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Cities take steps to save historic buildings

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In the early 1990s, Clayton organized a historical society charged with preserving the city's oldest and most interesting structures.

The group disbanded a few years later, out of either lack of interest or lack of funding. Now a new group is leading the way to not only protect the city's oldest home, but to build a bridge between the past and the future.

The Hanley House Council, a citizens group working with Clayton's parks department, hopes to give new life to the city's oldest home by turning it into a museum with regular hours. The council also hopes to use the house to help integrate the city's personal history into school curriculum.

The Hanley House is on Westmoreland Avenue, just a few blocks north of Clayton's business district and a few blocks west of the city limits of University City. It was bought by the city of Clayton for \$55,000 in 1968 from descendants of the Hanley family.

Patty DeForrest, superintendent of Clayton's parks department, said the home is in remarkable condition for its age - the home was built in 1855 by Martin Franklin Hanley and Cyrene Clemens Walton Hanley - but complete repairs and restoration would cost about \$1.3 million.

The city plans to spend about \$75,000 a year on improvements, DeForrest said, with the intent of seeking private donations and grants that would match the amount invested by the city.

The house, which has been closed to the public while preservation work was being done, will reopen to the public in May. The house has also become a classroom for history students at Clayton High School.

"It's just so fascinating to see them react to things," said Judy Goodman, who serves as a Ward 2 alderwoman for Clayton and is active on the Hanley House Council.

Goodman said the house naturally lends itself to conversations about historic issues, such as the Civil War. Goodman related one story in which a group of Union soldiers were eating inside the home during the war. One of the Hanley daughters, a Confederate sympathizer, sat at the piano and played a Confederate hymn as her way of protest.

"What also makes this house interesting is the fact that no one except the (Hanley) family and their descendants have lived in the home," Goodman said.

Clayton is just one of several municipalities in St. Louis County trying to preserve historic buildings and homes unique to their respective communities.

"People want to have something that defines the character of their community and that's not going to be based on having a Walgreen's on every corner," said Esley Hamilton, a preservation historian with St. Louis County.

In 2003, Creve Couer moved the historic Tappmeyer House, then located at 12525 Olive Blvd., one-fourth of a mile down the road, to Millennium Park. The city bought the home, built in 1880, for \$1 in 1994 after it was slated to be demolished. It is the only original farmhouse left in Creve Couer. Last fall, the Tappmeyer Foundation raised \$40,000 through donations and matching grants for new electrical wiring, a new water line and air conditioning.



[Erin Taylor](#) photo/ A tree flowers in the back yard of the Hanley House, built in 1855 and located just a few blocks from Clayton's busy downtown district.

University City's Sutter-Meyer Society has been meeting since 2006 to find ways to preserve and utilize what is believed to be that municipality's oldest surviving house.

The Sutter-Meyer House, in the 6800 block of Chamberlain Court, just a block north of Olive Boulevard, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was designated by the city as a historic landmark in 1986. The Mound City Archaeological Society has been conducting excavations at the house for several years.

Hamilton said a lot of cities aren't sure as to what is their oldest home. Building permits only started to be issued in 1907, and building styles can often be deceiving. In the case of the Hanley House, Martin Hanley kept a diary of construction so it was easy to trace the house's evolution.

Webster Groves and Kirkwood are both often considered examples of cities with numerous historic homes. A few years ago, an owner claimed his home was the oldest in Kirkwood but was unable to prove it before the house was torn down, Hamilton said. The Kirkwood Historical Society did not take a position on the home.

Joe Gill, president of the Brentwood Historical Society, said the city's oldest homes are about 100 years old, but that the group has no plans for a historical museum. Right now the historical society operates out of a building on Manchester Road where documents, photographs and other items of local significance are kept.

The Maplewood Historical Society is not currently active, but several committee members are working with the Maplewood Community Betterment Foundation to publish a book celebrating Maplewood's centennial in 2008. The book is expected to be published this summer.

More than historic homes, Maplewood was more well-known for its streetcar/bus public transportation system.

"They called it the 5-cent suburb, because you could get there from downtown for only 5 cents on the streetcar," Hamilton said.

Missouri offers a state tax credit that Hamilton said serves as a model for the country and helps aid historical societies looking to preserve properties. Those investing money into buildings registered with the national registry of historic buildings can get a 25 percent tax credit return of the amount invested into the property.

That credit can be combined with a federal credit that allows for a return of 20 percent of approved costs for qualified rehabilitation of certain historic buildings for income-producing use.

Hamilton, who is a virtual encyclopedia of historical places in the St. Louis area and elsewhere, said he is encouraged by efforts to preserve and aggravated when buildings are demolished when they could be saved. He said he is happy to see Clayton's historical society reformed and ready to go. After all, he was the original group's first featured speaker more than a decade ago.

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