

CAPTIVATING QUARTERS

History buff rescues, renews formerly forsaken Hill Place

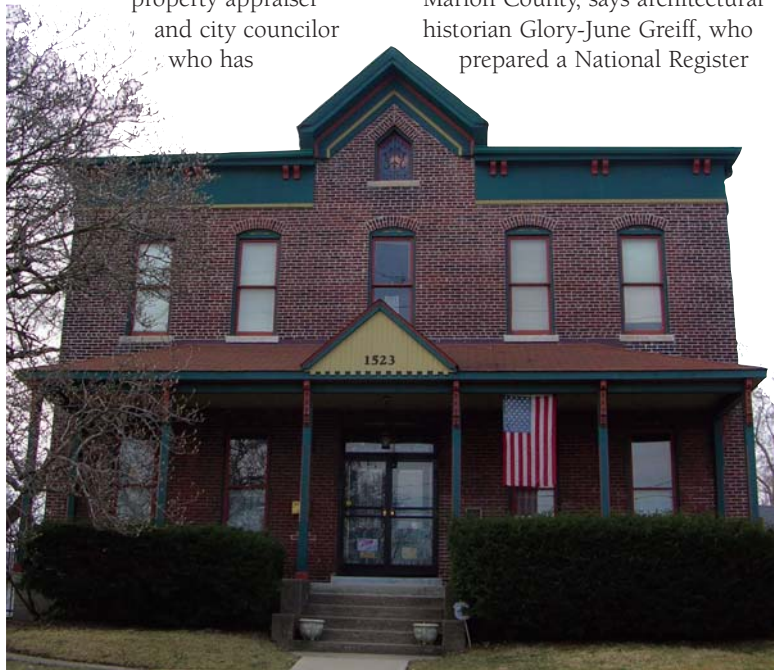
by Barbara E. Cohen

J. Scott Keller says he's been slowly restoring the house known as Hill Place for as long as he's lived there. Before he bought the historic house nine years ago and began renovation, the building was vacant for three years and in a state of disrepair.

"The house needed lots of work, but it was basically sound," says Keller, a personal property appraiser and city councilor who has

restored 615 homes, including one he sold to former Indiana Gov. Frank and first lady Judy O'Bannon. "I bought [Hill Place] for the quality of the house and its proximity to downtown."

Built around 1852, the brick home is among the oldest existing houses of any style and quite possibly the earliest surviving example of the Italianate style in Marion County, says architectural historian Glory-June Greiff, who prepared a National Register



Hill Place remains the largest and most ornate home in its neighborhood, which includes residential and industrial buildings.



The original owners added the Eastlake-style mantel. Keller (above) added the Bradbury and Bradbury wallpaper during the restoration.

of Historic Places nomination for Keller.

Hill Place, located at 1523 Southeastern Ave., began as a rural house on what was once Michigan Street. Hill and his wife, Susan Grant Hill, a relative of Ulysses S. Grant and a grand niece of Daniel Boone, bought the 220 arable acres in 1851. While living in the home, they made several improvements, including the front porch and the Eastlake-style slate fireplace mantels and surrounds that remain today. Greiff expects the home's ornate staircase was installed at this time, too.

Following the Hills' deaths in the late 1880s, the house was sold and subdivided for working-class residences — what is now

the Irish Hill neighborhood. It was at one time a rescue mission and later a rooming house for railroad workers. By the mid 1990s, it was vacant and in need of repairs but remarkably intact.

When Keller purchased Hill Place, he had lived downtown for about 20 years and was active in restoring many properties in the Old Northside neighborhood. "I have a keen interest in history, and as the custodian of this house, I want to pass on its legacy," Keller says.

His renovated Hill Place has 4,000 square feet of living space on two floors, a finished basement and an unfinished attic, but restoration proceeded in stages. After installing new heating and

cooling systems and stabilizing overt problems, Keller used sections from the second floor's hardwoods to patch areas of the first-floor damaged by rusty, leaking radiators. He also repaired and restored seven 8-foot doors and remodeled the kitchen. "I've made an effort to use as much of the original materials as possible to restore the house," Keller says. "Where things such as panels from the wood doors were missing, I had them recreated, so the restoration looks seamless. I replaced missing elements like the doorknobs with hardware from now-demolished area buildings."


To personalize the space, he knocked out the floor of the first-floor drawing room to create a two-story library that opens into the basement. Among the most challenging projects was the brown walnut and white ash staircase, which had separated from the wall and is currently held in place by aircraft cable and turnbuckles.

Keller is especially proud of the West Parlor's Bradbury



Keller removed the floor in the first-floor drawing room to create his two-story library.

and Bradbury period wallpaper border and comfortable mix of antiques; most he inherited, including a case clock originally belonging to Woodrow Wilson handed down from Keller's great grandfather, Parisian lamps circa 1900, Japanese prints from the 1850s and Belgian Art Moderne chairs from the 1940s.

"It continues to be a pleasure to live downtown," says Keller, who won numerous awards in the 1980s for his work restoring homes and sponsoring historic districts. 

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