee Co-chairmen, Carrie Bergs, at pipersgrove@milwpc.com or 878-1609 or Jacki Mekemson, at jaxson@ameritech.net or 939-6300. Mark your calendars for this special celebration.

A WALK IN THEIR SHOES

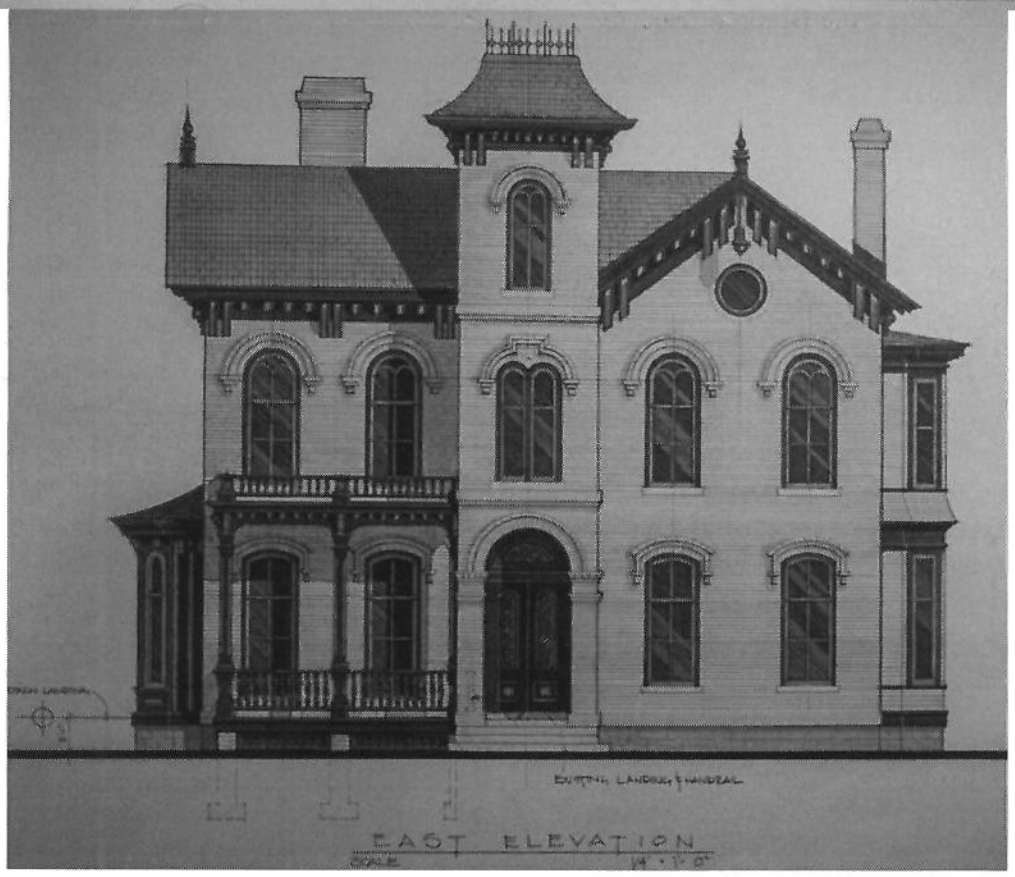
The November 3, 2014 membership meeting was held at 1110 South Main Street in the Henry C. Miller house. To quote from the H. Russell Zimmermann *The Heritage Guidebook*... "Henry was the son of Joseph Miller, who built his mansion next door. This imposing frame dwelling blends Georgian details with the then-popular Classical Revival style. The plans were drawn by Racine architects Guilbert and Funston. While most homes of this style and vintage were all frame construction, here is an unusual variation where the first floor is made of brick, with artificial quoins, and the upper floors are frame." Zimmermann attributed the date to 1899.

Members and guests who were fortunate to attend the meeting were treated visually to the splendor of the restored staircase and we gained an appreciation for what is involved in such a major renovation project. Peg and Lou Larson are the current owners who are working hands-on along with professional tradesmen to fulfill their dream of saving this outstanding building that had fallen into serious disrepair. Pat Miller Murphy displayed Miller memorabilia and shared Miller family history.

During the business section of the meeting Bob Hartmann presented impressive detailed prospective drawings for a possible porch addition to the Blake House. Together with discussion of this project and touring every nook and cranny of the Miller house the membership lingered and lingered gleaning rehabbing insights from the Larsons.

Barbara S. Walter

CONSIDERING THE BLAKE HOUSE AND ITS PORCH



Above: Photo of the Blake House published 1893, *Racine Illustrated*
Below: **Reconstructed appearance including earliest known porch by Bob Hartmann**

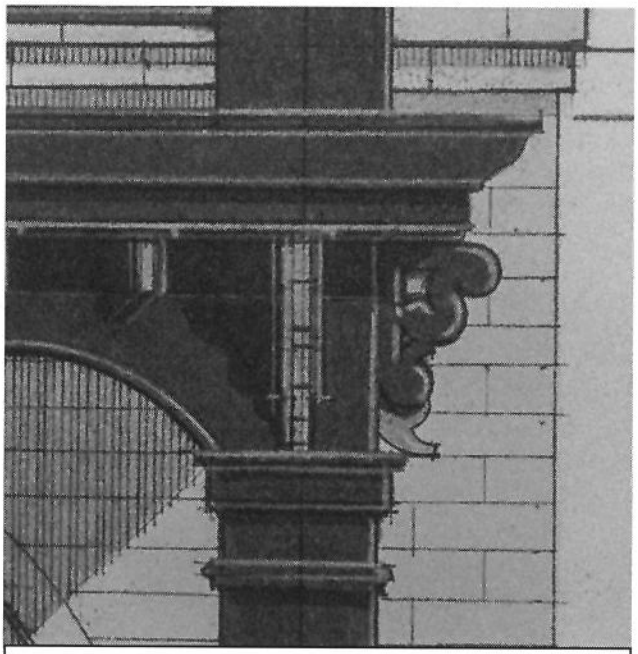
For some time, Preservation Racine has weighed the pros and cons of replicating the first known porch on the Blake House, and to that end we asked architectural designer Bob Hartmann to draw up plans for consideration. Bob produced exquisite drawings and presented them at our most recent Members' meeting and has kindly allowed us to publish two of them here.

This is an excellent opportunity to think about the Blake House, why it looks the way it does, and the kind of research and resourcefulness that goes into replacing a long lost part. Let's start by thinking about the Bulls, for whom the house was built in 1868, and why they might have chosen this Italianate style. Then we'll look at how Bob deduced the design for the porch and think about how close to its earliest known appearance we can bring the house, if it all falls into place.

George Bull and his second wife, Roxilana, were from New York. Married in 1850, they had been in Racine since at least that year, when George is listed as a merchant in the city directory. Through these directories, we can see the Bulls' prosperity rising as the business moves from the far end of Main Street towards Sixth Street, and as they exchange their residence from a side street (Chatham) to the 1100 block on Main Street. In 1862 George was running a dry goods and groceries business on the southwest corner of Wisconsin Avenue and Sixth Street, and in 1868 he was in partnership with Jonas Brown on the southwest corner of Sixth and Main Street. The same year, the couple commissioned the house at 936 Main Street in the Italianate Villa style with its square tower nested in the angle between two wings. Lucius and Caroline Blake acquired the house in 1873. They retained it until 1926, and it has been known as the Blake House ever since.

The Bulls' commercial success was part of the economic prosperity between the Civil War and the Depression (1865–1873) and the versatile Italianate style, based on working farm villas rather than great historic buildings, was especially favored during this period. Their house has the diagnostic features, including wide eaves supported on ornate paired brackets, and arched windows with corbelled dripstone hoods. More specifically, the tower, nested between the two front wings, designates the variant known as the Villa style. It is supported on an unusually articulated porch, where the dentils marking the spring of each arch are carried around the voussoirs, creating a rich surface texture. Next to this was the covered wood porch that we would like to replace.

We have tantalizingly little information about this porch! Faint discoloring of the brickwork shows where its roofline went, just below the second-floor windows, and small square gaps in the stringcourse show where it was attached to the tower. There is also a photograph from 1893 where the porch can be glimpsed through the trees. We can dimly see a low wooden balustrade around its roof supported on three square-sectioned columns. These did not have typical classical capitals but instead branched into voluted brackets to support the roof. At the ground level was another relatively low balustrade of fine spindle work.



Bob Hartmann's recovered design for the porch brackets

Bob Hartmannn has spent untold hours researching this wooden porch to help us return the building as closely as possible to its earliest known appearance if we should choose to do so. In fact, his hand-drawn rendering is intended to convey that appearance by "restoring" a number of details. A comparison with the 1893 photo verifies its accuracy, so do note the divided windows and the finials on the roof. Unfortunately, the photo is too indistinct to show the individual brackets which (typical of the style) did not match those under the eaves so to determine their design Bob turned back to the house itself and looked at the ones supporting the cornice on the south-side bay window. These consist of elegant double scrolls with generous curves and raised profile moldings and look like a good match for the hints in the photo.

So the Blake House – a fine example of the Italianate Villa style – testifies to the rising prosperity of a particular couple at a significant time in America's history. Clearly, it deserved to be designated a "key building" by the United States Department of the Interior's National Register of Historic Places. Yet, it almost did not survive: there were plans to raze it in 1976. Preservation Racine is privileged to have participated in saving it. As current owners, we continue to preserve and maintain it and, if the membership approves, we hope for the pleasure of bringing it back to its earliest known appearance.

Pippin Michelli

"PLEASED TO PRESERVE PROUD TO PRESENT" TOUR

This year's Preservation Racine Tour of Historic Places was a resounding success in many ways. The seven sites offered on this year's tour ranged in age from 1847 through 1950 and featured architectural styles indicative of when they were built. Two Main Street residential apartments carved out of the second story of two historic commercial buildings were opened for this tour. Bruce Zamecnik invited us into his beautifully decorated apartment located at 404 Main Street in a building whose grand opening was reported in the *Racine Weekly Journal*, March 1878, as "The New and Elegant Dry Goods Establishment of Messrs. Fixen & Hansing." Note the emphasis on new and elegant. Over this building's history, it has served as retail space, dentist offices, newspaper offices and insurance companies. William, Jr. and Susan Norovich purchased this building for their surgical supply business in 1967. In 1979 they began renovations of the second floor creating an elegant home with hardwood floors, modern kitchen, three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a living room overlooking Main Street and many other amenities. With the intent of returning the building to its original appearance, Johnson Redevelopment Corporation undertook the restoration of the exterior of 402-404 Main Street, with guidance from Robert Hartman. Just one block away, Dr. Stephen and Cindy Norovich,

undertook the restoration of the 1847 Nicholas D. Fratt building located at 426 Main Street. Sam Johnson noticed the building's deterioration and was responsible for restoring the exterior. After two years of renovation, the Norovichs moved into their lovely second story apartment. Both of these apartments illustrate the possibilities of the convenience of downtown living, wonderfully airy high ceilings and tall windows that allow commodious light and views for the occupants.

The three houses on this year's tour were located in the National Register's Southside Historic District. The Frank and Louisa Marshall house, located at 1703 College Avenue, was built in 1882, in the Victorian Eclectic style. It was built in the Holborn's Partition, a new 190 acre development north of Racine College formerly known as Wright's Farm. The Wright brothers were responsible for the gift of 10 acres of land toward the establishment of Racine College. The Queen Anne style house William and Laura Crane built in 1902 and located at 1654 College Avenue was built as a "modern" retirement home after this couple retired from their dairy farm located on Lathrop Avenue. Located behind the house, facing Seventeenth Street, is the original carriage barn which people had the opportunity to walk through. Known as the Johnson Homestead, Samuel Curtis Johnson and his wife, Caroline, built their 1903, Late Picturesque Gothic style house as a retirement home. This house was designated as a Racine Landmark in 1977. Tradition has it that S. C. Johnson drew the plans for this house located at 1737 South Wisconsin Avenue himself. We are grateful to Tom Peterman and Albert Juarez, Genevieve Sesto and S.C. Johnson for opening their houses for this year's tour.

The most "modern" building on this year's Tour of Historic Places was the Frank Lloyd Wright designed, S. C. Johnson Research Tower. The Research Tower is one of the tallest structures ever built on the cantilever principle. It was Wright's vision of a vertical complement to the company's Administration Building. Drawings, photographs and correspondence between Wright and H. F. Johnson, Jr. provided visitors with a review of the Tower's origin, unique role in the company's history and its influence on the local community.

The cornerstone for St. Luke's Episcopal Church was laid in 1866, after a devastating fire destroyed the first church in1842. This Gothic revival, cream brick church designed by Edward T. Mix of Milwaukee and built by local builder Lucas Bradley is an important anchor for downtown Racine, located on the corner of Main and Seventh Streets. Our visitors enjoyed the beauty and history of this historic church, were invited for refreshments and to view Jim Mercier's exceptional display of Racine manufactured clothing.

We are indebted to Miller's Flowers, Personal Touch Flowers by Julie, Signature Flowers by Randy and Flowers by Walter for the beautiful floral arrangements for each building. Thank you to Sturino Funeral Home for covering the cost of hospitality and to Maresh-Meredith & Acklam Funeral Home for covering the cost of printing the tour tickets; Don Vander Leest who produced the original drawings of the buildings on the tour, and Charles Vallone and Ron Dunnett who took care of photography. We are grateful to Bruce and Barbara Armstrong who were responsible for afternoon hospitality. Over 150 volunteers were needed to be committee chairmen, house captains, guides and to help coordinate this event. We greatly appreciate all of the owners for allowing us to come into their buildings. We could not have done it without you!

Our gross income was $16,961.53, expenses $3,777.80 with a profit of $13,183.73. A special thank you must be extended to the co-chairmen for this year's very successful tour. With heartfelt applause to Heather Egan, Sherry Peccarelli and Karen Urben . . . you did a great job!

Vivian Merlo

PLEASED TO PRESERVE PROUD TO PRESENT

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

The end of the year is upon us. Winter has come earlier this year. It is time to be thankful and think to the future.

First, Preservation Racine needs to thank everyone that helped us to have another great tour of historic homes; the chairmen of the committee Sharon Peccarelli, Karen Urben, and Heather Egan did an excellent job. They were supported by a great team of researchers, house captains and tour guides.

We also need to thank Clem Krivich for his combined loan and gift of plat maps from 1873. Special thanks also to Jim Wardrip for donating to the cost of color copying the large plat maps.

Our new web site is up and running. If you have not looked at it lately check it out at www.preservationracine.org and let us know what you think. If you know of an event that we should put onto the website, e-mail it to preservationracine@gmail.com and we may be able to post the information on the site.

Looking to the future, we have several events that are being worked on.

- **Monthly membership meetings** – Pat Murphy does a fantastic job of finding interesting places and topics. I am always amazed at the suggestions Pat gets from members. Keep them coming!
- **Century Homes** – The committee is revisiting the program; look for some exciting news for this year's event, to be held May 4, 2015.
- **Tour of Historic Homes** – The committee is just starting work for the September 27, 2015 tour. I have already heard some interesting ideas that are being explored.
- **Blake House Porch** – Plans are being finalized, with the next step being to go before the city to get approval of the plans. Watch for more information as we work toward putting together a final plan for the membership to approve. A Blake House Porch Fund has been established and donations are starting to come in. Thanks to those of you who have already supported this campaign and to those of you who can make a contribution.

My goal for the future is to see more people becoming involved in what Preservation Racine does:

- Come to the monthly membership meetings and bring friends that may not be members
- Join a committee to help plan events
- Let us know if you would like to learn more about an historic building in your area.

Don Schumacher

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