

## *A Look Back in Time*

*The William Seymour House located at 1207 55<sup>th</sup> Street, is a former residential/commercial building that sits in the small 55<sup>th</sup> Street commercial district just north of the City's Civic Center. The house has a small lot with little landscaping. Section 15.04 of the City's Zoning Ordinance establishes standards for historic designation. All applicable standards were applied in evaluating this property, and it was determined that the William Seymour House is architecturally significant under Standard 3, "embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen..." The Seymour House is a fine example of a pre-Civil War Greek Revival house that is constructed of early-produced bricks. The house has the symmetrical form and simple classical details typical of the style, and as one of the oldest residences still extant in the City, the house well illustrates the type of construction that was typical of pre-Civil War Kenosha. Almost totally dilapidated two (2) decades ago, the house has been restored to much of its original appearance, so that today, it has a high degree of architectural integrity. This structure was originally designated a Kenosha Historic Site in 1979 and re-designated on February 17, 1997.*

*The William Seymour House is a two-story Greek Revival style building that has been recently renovated. The building has a rectangular plan with a moderately-pitched gable roof covered with wood shingles. The walls of the building are constructed of early-produced local bricks that have both a cream and vermillion hue. The north and south elevations of the building feature a full pediment attached to the brick-covered gable peaks. A very shallow projecting line of brickwork runs under the roof eaves creating a frieze. The north and east walls are punctuated with symmetrical fenestration of modern six-over-nine light double-hung sashes. The windows are simply decorated with very narrow stone cornice lintels. A modern cast-iron fire escape is attached to a second floor opening along the east elevation. The main entrance consists of a modern glass and wood paneled door that features sidelights and decorative moldings. It is topped with a large wooden transom and historic wood lintel. A one-story garage addition projects from the south elevation. It features a wood shingled roof and three (3) large garage style doors.*



*Local tradition for many years has stated that this building was the home of prominent pioneer Michael Frank and/or C. Latham Sholes. A thorough examination of historic records, including maps and deeds, show that this is not the case. Both the Frank and Sholes houses were located across the street from this property and were demolished by 1900. This house, though, was the home of another early pioneer, William Seymour, who acquired the land in March 1839, and probably built this house shortly afterward. Seymour was a merchant who also served as an early city official. In July*

1856, Cyrus Briggs acquired the house. Briggs was a merchant who operated a clothing store, and he owned the property until 1866.

For the next 20 years, the house had several owners and this part of 55<sup>th</sup> Street became increasingly commercial. By 1890, the Seymour house had been converted into a boarding house known as the Maple House, and a one-story saloon ell was attached to its northwest wall (not extant). The Schlitz Brewing Company Beer Depot was located directly to the east of this building, and in 1889, the company acquired the Maple House property, as well. Between 1894 and 1900, the old saloon ell was demolished, and a long frame ell connected the Maple House with a new saloon building to the west. The long ell housed a bowling alley, and the entire complex was known as the Maple House Saloon and Hotel.

During the prohibition years of the 1920s, the Maple House complex was used as a restaurant and hotel, and for a brief period around 1930, this portion of the complex was used as the Communist Labor Party Hall. For much of the rest of the twentieth century, the building stood vacant and became increasingly dilapidated. In fact, about 20 years ago, this building was seriously threatened with demolition. A historic preservation revival of the extant commercial buildings along 55<sup>th</sup> Street saved and renovated the buildings in 1991. The old bowling alley ell was removed, and both this building and the newer Maple House next door were historically renovated to much of their original appearance. Today, the building continues its long-time commercial use as an office building and it is a historic preservation success story.

The Seymour House is a fine example of the Greek Revival style because it has a formal, symmetrical plan, regular fenestration, and a fine full pediment decoration. It is typical of the simple Greek Revival houses that were common in pioneer communities throughout southeastern Wisconsin, but have largely disappeared due to remodeling and demolition. Not only is the building a fine example of the style, it is also a fine example of early brick construction. The multi-hued bricks suggest the crude brick kilns common prior to the Civil War and the dominance of standardized cream colored bricks. The brickwork is also significant because it is not painted, as are many other early brick houses in the City.

The renovation of the house brought back most of the building's historic appearance and the modern period features blend in well with the original architectural style of the building. The result is a house that is not just a fine nineteenth century building, but an important example of pioneer architecture, one of the few examples still extant in the City. And, although research does not connect this house with Frank or Sholes, that fact does not detract from the building's historic interest. William Seymour was not as prominent as those men, but the size and style of this house indicates that he was a successful merchant who helped build the City's important commercial economy during the nineteenth century.