

City of La Crosse
Heritage Preservation Commission

Historic Landmark Nomination Form
(All fields must be filled out)

What is the name of the Landmark or Landmark District Pettibone River Front #006

Joe Katchever & Tami Plourde
Name of Nominator

401 Pettibone Dr S H-6
Property Address

400 La Crosse St
Address of Nominator

Name of Property owner

La Crosse WI 54601
City State Zip

Phone # of Property Owner

(608)-789-7512
Phone #

Tax Computer/ID No.

Classification

Proposed Designation (choose one)

☐ Landmark District
☒ Landmark

If it is a Landmark, choose a category

☐ Site ☐ Building(s)
☒ Structure(s) ☐ Object

Description of Property

Present Use

| | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial | <input type="checkbox"/> Religious | <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Military | <input type="checkbox"/> Scientific | <input type="checkbox"/> Educational | <input type="checkbox"/> Museum |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Entertainment | <input type="checkbox"/> Park | <input type="checkbox"/> Government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Private Residence(s) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ | | |

Has the property been nominated previously? ☐ Yes ☒ No

When? _____

What was the outcome? _____

Is the proposed Landmark or Landmark District on the National Register? __Yes **X**No

When? _____

Condition

__Excellent

__Deteriorated

X Good

__Ruins

__Fair

__Other

A historic property must meet at least one of the following criteria. Please check all that apply to this Property:

__ **Associated with events or person(s) who have made a significant contribution to the history, heritage, or culture of the City of La Crosse, the County of La Crosse, the State of Wisconsin, or the United States.**

__ **It embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style or method of construction or of indigenous material or craftsmanship.**

__ **It is representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer or architect whose individual work is significant in the development of the City of La Crosse, the County of La Crosse, the State of Wisconsin, or the United States.**

X **It exemplifies or reflects the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state or community.**

Designation of property will require affixing a plaque to said property and that the plaque will be the sole property of the City of La Crosse. Signature of the property owner assures the Heritage Preservation Commission that designation and installation of a plaque are supported.

Signature of Property Owner

Date

Signature of Nominator

Date

History- You must provide a complete history of the proposed Landmark or Landmark District's history in order to be considered for designation. Include time period, builder/architect, reasons why you believe the property in question fits the criteria you checked above, photocopies of any historical documents found pertaining to the property and any other items of historical significance. List the title, author, and copyright date of all resources used. Also provide past and present pictures of the proposed Landmark or Landmark District. Use extra pieces of paper if necessary and attach them to this application.

When completed, submit application to the City of La Crosse Planning Department, 400 La Crosse Street, La Crosse WI.

Early boathouse origins

During the early 20th century on the Mississippi River, lumber rafts, steamboats, keelboats and shantyboats were both means of transportation and housing. The river provided work onshore, such as farming, providing wood for steamboat fuel, supplies for river trade, or processing products from the river.

Fishing, hunting, and trapping, for market or subsistence living, were significant industries through the mid-20th century.

Market hunting of wildfowl had a huge economic impact on the Mississippi River flyaway and other areas of the Midwest.

The clamming and pearl button industry brought hundreds of people to the Mississippi to seek their fortune, maybe to strike it rich with a special pearl find. They lived on shantyboats, rafts, in tents on shore, or boarded in nearby homes.

Over time, floating homes were built on big logs remaining from logging days, while hunters and trappers lived in backwater cabins, built to float out seasonal floods.

In other areas of the country, special floating homes were also used for seasonal work. The fishing shanties of the Chesapeake Bay area are almost identical to Mississippi River boathouses in size and shape, but these were pulled onto tidal rivers by sailboats to serve as temporary shelters for fishermen when the fishing grounds were too far away to return home each night. They were removed following each fishing season. Also called shanties, scows, or houseboats, the fishing shanties were used on the Chesapeake Bay from 1900-1917.

In the Midwest, families lived on floating homes, tying them near towns. In addition to small homes, there were floating hotels and workboats. The US Army Corps of Engineers had quarterboats of Fountain City, to house the workers on the river, and some smaller launches provided sleeping space used for government officials and contractors. (Phillips, 2009)

The Great Depression

During the Great Depression, some houseboats and boathouses around the United States became homes for people who lost their homes on land. Wealthy people who had owned luxury or pleasure houseboats often abandoned them because of financial hardship or loss, or moved onto the houseboats as full time residents. Abandoned or vacant houseboats were taken over by people made homeless by the effects of the Crash of 1929.

Families along the Mississippi and elsewhere built rough and utilitarian homes on stilts or barrels on floodplains so they could eke out a simple living from the river's resources. It was commonplace for people with marginal means to squat, or live on unoccupied land without legal permission, during the time between the Depression and WWII.(Phillips 2009)

After-shocks from the Depression carried through long beyond the 1930's; people had a greater need to be self-sufficient, which had a continuing influence on Mississippi River life. Other economic and cultural changes were beginning in 1939, but these were not sustained due to the approach of World War II. In the brief era between the ending of the economic instability and the beginnings of the war around the world, the Upper Mississippi seemed to be in a holding pattern, where change was slight. World economic and political events masked any changes taking place in life along the river.

The late 1930s brought significant changes to the Mississippi River in the form of the Nine-Foot Channel Project, the lock and dam system which created a deeper channel, improved navigation, and provided stable water levels which created a situation that allowed for stationary boathouses. A natural river's traditional spring floods and summer low water levels were tempered by the new channel and dams. Boathouses, fixed in place, needed consistent water levels for both pedestrian and boat access.

The lock and dam system also made huge improvements in the river environment for boating and fishing. Year-round plentiful waters eliminated summer's progressively isolated and shallowing backwaters, where fish struggled to survive and boaters ran aground. Dams provided aeration and ice-free areas in winter. Wing dams built for channel improvements in the very early 20th century, were submerged, giving enhanced conditions for fishing.

Without the country's sudden plunge into World War II, fishing and boating on the river may have continued slow and steady growth in popularity, keeping pace with a slowly recovering economy. But the war changed everything, for its duration and afterward. (Phillips 2009)

La Crosse boathouses

Houseboats were common in La Crosse at the turn of the 20th century. Although boathouses began dotting the shores of La Crosse's two main rivers shortly after the lock and dam system was completed in 1939, the earliest relevant newspaper article found was from the March 1941 *La Crosse Tribune* that said completion of the Upper Mississippi River nine-foot channel has "increased materially interest in boating in La Crosse just as it has other points in the valley." The article goes on to say, "For years there were boathouses along part of Copeland Park, but now practically the entire west bank of Copeland Park is lined with boathouses and houseboats, people maintaining residences in the latter." The boathouses were reported to contain inboard launches, outboards, and rowboats. The article also raised a question of how the city would solve the problem of pollution from the increased number of boathouse.

In the Book *The Floating Boathouses on the Upper Mississippi River*, author Martha Greene Phillips talked with La Crosse area, centenarian Muriel Rorabaugh about her family's "boathouse." Her family boathouse was named Muriella, after Muriel and her sister Ella. Her father used the boathouse as a hunting and fishing shack, and the family lived on it during the warmer months. Her family also lived there throughout one

year during her childhood in the early 1900s. Her mother rowed the children to town and school, except for one summer when they moved their boathouse over to the La Crosse shore to make it easier for their father to get to work in town. Later, in her teens, her boyfriend would row over to pick her up for school or dates, and she clearly recalled the first outboard motorboat, which her brother's friend had bought, around 1926. Their boathouse was eventually moved to land on French Island, and enlarged to become a two-story cottage, complete with a kitchen, dining room, and porch. Muriel also remembered a few other boathouses, floating on steel drums, below where the Cass Street bridge was eventually built in 1940.

As in the other boathouse communities, regulations were sparse, and little changed until the 1950's. Boathouse numbers increased exponentially after WWII and through the early 1960s. The boom in recreational boating, improved fishing, the popularity of water skiing, and the convenience of a summer floating cottage adjacent to the city made having a boathouse very desirable.

Most of the La Crosse area boathouses began life as boat garages and have changed over the years into weekend getaways, or party boats in some cases. The ones which actually house boats are now very few, probably due to the many available boat landings in the area. Boat wells have been enclosed, water slides and bright colors added, palm trees and decorative lights give a tropical feeling, and, of course, Green Bay Packer colors and beer signs are common. A warm Sunday afternoon brings a lot of people and families down to their boathouses, to visit, swim, fish, and just relax. (Phillips 2009)

The majority of La Crosse's boathouses are lined along city parks, and some of the boathouse groups have their own boat club. The boat clubs sign leases for the boathouse access with the City of La Crosse and govern their members.

Although each boathouse grouping has an association, the West Side boat Club (Copeland Park West) is the model and the primary negotiator with the city. Every five years the leases need to be renewed, and the West Side Boat Club sets the tone for the other clubs. Whatever agreement is made between the West Side Club and the city, the other boathouse groupings have traditionally followed. The lease terms include an annual fee paid to the association and to the city.

A shoreline committee does inspection walks regularly, ensuring the boathouse owners use only the leased amount of shoreline, and do not privatize the land. Boathouse owners can have such items as a picnic table, swing set, or horseshoe court within the leased space, but can have no building materials, barrels, or trash stored on the shore.

Brief History of The Mississippi River Boathouses

Early 1900s: Houseboats and shantyboats ply the Mississippi's meandering channels, providing homes for worker and families earning subsistence living by clamming, fishing, hunting and trapping. Cabins on stilts or cabins floating on logs make homes in sloughs and backwaters.

1930 to 1945: The Great Depression leads more people to live and to try to make a living on the river. Wooden boats, often with small, difficult-to-use outboards, are stored where used on the river shores. Geography and railroad lines limit access to river.

1936 to 1939: Nine-Foot Channel Project completed on the Upper Mississippi River, creating stable water levels and improved fishing.

WWII: Time of national focus on war effort and resources needed to win. Rationing, men away at war, manufacturing turns to war production.

1945 to 1960s: Post WWII economic boom: shorter work week, increased recreation time. New concept of “week-end.” Rationing of raw materials ends, men home from war, “do-it-yourself” movement begins. New landscape on river: Vast pool of water behind dams available for extensive boating.

Boating innovations: Improved outboard engines, kit boats, aluminum and fiberglass boats, new concept of recreational boating, water skiing become popular. Improved highway system, increased car ownership lead to having “back yard” boats. Conditions ripe for boathouse building, and little, if any, regulation of such construction.

1965 to 1980: Regulations and efforts to eradicate boathouses ever increasing. Boathouse owners’ groups become active in fighting new rules.

1980s to 1990s: Water Resources Development Act of 1986 protects existing boathouses. US Army Corps of Engineers assumes permitting process for boathouses on the Upper Mississippi River. Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources develop administrative codes for existing boathouses, also prohibiting and additional boathouses, ever.

Bibliography

2009, Martha Greene Phillips, *The Floating Boathouses on the Upper Mississippi River their history, their stories.*

Designation Criteria

Based on the above information, the boathouses identified as Copeland West (37 boathouses), Copeland North(11 boathouses), and Copeland East(10 boathouses) are designated under Criteria (a) under Section 2.27(E)(1) of the La Crosse Municipal Code as they reflect the broad cultural, political, economic and social history of La Crosse.

Due to the La Crosse’s status with the Wisconsin Historical Society as a Certified Local Government and has a local historical preservation ordinance, designation of these boathouses would meet the definition of “Historic or Cultural Value” as stated in Chapter NR 325.03(5k).

Meeting this definition allows the owners to apply to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for an exception to the repair and maintenance cost restrictions outlined in Chapter NR 325.06 by using the certification procedure for exceptions outlined in Chapter NR 325.08.