



# City of La Crosse, Wisconsin

City Hall  
400 La Crosse Street  
La Crosse, WI 54601

## Meeting Agenda

### Heritage Preservation Commission

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Thursday, April 25, 2024

6:00 PM

Grandad Room- City Hall 400 La Crosse St

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Members of the public may participate in the meeting in the following ways:

View Virtually and Speak:

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://cityoflacrosse-org.zoom.us/j/84101189486?pwd=bFhXeHBwdWR3YkhOcmpzWWYrTjRvQT09>

Meeting ID: 841 0118 9486

Passcode: 810151

Phone Only

1 312 626 6799

Or you may attend in person at City Hall located at 400 La Crosse Street. Members of the public who would like to provide written comments on any agenda may do so by emailing [acklint@cityoflacrosse.org](mailto:acklint@cityoflacrosse.org), using a drop box outside of City Hall or mailing the Department of Planning, Development and Assessment, 400 La Crosse Street, La Crosse WI 54601. Questions, call 608-789-7512.

#### Call to Order

#### Roll Call

#### Approval of Minutes

1. Approval of the March 28, 2024 Meeting Minutes.

#### Agenda Items:

2. [24-0591](#) Nomination of the South Branch Library, located at 1307 16th Street S, to designated as a Local Historic Landmark.  
**Attachments:** [Nomination](#)
3. [24-0592](#) Review of a Certificate of Appropriateness for the property located at 313 Main Street. (Sign- Downtown Historic District)  
**Attachments:** [Proposed Plans](#)  
[Staff Report](#)

4. [24-0473](#) Discussion on Ghost Signs.

**Attachments:** [Updated Ghost Sign Research 4-23-24](#)

[Ghost Sign Research 3-26-24](#)

5. Discussion on the 2024 10 Most Endangered Building List.

## Adjournment

*Notice is further given that members of other governmental bodies may be present at the above scheduled meeting to gather information about a subject over which they have decision-making responsibility.*

### *NOTICE TO PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY*

*Requests from persons with a disability who need assistance to participate in this meeting should call the City Clerk's office at (608) 789-7510 or send an email to [ADAcityclerk@cityoflacrosse.org](mailto:ADAcityclerk@cityoflacrosse.org), with as much advance notice as possible.*

Heritage Preservation Commission Members

CM Mackenzie Mindel, Laura Godden, Greg Clark, Natalie Heneghan, Eric Garland, Jim Gallagher



# City of La Crosse, Wisconsin

City Hall  
400 La Crosse Street  
La Crosse, WI 54601

## Text File

File Number: 24-0591

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**Agenda Date:** 4/25/2024

**Version:** 1

**Status:** Agenda Ready

**In Control:** Heritage Preservation Commission

**File Type:** Application

**Agenda Number:** 2.



# CITY OF LA CROSSE HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION

## Historic Landmark Nomination Form

### 1. What is the historic name of the Landmark or Landmark District?

South Branch Library

### 2. What is the current name of the Landmark or Landmark District?(If applicable)

N/A

### 3. Property Address: 1307 16th Street S., La Crosse, WI, 54601

### 4. OWNERSHIP

- a. Owner(s): City of La Crosse, WI
- b. Street: 400 La Crosse Street
- c. City, State, Zip Code: La Crosse, WI, 54601 Phone: (608) 789 - 2489
- d. Email: N/A Parcel ID#: 17-50265-10

### 5. NOMINATED BY (If different):

- a. Name: David Riel
- b. Street: 1107 Caledonia Street
- c. City, State, Zip Code: La Crosse, WI, 54603 Phone: (857) 222 - 6224
- d. Email: driel1974@gmail.com

### 6. CLASSIFICATION AND USE (Check all that apply):

Proposed Designation (choose one)

   Landmark District

☒ Landmark

If it is a Landmark, choose a category (definitions can be found on the instructions page)

☒ Historic Structure

   Historic Site

   Historic Object

### Present Use

   Agriculture

   Industrial

   Religious

   Commercial

   Military

   Scientific

   Educational

   Museum

   Transportation

   Entertainment

   Park

☒ Government

   Private Residence(s)

   Other



**Condition:**

☒ Excellent                      \_\_\_ Deteriorated  
\_\_\_ Good                         \_\_\_ Ruins  
\_\_\_ Fair                         \_\_\_ Other

**Has the property been nominated previously?** \_\_\_ Yes ☒ No

When? \_\_\_\_\_

What was the outcome? \_\_\_\_\_

**Is the proposed Landmark or District on the National Register?** \_\_\_ Yes ☒ No

When? \_\_\_\_\_

**7. SIGNIFICANCE:**

**Section 20.90 of the *Municipal Code of Ordinances* lists 4 criteria that a district, site, structure or object may be designated under.**

**Please check one or more of the listed criteria 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.
- ☒ It exemplifies or reflects the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state, or community.

**8. HISTORIC OVERVIEW/ANALYSIS (See attached instructions for analysis outline):**

**Please attach the analysis as a separate document containing the following sections:**

**A. Existing Physical Description**

- a. Write a physical description of the nominated property or district in its current state.
- b. If it has been altered over time, indicate the date(s) and nature of the alterations.
- c. Include additional information as applicable.

**B. Narrative History**

- a. Provide a complete narrative history of the district, structure, site, or object.
- b. If known, include the year it was built, the architecture style, and the name of the architect or builder.
- c. Include references to source material that are listed in the bibliography.

**C. Additional Information**

- a. Include any additional information that helps support the claim of criteria (Section 7) made in this document; or is otherwise deemed useful for the purposes of evaluation.

**D. Bibliography**

- a. Include a list of all sources consulted.
- b. Include copies of relevant source materials with the nomination form.

**9. PHOTOGRAPHS:**

**Include photos, as applicable, of the nominated district, structure, site, or object as follows:**

**A. Current photographs**

- a. Exterior photographs are required.
- b. Interior photographs if available and relevant to its historic significance.

**B. Historic photographs**

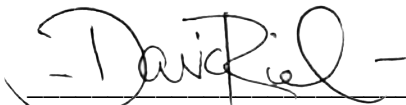
- a. Interior and exterior if available.

**Each photograph must be labeled with the street address of the building(s) and the month and year the photograph was taken.**

**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

**4/22/24**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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

**PLEASE NOTE:** It is the responsibility of the nominator to provide the Heritage Preservation Commission and its Staff with information sufficient to fairly evaluate the nomination. **Incomplete nomination forms will not be accepted. A fee, in the amount stated in the Schedule of Fees and Licenses table in Section 25.01 of the Municipal Code, must be included.**

## **INSTRUCTIONS FOR FILLING OUT THE NOMINATION FORM**

1. Indicate the historic name of the property if it is currently known by a different name.
2. Indicate the current name of the property, if it is different than the historic name.
3. Indicate the street address for the property. For districts, attach a separate sheet listing the street address of each property included in the nomination and a clear street map of the area showing the boundaries of the proposed district.
4. Indicate the owner of the property and his or her mailing address and phone number. For districts, attach a separate sheet listing the owner of each property and his or her mailing address.
5. Indicate the nominator of the property and his or her contact information including mailing address, phone number, and email address.
6. Check the classification and use as indicated. Check the current condition of the property. Indicate whether or not the property has been previously nominated. Indicate whether or not the property is on the National Register of Historic Places.
  - a. **“Landmark District”** or Historic Overlay District is an area designated by the Common Council on recommendation of the Commission composed of one or more improvements or sites that is of special character or special historic interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the city, state or nation and which has been designated as a Historic District.
  - b. **“Historic Structure”** means any improvement which has a special character or special historic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, state or nation and which has been designated as a historic structure.
  - c. **“Historic Site”** means any parcel of land whose historic significance is due to a substantial value in tracing the history of aboriginal people, or upon which a historic event has occurred, and which has been designated as a historic site under this section, or an improvement parcel, or part thereof, on which is situated a historic structure and any abutting improvement parcel used as and constituting part of the premises on which the historic structure is situated.
  - d. **“Historic Object”** means a material thing of historic significance for functional, aesthetic, cultural or scientific reasons that may be, by nature or design, moveable yet related to a specific setting or environment.
7. Select, as applicable, one or more of the four listed criteria that applies to the nominated property or district.
8. Write a **Historical Overview/Analysis** of the nominated property or district that supports the claim of criteria made in section 7. Attach to the nomination form a document that includes:
  - A. An existing physical description of the structure, district, site, or object. Include the following information as applicable:
    - architectural style(s)
    - arrangement of architectural elements
    - building materials
    - method(s) of construction

- visual character
- street pattern
- density
- type and arrangement of buildings
- topography

**B.** A narrative history of the structure, district, site, or object. Include the following information when available:

- History of the development of the area;
- Circumstances which brought the structure, district, site, or object into being;
- Biographical information on architects, builders, developers, artisans, planners, or others who created or contributed to the structure, district, site, or object;
- Contextual background on building type(s) and/or style(s);
- Importance of the structure, district, site, or object in the larger community over the course of its existence.
- **Include references** to consulted sources, listed in the bibliography, as necessary. Where any historical information is uncertain or disputed, reference sources directly in the text.

**C.** Any additional information that contributes support to the argument being made for the significance of the structure, district, site, or object; as selected in section 7 of the nomination form.

**D.** A bibliography consisting of all consulted source material used in the preparation of the Historical Overview/Analysis. Copies of major supporting documents should accompany the bibliography. Such documents may include, but are not limited to:

- Historic and contemporary maps;
- Historic or contemporary texts describing the subject property or district;
- Historic or contemporary texts describing people, places, or events that comprise the historic context of the subject property or district.
- Oversized materials (such as architectural drawings) and materials too fragile to copy may be accepted.

**9.** Clear photographs of the nominated buildings or districts should accompany the nomination form. The applicant shall include photographs of all elevations of an individual building and its setting, or the front elevation of each building in a district. In case of closely spaced buildings or row houses, several buildings may be included in one photograph. Each photograph must be labeled with the street address of the building(s) and the month and year the photograph was taken. A current exterior photograph of the structure, district, site, or object must accompany the nomination form.

## **Introduction**



South Branch Library, ca. 1996. Source: Wisconsin Historical Society.

The South Branch Library building, located at 1307 16th Street S., is a historically-significant example of municipal library architecture. Designed by architect Frank J. Fuchs and built by contractor F.R. Schwalbe & Sons, the Wisconsin Historical Society “Architecture and History Inventory” lists the architectural style as Prairie School, despite being built in 1952.

Made of golden brick and Winona Stone, the South Branch Library building was completed in 1952 for a cost to La Crosse tax payers of \$128,000, which today would be the equivalent of approximately \$1,490,000.00.

Efforts to create a “South Side” library began in the early 20th Century, but several events, including the Great Depression and World War II, led to a series of multi-decade delays. Funding for this building was finally approved by the residents of La Crosse through an election referendum in 1951. It served as a branch of the La Crosse Public Library from 1952 until 2023.

The South Branch Library building satisfies all four criteria under Section 20.90 of the Municipal Code of Ordinances for La Crosse Historic Landmark designation, and if designated, will continue to benefit future generations.

## **Existing Physical Description**



South Branch Library, West Elevation, 2024. Source: David Riel.

The South Branch Library building is a unique, publicly-owned asset. It served as a branch of the La Crosse Public Library for 71 years and is in excellent condition. The façade of the building and main entrance faces west toward 16th Street S. The building, which stands between Farnam Street to the north, Park Avenue to the south, and East Avenue to the east, also shares public land east of the building with Tower Park. The well-maintained building and site, landscaped with a variety of trees, play areas, walking paths and a dedicated parking lot make this an ideal building to be repurposed for future use.

Designed by architect Frank J. Fuchs and built by contractor F.R. Schwalbe & Sons, the Wisconsin Historical Society “Architecture and History Inventory” lists the architectural style as Prairie School, despite being built in 1952. Most Prairie School structures were actually built between 1900 and 1930.

However, the Prairie School greatly influenced modern architecture well into the 1960s, and you can see the Prairie School’s influence on the South Branch Library building in multiple ways. The Prairie School was an architectural movement that drew inspiration from the low, horizontal landscape of the Midwestern prairie. Perhaps the most well-known proponent of the Prairie School movement was Wisconsin-born architect Frank Lloyd Wright.



The South Branch Library wasn't built until 1952, but it was first designed in 1938. By the 1930s, the International Style had become popular, and you can see its influence in the South Branch Library. However, the International Style took *its* inspiration from the earlier Prairie School, so the South Branch Library naturally shows Prairie School influence in massing and decorative brickwork.



Heurtley House (1902), Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, 2023. Source: David Riel.

For example, consider Frank Lloyd Wright's Heurtley House, seen above. This early Prairie School design used contrasting colored bricks to create horizontal lines that mirror the prairie it sits upon. With the South Branch Library, Frank J. Fuchs also used alternating bricks to emphasize the horizontal. Five rows of brick placed on their sides (stretchers) are separated by one row of bricks lighter in color and turned on their ends (headers), creating horizontal lines and decorative patterns. Pure examples of International Style buildings had largely abandoned these types of decorative motifs for unadorned surfaces.



South Branch Library, Brick Detail, 2024. Source: David Riel.





South Branch Library, Aerial View, 2024. Source: Google.com.

The South Branch Library building was designed by Frank J. Fuchs on a rectilinear, cruciform floorplan, a very traditional Prairie School layout.

The asymmetrical nature of the cruciform plan creates visual interest, and is similar to Otto Merman's floorplan for the North Branch Library.

Originally designed with a flat roof, the existing hipped roof with deep, overhanging eaves wasn't added until 1993, but its addition only enhances the Prairie School influences already present in the building.





South Branch Library, Window Detail, 2024. Source: David Riel.

The South Branch Library windows are horizontal in shape as well, continuing the Prairie School influence. A large picture window north of the entrance is completely framed in Winona Stone, and a band of smaller windows that run directly under the eaves have Winona Stone sills. Use of the smaller, elevated windows, which allow light into the interior while also providing privacy to the occupants, is another design feature you can see in many, early Prairie School designs, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's F. F. Tomek House, seen below.



F. F. Tomek House (1904), Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, ca. 2022. Source: Terry Cahill.

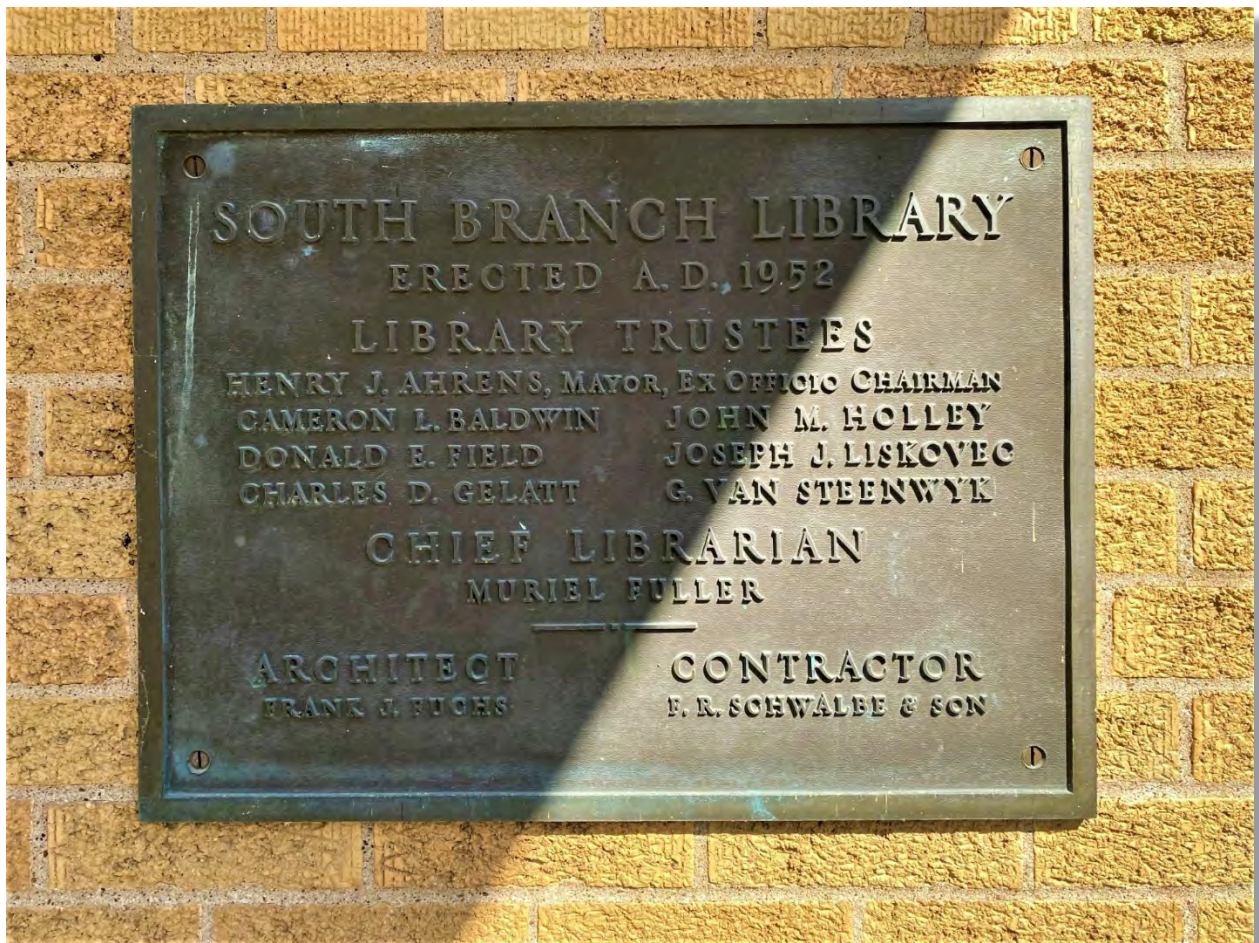
The only truly vertical elements on the South Branch Library are the piers of the portico which were added during the 1993 remodel by La Crosse architect Valentine Schute. The 1993 remodel was performed in a very sensitive manner, and most of the changes made in 1993 could be reversed by a future owner if desired. However, the addition of the hipped roof and other changes only serve to enhance the appearance and improve the functionality of the building.



The name “South Branch Library” is elegantly carved into the Winona Stone header above the entrance, showing the work of a master mason.



South Branch Library, Carving Detail, 2024. Source: David Riel.



South Branch Library, 1952 Dedication Plaque, 2024. Source: David Riel.





South Branch Library, South Elevation, 2024. Source: David Riel.

The original chimney (and accompanying fireplace) of the South Branch Library is another example of traditional elements more common in the late-1800s and early 1900s than the 1950s, as newer ways to heat an interior were available.

In the 1998 documentary “Frank Lloyd Wright” by Ken Burns & Lynn Novick, architecture critic Paul Goldberger said of the International Style architects “They worshipped modern technology and sought ways to symbolize it. They had very little interest in using wood and stone, which struck them as old fashioned materials. There was much more glass, much more metal.” The simple fact that Frank J. Fuchs included a wide chimney as part of a 1952 design shows the influence of early, traditional styles like the Prairie School.

During the 1993 remodel, the height of the chimney was increased just enough to clearly intersect the newly added hipped roof. These changes help to soften the angular mass of the building, and easily give this 1950s-era building the appearance of a Prairie School design that was ubiquitous in La Crosse forty years earlier. Shadows cast by the hipped roof change shape along the surface of the building throughout the day, increasing the buildings visual interest.





South Branch Library, East Elevation, 2024. Source: David Riel.



South Branch Library, North Elevation, 2024. Source: David Riel.

## **Narrative History**



La Crosse Public Library Building (1888), ca. 1960. Source: UWL Murphy Library Special Collections/ARC.

As early as 1853, efforts began to form a public library, with the La Crosse Library Co. opening in a store on Front Street. The library company formed when La Crosse only had about 500 residents. Struggling to acquire books and steady funding, they eventually disbanded in 1859. A new group, the Young Men's Library Association formed in the year 1868, with local businessman Mons Anderson acting as chairman while the group became organized.

In 1882, former Wisconsin Governor, Civil War General, and businessman Cadwallader C. Washburn died, leaving \$50,000 to the City of La Crosse for the establishment of a public library. His will only allowed \$12,500 of that money to buy land and construct a building, which proved financially challenging.

The board of the Young Men's Library Association worked to secure more funding, then purchased land on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Main Street in 1885. The group disbanded when the La Crosse Public Library was formed in 1888.



With La Crosse's population surging between 1888 and 1900, it quickly became apparent the library would need to expand to meet the community's needs. In 1905, the first branch library opened on the North Side in Brakke Drug Store at 1353 Caledonia Street, with a collection of 225 books. By 1914, that branch had more than 2500 books. Focus then shifted to the South Side.



Former Barracks In Powell Park, ca. 1924. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

According to the La Crosse Public Library: "In 1914 the "Webster Outlet" was opened in Webster School at 1402 Redfield Street, although the South Branch Library wasn't a reality until 1922. The library moved into a former school barracks at Jackson Street and West Avenue, on the south side of Powell Park, in 1924. It was cold in winter and so hot in the summer it had to be closed many afternoons. Like its sister to the north, the South Branch Library also suffered severe space shortages for collections and programming."

Seen above, these barracks (initially considered temporary), served as a library branch for about 28 years. In the 1930s, an effort was made to secure funding from the Public Works Administration to build a modern library, but the effort was unsuccessful. In the 1940s, World War II restrictions on building materials diverted necessary resources. In 1951, funding was finally approved by the residents of La Crosse through an election referendum. After a decades-long struggle, a modern South Branch Library was about to become a reality.

# Architects Open Offices In City

Orval J. Nelson, born and raised in La Crosse, and son of Bernt Nelson, of the local contracting firm of Peter Nelson and son, has, together with Frank J. Fuchs, registered architect, become successor to the late Otto A. Merman, prominent architect who passed away recently.

The two men have taken over the entire office and business, including plans of buildings erected in the past, as well as sketches of proposed work.

"Architects Open Offices In City." Source: La Crosse Tribune, June 23, 1935, pg. 11.

Nelson Wm S (Theresa A) shoemkr LaCrosse Rubber M Co  
h2100 Liberty  
Nelson & Fuchs (Orval J Nelson, Frank J Fuchs) archts  
115 S 4th  
**NEON SUPPLY CO, Cyril Hedrick Mgr, Everything in Neon  
Signs 111 S 2d, Tel 555**

La Crosse City Directory, 1937. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

The South Branch Library was designed by architect Frank J. Fuchs. Born in Austria on July 5, 1904, Fuchs attended the University of Chicago and graduated with honors from the Armour Institute of Architects. After graduating, he worked in a Chicago architecture firm with Orval Nelson until 1934, when both men decided to move to La Crosse, creating the firm Nelson & Fuchs.

After the passing of architect Otto Merman in 1935, Nelson & Fuchs purchased Merman's firm, which included Merman's blueprints, pending projects and other intellectual property. Even though Otto Merman (who also designed the North Branch Library) worked in a variety of styles, he was primarily known for his Prairie School architecture. Frank J. Fuchs may've taken his design inspiration for the South Branch Library from Otto Merman's Prairie School background. Nelson & Fuchs dissolved in 1941, but Frank J. Fuchs



Frank J. Fuchs. Source: La Crosse Tribune, September 25, 1977, pg. 1.

would continue his architectural practice, designing a variety of significant buildings and structures in La Crosse and throughout the region, including:

- The PWA-funded Memorial Pool and Bathhouse on State Street (1938).
- Logan High School Auditorium on Avon Street (1939).
- Pla-Mor Bowling Alley on 4th Street (1940).
- The "WayLite Blocks" Demonstration House at 815 S. 22nd Street (1941).
- VFW Hall Post No. 1530 on 3rd Street (1947).
- Freyhoff Flying Service Airport Hangar at Municipal Airport (1947).
- Alfred G. Shay House in the Verchota addition on 21st Terrace (1949).
- La Crosse County Highway Dept. Shop Building on Highway 16 (1949).
- Our Redeemer Lutheran Church at 21st Place and Weston (1952).
- The "Bear Den" at Myrick Park Zoo (1953).
- Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium (1955).
- Shelby Town Hall and Fire Department (1957).
- The Jackson Street Shopping Plaza (1957).
- Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG) Co. Building at 59 Copeland Avenue (1959).
- Educational Building - St. John's Church on West Avenue (1961).
- John's Memorial Chapel - Wesley Methodist Church at 8<sup>th</sup> & King (1963).



The Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium was perhaps the most significant and well-known building designed by Frank J. Fuchs during his lifetime. However, it's also worth noting that Fuchs designed the first house in La Crosse specifically planned for a paraplegic in 1949. Alfred G. Shay, a WWII veteran paralyzed from the waist down, was to have wheelchair ramps instead of stairs and swinging doors that could be "easily entered from any side."



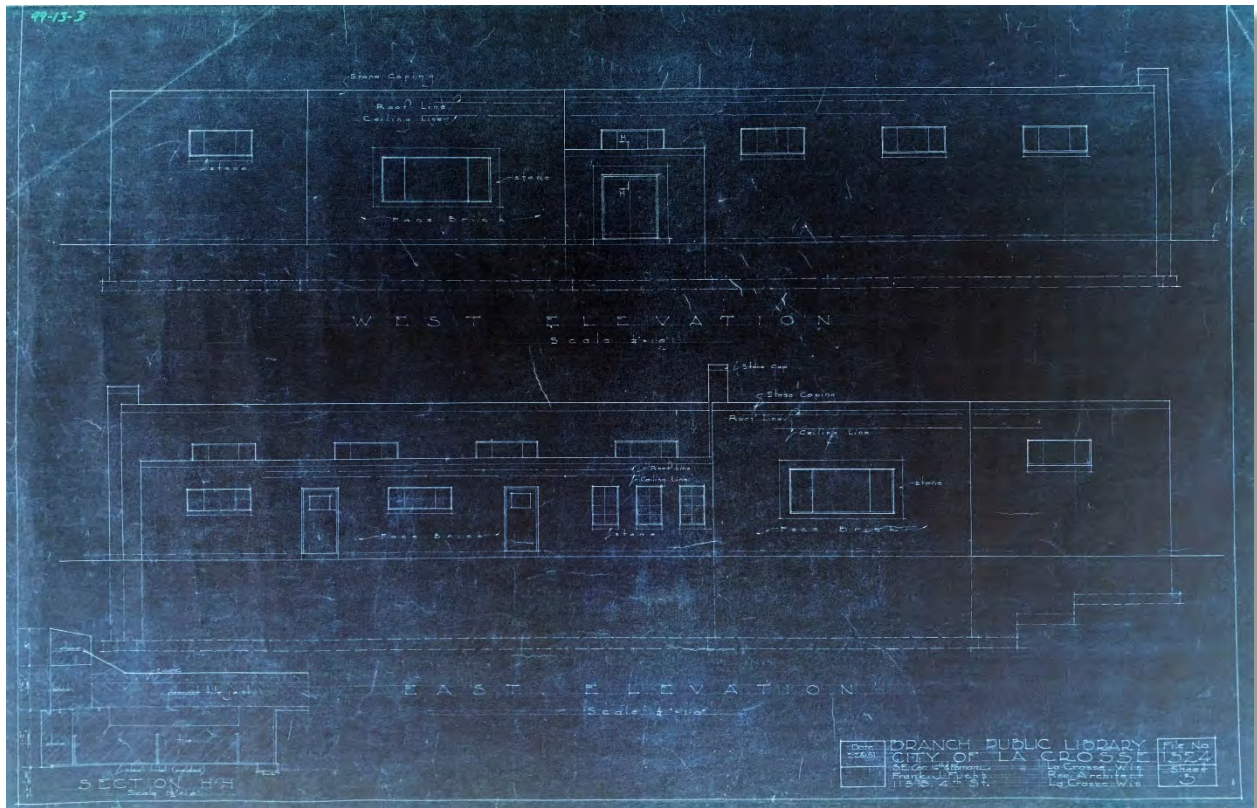
South Branch Library Concept Art, Architect Frank J. Fuchs. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

Concept art for the South Branch Library, seen above, was presented in the La Crosse Tribune March 11th, 1951, depicting a rectilinear structure with a flat roof. With the exception of the hipped roof that was added in a 1993 remodel, the building today appears nearly identical to Frank J. Fuchs plan.

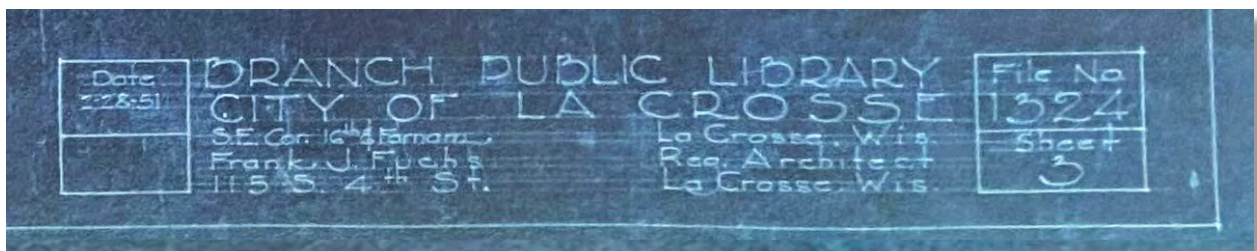
It should also be noted that Fuchs is cited in the March 11, 1951 article as the architect of the North Branch Library. Architect Otto Merman actually designed the "Tudor style" North Branch Library in 1923. However, funding challenges delayed the North Side project until after Merman's passing in 1935. When Frank J. Fuchs acquired Merman's firm in 1935, Fuchs oversaw construction of Merman's design in 1942 after funding finally became available. It is unclear if Merman was already sketching ideas for a South Branch Library, but the floorplans of the North Branch Library and South Branch Library are very similar. Considering that Fuchs bought all of Merman's work, it is very likely that some of Merman's design aesthetic had an influence on Fuchs projects.

Blueprints for the South Branch Library are on file with the City of La Crosse Engineering Department. Sheet 3, seen below, was drawn February 28, 1951 and depicts the west and east elevations. A comparison of the 1951 blueprints to the South Branch Library building today shows no discernable change. The building retains a high degree of historic integrity and is in excellent condition.

That excellent condition is due in large part to the *years of significant financial investment* the taxpayers of La Crosse have made in the building. In addition to the cost of the 1993 remodel, upgrades in 2020 included new energy-efficient LED lighting and replaced boilers in the HVAC system. In 2021, a new roof was added, and that upgrade alone cost La Crosse taxpayers \$74,710.00.



South Branch Library Blueprints, Architect Frank J. Fuchs, 1951. Source: City of La Crosse Engineering Department.



South Branch Library Blueprints, Detail, Architect Frank J. Fuchs, 1951. Source: City of La Crosse Engineering Department.





South Branch Library Ground Breaking, 1951. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

Ground broke on the South Branch Library June 30, 1951. Officials in attendance, seen above, from left to right was Miss Nellie MacDonald, South Branch librarian; Arthur Schwalbe Jr., representing contractor F. R. Schwalbe & Sons; Judge C. R. Baldwin and Joseph Liskovec, members of the library board; Miss Muriel Fuller, librarian; Frank J. Fuchs, architect; Alderman Melvin Olson; and Mayor Henry Ahrens, breaking ground with shovel in hand.

Construction of the South Branch Library building was a source of great civic pride. It represented a major accomplishment for the community, decades in the making, and was publicly celebrated in several La Crosse Tribune articles.

Three reputable contractors submitted bids to construct the building. Of these, F.R. Schwalbe & Sons was the lowest bidder and selected. Their low bid was \$88,768.00, which did not include the architect's fees. A bond of \$125,000.00 was approved to cover the total cost, which ended up being \$128,000.00.

# FRANK R. SCHWALBE,

## General Contractor and Builder.



**Contracts taken for  
all kinds of Build-  
ings and Carpenter  
Work.**

**Personally oversees the  
fulfillment of all his con-  
tracts.** ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀

**Estimates Furnished on Application**

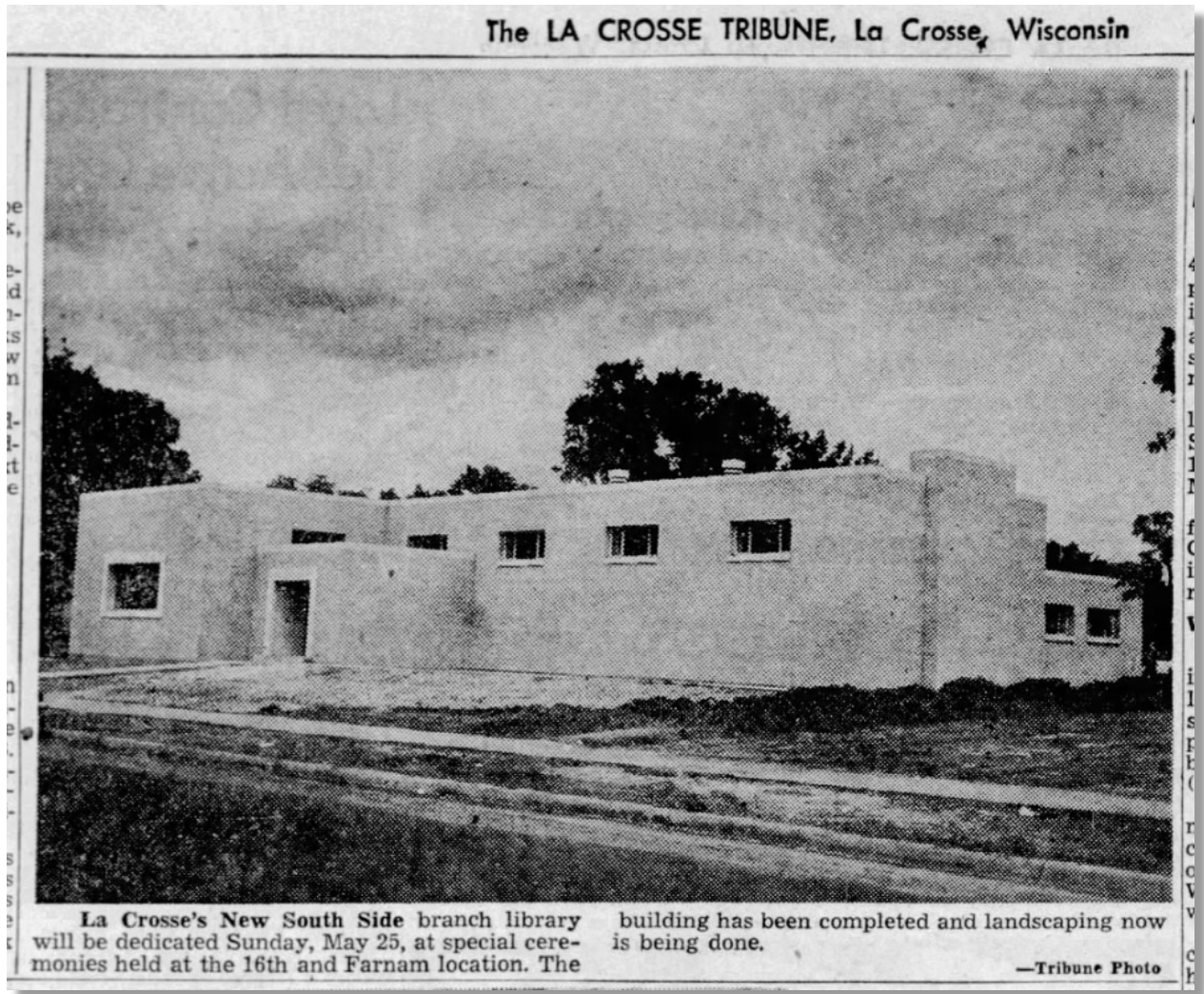
**OFFICE 1524 MADISON STREET.**

Frank R. Schwalbe Ad, La Crosse City Directory, 1900. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

The South Branch Library was built by F. R. Schwalbe & Sons, one of the most prominent General Contractor and Builder firms in La Crosse history.

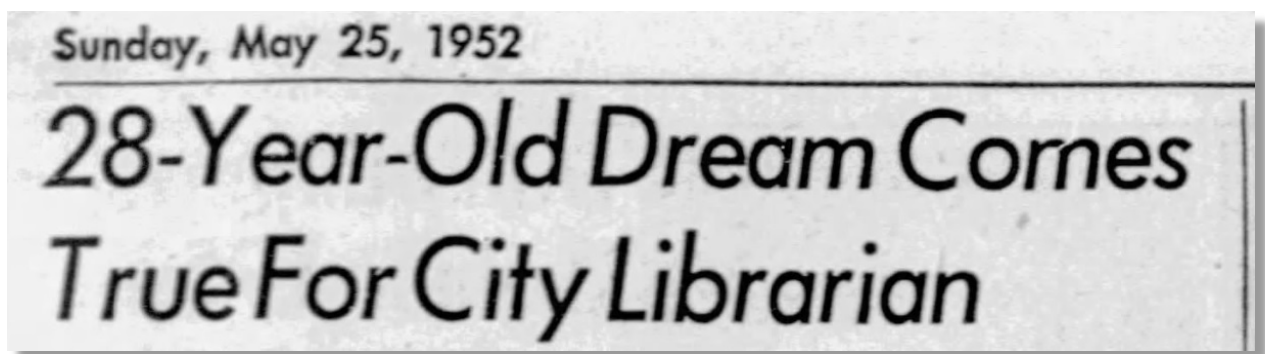
Frank's father, Joseph Schwalbe, first appears in the 1873 La Crosse City Directory, listed as a carpenter residing on 8th Street near Mississippi Street. Joseph and his son Frank created Joseph Schwalbe & Son, which operated from 1891 until Joseph retired in 1897. At that point, Frank formed Schwalbe & Magnussen with contractor Nels Magnussen.

By 1915, F.R. Schwalbe & Sons was established, which included Frank's sons Frank Jr. and Arthur. The Schwalbe family built (and/or owned) some of the most significant commercial and residential properties in La Crosse, including the Rivoli Theater at 115-123 4th Street, the Salzer House at 1634 King Street, the Frank Schwalbe House at 1524 Madison Street, and the Frank Schwalbe Jr. House at 1420 Madison Street. Frank Schwalbe Jr. died in 1929 at the age of 40. Frank Sr. died in 1941 at age 77, but the firm F. R. Schwalbe & Sons continued under Arthur Schwalbe until he died in 1956.



"La Crosse's New South Side Branch Library." Source: La Crosse Tribune, May 15, 1952.

The South Branch Library was dedicated Sunday, May 25, 1952 at 2:30 p.m. An open house was scheduled from 2-5 p.m. with refreshments served, encouraging the public to join in the celebration of their new, modern library.



"28-Year-Old Dream Comes True For City Librarian." Source: La Crosse Tribune, May 25, 1952, pg. 15.



South Branch Library Dedication Ceremony. Source: La Crosse Tribune, May 26, 1952, pg. 7.

At the dedication ceremony, seen above, from left to right are Melvin Olson, 8th Ward alderman; Walter S. Botsford, executive secretary, Wisconsin Free Library Commission, who was the principle speaker; Miss Nellie MacDonald, South Branch librarian; Miss Muriel Fuller, chief librarian; and Mayor Henry Ahrens. Even though it was a day of celebration, Miss Muriel Fuller was quoted as saying she expected the following day “would be business as usual.”





"Already Busy At Her Desk." Source: La Crosse Tribune, May 25, 1952, pg. 15.

The May 25th, 1952 La Crosse Tribune quoted Miss Nellie MacDonald, the South Branch librarian as saying "People always told me to wait for my new library," says Miss MacDonald, "and now it's really a dream come true."



"Pre-School Story Period." Source: La Crosse Tribune, November 27, 1952, pg. 21.

The South Branch Library building is worthy of preservation for several reasons. The building was designed by a prominent architect and master builder, and is in excellent condition thanks to the substantial financial investment taxpayers have made for more than seven decades. However, the building is also worthy of preservation because it was at the center of social life for multiple generations of La Crosse residents. There are residents who visited the South Branch Library as children in the 1950s, only to return 30 years later with *their children*, then in subsequent years with *their grandchildren*. It is part of the very fabric of this community. If the South Branch Library building is preserved, it will continue to serve the community for many decades to come.





South Branch Library, ca. 1952. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

The South Branch Library building is more than just a structure. It's a symbol of the perseverance and determination of our community. It also represents a significant financial investment made by multiple generations of taxpayers, and it would be cost prohibitive to build something of this quality again. It's an asset of great historic, cultural, and financial importance to the community.

The South Branch Library building satisfies all four criteria under Section 20.90 of the Municipal Code of Ordinances for La Crosse Historic Landmark designation, and if designated, will continue to benefit future generations.

- The South Branch Library building is a unique, publicly-owned asset, a historically-significant example of municipal library architecture whose creation made significant contributions to the history, heritage and culture of the City of La Crosse and multiple generations of residents.
- The South Branch Library building embodies the distinguishing characteristics of a Prairie School influenced mid-century library. Constructed of golden brick and locally-sourced Winona Stone, it is inherently valuable for the study of a period, style or method of construction or of indigenous materials and craftsmanship.
- The South Branch Library building is representative of the notable work of a master architect, Frank J. Fuchs, a significant architect responsible for a variety of buildings and structures in La Crosse and throughout the region, including the non-extant Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium. It is also notable for the work of a master builder, F. R. Schwalbe & Sons.
- The South Branch Library building is the result of a multi-decade struggle to provide educational opportunities to the community. The community effort to build a modern public library exemplifies of reflects the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of La Crosse.

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# City of La Crosse, Wisconsin

City Hall  
400 La Crosse Street  
La Crosse, WI 54601

## Text File

File Number: 24-0592

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**Agenda Date:** 4/25/2024

**Version:** 1

**Status:** Agenda Ready

**In Control:** Heritage Preservation Commission

**File Type:** Review of Plans

**Agenda Number:** 3.



# La Crosse Fire Department

## Division of Community Risk Management

inspection@cityoflacrosse.org 608-789-7530

<http://www.cityoflacrosse.org/your-government/departments/fire-department>



## SIGNS

### When do I obtain a sign permit?

A Sign permit is required for signs placed on awnings, canopies and walls. Also, a sign permit is required for ground, projecting and suspended signs.

### Data Requirements:

- Completed and signed Application for Building Permit
- 2 colored pictures of the sign (indicating size of sign)
- For ground signs, a site plan showing the location of the sign and structural calculations for footings for signs.
- For wall signs, size of wall, location of sign and information on where the sign faces (road or parking).
- For awning and canopy signs, indicate size of awning or canopy, and their location on the building.
- For suspended and projecting signs, height above the sidewalk (if applicable) and location on building.
- Pole signs are prohibited.

If you would like to submit the permit application electronically, please upload the forms and email them to [inspection@cityoflacrosse.org](mailto:inspection@cityoflacrosse.org)

### How long does it take to get my permit?

Permits are reviewed on a first come, first serve basis. Inspectors are allowed 10 business days to complete. They may take longer depending on circumstances. For an additional cost you can EXPEDITE your application, moving it to the forefront.

### How much does a permit cost?

Building Permit Fees can be found on the City website at this link <https://www.cityoflacrosse.org/fire/fees/buildings>

### What do I do with the card I received with the building permit?

The yellow permit card should go in a window or where it can be seen from the street

### When must I call for building inspections?

Inspections are required:

- After excavation, before playing concrete.
- When the project is complete.

### Frequently encountered issues:

Following is a list of frequent problems or errors we encounter:

- Excavation full of water/mud
- Excavation not to a minimum 48" depth
- Foundation backfilled before inspection
- Permit holder forgets to call us for required inspection, especially the required final inspection

**The property owner is responsible for correct placement of structures upon a parcel of land to comply with the building and zoning law. The back edge of the City sidewalk is usually located on a property line.**

Be sure to call Digger's Hotline prior to digging. The number is 1-800-242-8511.



# La Crosse Fire Department

Division of Community Risk Management

[inspection@cityoflacrosse.org](mailto:inspection@cityoflacrosse.org) 608-789-7530

<http://www.cityoflacrosse.org/your-government/departments/fire-department>

## APPLICATION FOR *BUILDING* PERMIT



Application Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Parcel Number: \_\_\_\_\_

### OWNER INFORMATION

Name:			
Address of Above: Street	City	State	Zip Code
Phone:	Cell:	Fax:	Email:

### CONTRACTOR INFORMATION

Name:			
Address of Above: Street	City	State	Zip Code
Phone:	Cell:	Fax:	Email:

### PROJECT INFORMATION

Project Address:		
Construction Cost: \$	Description of Work: <small>If Demolition, include intended use of land after demolition</small>	
Project Type: <input type="checkbox"/> Building <input type="checkbox"/> Addition <input type="checkbox"/> Sign <input type="checkbox"/> Alteration/Remodel <input type="checkbox"/> Demolition		
Architect/Engineer Name:	Architect/Engineer Phone:	Level of Alteration (per IEBC):

### PROPERTY INFORMATION

Zoning:	Nbr. Dwelling Units:	Flood Plain <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Fire Limits <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Archaeological District: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Building Construction Type:	Occupancy Type:			

### FEE INFORMATION

Copies: \$	Plan Review: \$	Permit: \$	Record Mtce: \$	Other: \$	Total: \$
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IT IS HEREBY AGREED between the applicant, as owner, owner's agent or servant, and the City of La Crosse that for and in consideration for the premises and of the permit to construct, erect, alter, move, raze, or install and the occupancy of a building adding or property as above described, to be issued and granted by Fire Prevention and Building Safety of the City of La Crosse, that the work thereon will be done in accordance with the descriptions set forth in this statement, and as more fully described in the specifications and plans herewith filed and it is further agreed to construct, erect, alter, move, raze or install and occupy in strict compliance with the ordinances of the City of La Crosse, and to obey any and all lawful orders of Fire Prevention and Building Safety of the City of La Crosse and State of Wisconsin laws relating to the construction, alteration, repairs, removal and safety buildings and other structures and permanent building equipment.

Agent/Contractor: \_\_\_\_\_ (Print) *Carlee Strong* (Sign) \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) \_\_\_\_\_ (WI Cred/Qual)

Owner: \_\_\_\_\_ (Print) \_\_\_\_\_ (Sign) \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

### OFFICE USE ONLY

Application Approved:	Inspector:	Date:
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## La Crosse Sign Group

lacrossesign.com

1450 Oak Forest Drive Onalaska, WI 54650 608-781-1450  
2242 Mustang Way Madison, WI 53718 608-222-5353  
2502 Melby Street Eau Claire, WI 54703 715-835-6189

This artwork is copyright La Crosse Sign Group and may not otherwise be used without permission. It is the property of La Crosse Sign Group and must be returned to them upon request.

### Client

Nom Coffee  
313 Main St  
La Crosse, WI 54601

### Project

Non-Lit Wall Sign

### Consultant

Kyle Sanger

### Design Art

Chris Clark

### Wall Sign Specifications

- 33"x96" Aluminum Panel
- 3M Opaque Vinyl Graphics
- Printed Vinyl Graphics

### Area

- 22 sqft

### Color Key

- 1  PMS 205 C/Magenta - 103
- 2  PMS 1895 C
- 3  White - 10
- 4
- 5

### Job Number

124860-3

### Creation Date

4-2-2024

### Revision Date

4-8-2024

### Revision Number

3

### File Path

C:\Users\Clark\La Crosse Sign Company\Job Files - Documents\WNum Coffee\LA CROSSE\124860-Non Lit Wall Sign\Design

Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Landlord: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Colors on sketch are only a representation, actual color of finished product may differ from this sketch.

\*To make the best use of standard sized materials and control costs the size of the finished product may vary slightly.

## HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION REPORT

Certificate of Appropriateness- Downtown Commercial Historic District.  
Section 115-320(d)(2)

**TO:** Heritage Preservation Commission  
**FROM:** Planning Staff  
**MEETING DATE:** April 25, 2024

**PROPOSAL:** The applicant is proposing to replace an awning with a wall sign on the property located at 313 Main Street.

**PROPERTY/BUSINESS OWNER:**

608 Properties LLC  
119 19<sup>TH</sup> Street N  
La Crosse, WI 54601

**APPLICANT:**

La Crosse Sign Group  
Carlee Strong

**BACKGROUND:** The Downtown Commercial Historic District was established by Ordinance in April 2016 along with design standards that are specific to the styles of architecture found within. The local district designation of the Downtown Commercial Historic District was created to encourage preservation of the historic resources of the district, which was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994. The design standards and review procedures are used to guide preservation, rehabilitation, new construction, relocation and demolitions. Plans or requests must be approved by the Heritage Preservation Commission prior to any building/demolition permit being issued. In determining whether to issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for Demolition, the HPC shall:

1. Consider factors such as whether the structure is of historical significance, the state of repair of the building, and whether denial of a permit would create a significant economic hardship for the owner.
2. Issue the certificate only if the owner can demonstrate that the building is structurally unsound and/or that denial of a demolition permit would create a significant economic hardship for the owner.

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** The applicant is proposing to remove an existing awning and replace it with an aluminum wall sign. The wall sign will be 2'-9" in height and 8' in width. It is flat, non-lit, with printed graphics. It will be attached to the building with aluminum tieback clips and mounting fasteners

Existing Façade



Proposed Facade



SEE ATTACHED PLANS FOR MORE INFORMATION

## ANALYSIS:

Design standards for signs are:

*Signs* . In historic commercial buildings, signs were typically mounted above storefronts flush with the façade, or projected perpendicularly from the façade. Signs were also placed in windows and appeared on awnings. All of these sign types are appropriate if designed with suitable materials and dimensions. Signs shall be placed where they would have historically been placed, and shall not cover significant architectural features or ornamentation.

- a. Sign installation shall be reversible - that is, it should leave no trace on the building after the sign is removed.
- b. Sign colors shall be compatible with those of the building; a limited palette of no more than four colors should be used.
- c. Traditional materials (wood and metal) are appropriate, while plastic is not. Neon signs may be used with the approval of the HPC. Other composite material may be approved by the Heritage Preservation Commission.
- d. Modern back-lit fluorescent signs, animated signs, awnings, or electronic billboards and signs with changeable letters are prohibited.
- e. Small free-standing or wall-mounted signs may be used to identify rear entrances or parking areas.
- f. Wayfinding, directional, or upcoming event signs that maintain the historic character of the Downtown may be approved by the Heritage Preservation Commission.
- g. All proposed signs must receive a sign permit from the Fire Department - Division of Fire Protection and Building Safety in accordance with [section 111-36](#) of the Municipal Code



The proposed sign is intended to be installed where the existing sign is currently located or traditionally located. They will not physically impair any significant architectural features nor visually impair any portion of the storefront. They are constructed of aluminum panels which is an appropriate material. The sign is non-lit..

**FINDING:** The proposed sign is in conformance with the Downtown Historic District Design Standards. The composite sign face material must be approved by the Commission.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION BY STAFF:** This Certificate of Appropriateness is recommended for approval with the condition that it is approved by the Community Risk Management Department.



# City of La Crosse, Wisconsin

City Hall  
400 La Crosse Street  
La Crosse, WI 54601

## Text File

**File Number: 24-0473**

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**Agenda Date:** 3/28/2024

**Version:** 1

**Status:** Agenda Ready

**In Control:** Heritage Preservation Commission

**File Type:** General Item

**Agenda Number:** 4.

# PROPOSAL TO INCLUDE GHOST SIGN LANGUAGE IN THE MUNICIPAL CODE

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Statement of Intent .....2

Example Definitions .....3

Related Terms and Definitions .....4

Best Practices for Brick .....6

Criteria for Designation .....11

The Goals of our Municipality.....12

Resources .....13

## STATEMENT OF INTENT

In order to promote and practice heritage preservation in La Crosse, it is in our best interest as a municipality to survey and attend to the early building structures of our community. The majority of early La Crosse buildings and settlements are made out of brick, a durable material that is self-sustaining in the way that it is breathable and can rid itself of moisture naturally. With the industrial revolution came the artistry of advertising, which propelled the practice of hand-painting advertisements on the side of brick buildings. These advertisements are now referred to as Ghost signs, due to their faded appearance, their age, and the way they are segments of a community's cultural history. Many local business owners have inquired about these signs and what can be done with them, if they are responsible for them, if they are protected by some form of legislation, if they can be restored, if they can be removed, or if they can be covered up. Without recognition of ghost signs in the municipal code, it has been difficult to respond to these kinds of questions, as they do not necessarily fit into the types of signs defined in our code already. These signs are particularly complex, in the way that most of them are original, one-of-a-kind paintings that were created by local artists, but also were created on structures that were not intended to be painted on. The community is demonstrating investment and concern for these artifacts, which has ignited this research. The intention of this project is to determine what our municipality can do regarding these signs so that we can provide guidance for community members, protect our brick structures, and preserve La Crosse Heritage in a meaningful way.

## EXAMPLE DEFINITIONS OF “GHOST SIGN”

- “Ghost sign means a faded painted sign that is more than fifty (50) years old that remains from an earlier time. Ghost signs provide evidence of the history of the use of the building, product, service, events, or activities of the community.” (Mesquite, TX)
- “A sign of historic nature and character painted on the side of a building. These signs generally serve no current purpose with regards to commercial or noncommercial advertising.” (Arkadelphia, AR)
- “A painted wall sign that remains from an earlier time or advertises the use of a building that provides evidence of the history of the use of the building or activities of the community. A “Ghost Sign” is not considered an off-premise sign.” (Oak Park, IL)
- “A remaining image of a hand painted sign on the exterior of a building or structure that existed prior to 1970” (Clarksville, TN)
- “A sign, painted upon the façade of a building, that is in excess of fifty (50) years old and which generally advertises an extinct business” (Helena MT)

## RELATED TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

### Art

- The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power (Oxford Dictionary).
- “Produced as an artistic effort or for decorative purposes” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

### Brick

- “A small rectangular block typically mad of fired or sun-dried clay, used in a building” (Oxford dictionary).

### Illuminated light Capsules

- “Intricately mapped projections that resurrect ghost signs, the faded historic advertisements painted on the sides of buildings” (Faded ‘ghost signs’ given new life in Astoria - OPB).

### Mortar

- “A workable paste which hardens to bind building blocks such as stones, bricks, and concrete masonry units, to fill and seal the irregular gaps between them, spread the weight of them evenly, and sometimes to add decorative colors or patterns to masonry walls.” (Wikipedia).

### Mural

- “A painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall” (Oxford Dictionary).

### Obsolete product

- A product that is “no longer produced or used; out of date” (Oxford Dictionary).

### Patina

- “A usually green film formed naturally on copper and bronze by long exposure or artificially (as by acids) and often valued aesthetically for its color” (Merriam Webster).

### Projection

- “The Presentation of an image on a surface” (Oxford Definition)



### Removal

- “The action of taking away or abolishing something unwanted” (Oxford Dictionary).

### Restoration

- “The action of returning something to a former owner, place or condition” (Oxford Dictionary).

### Revitalization

- “The action of imbuing something with new life and vitality” (Oxford Dictionary).
- “The process of making something grow, develop, or become successful again” (Cambridge Dictionary).

### Sign

- “Any device, fixture, placard, or structure that uses any color, form, graphic, illumination, symbol or writing to advertise, announces the purpose of, or identify the purpose of a person or entity, or to communicate information of any kind to the public (La Crosse Municicode).

# BEST PRACTICES FOR BRICK

## MAINTAINING ORIGINAL, UNPAINTED BRICK

### *Leave it as is*

The average lifespan for brick is over 500 years when it remains in its original form and is not exposed to compromising materials. In the ideal environment, brick can be expected to remain serviceable for 650 years. The best practice for making brick last is for it to remain unpainted, with minimal to no exposure to any cleaners, sealants, or other barriers and potential pollutants. The material is naturally porous, so moisture retention is inevitable. However, its porous nature also allows the material to rid itself of moisture, which is necessary to prevent mold growth and other forms of deterioration. When brick is painted, its ability to breathe and rid itself of moisture is compromised, as paint essentially clogs the pores. Paint on brick can often hinder our ability to see structural issues underneath, like cracks in mortar joints, soft mortar or efflorescence preventing these issues from being addressed and attended to, further shortening the life span of the structure.

### *Cleaning Brick*

Brick masonry itself can sometimes change color due its environment and age, often giving the appearance of a dirt coating, though cleaning brick is not necessary for its health. The appearance of brick can be affected by soot/smoke, metal stains, rust, paint, and tendrils (the remnants of ivy growth). If cleaning is desired it is best to assess the cause of the undesired appearance before taking any action so that the masonry can be best protected throughout the cleaning process. It is also important to understand the environmental, public, and personal safety threats that cleaning can cause. Cleaning can be done through water-based, chemical, or mechanical methods. The least harmful approach includes hosing the brick until the desired area is wet, then using a sponge or hard bristled brush with soap and water to gently scrub the surface. In any case, it is crucial to wear protective gear such as gloves, a face covering and safety goggles, as it is likely that the materials being shed in this process will be harmful to the eyes, skin and will contaminate the air.

## *Leave it as is*

Due to the advertising practices that emerged with the industrial revolution, many brick buildings have already been painted, and some have been re-painted over and over. Ghost signs are a result of this late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century practice, meaning that the brick structures where the signs reside have already been compromised to some degree. Generally, the best and safest practice for preserving painted brick is to leave it as is. A non-profit organization, Texas Preservation, headquartered in San Marcos explains that: “repainting a historic sign can destroy the patina that is associated with its authenticity.” It is important in heritage preservation to consider the authenticity of original signs, however, not all painted brick signs are historical in nature, therefore it can be desirable to re-paint, clean or remove them.

### *Cleaning Painted Brick*

Cleaning painted brick is generally unnecessary, however it is helpful step when the goal is to restore a painting or remove paint. As discussed for cleaning un-painted brick, the least harmful approach includes hosing the brick until the desired area is wet, then using a sponge or hard bristled brush with soap and water to gently scrub the surface. When paint is present, it is especially important to utilize personal protective gear when cleaning, as there is increased exposure to potentially harmful materials. Many of the paints used at the time these paintings were created contained lead, which is an incredibly harmful pollutant that contaminate the air. In addition to wearing personal protective gear, it is crucial to have a plan in place for water and waste disposal due to the pollutants present. The Environmental Protection Agency requires under the federal Toxic Substances Control Act that and the Residential Lead-Based Activities Reduction Act that contractors working with paint on dwellings built before 1978 must be certified in lead-safe work practices.

### *Re-painting Brick*

Removing paint from brick surfaces can be very damaging to the integrity of the material, and it is not advised. Painting over already-painted brick does not usually damage the masonry further or expose it to more danger. The Historic National Trust suggests that it is usually better to re-paint ghost signs a sympathetic color rather than to remove the paint. The paint removal process will often be more destructive to the face of the brick, as it often removes the mortar and or its soft jointing, compromising its appearance and structural endurance. Re-painting brick rather than removing paint will also help to avoid

the disposal of potentially harmful materials, as many paints used for older signs contain lead. However, in cases where the paint is flaking or chipping and revival of the painting is desired, it may be necessary to remove some areas of paint that have loosened in order to achieve a simplistic, restored aesthetic. When it is necessary to remove paint due to chipping or layering, address only the necessary areas with water, a gentle cleansing brush, and if necessary, a paint scraper. To avoid further damage to the surface, it is best to use a breathable sealant or porous paint so that the material is not more constricted in its ability to breathe. Paints and clear sealants that are water and/or silicone based are typically the most breathable.

Many Ghost sign restoration projects have been executed in a way to preserve the authenticity of the original sign, addressing only the necessary details to return the sign to or maintain its legibility. In 2020, Brushcan Custom Murals & Hand Painted Signs restored three historical signs in Mooresville, North Carolina. The company hand cleaned the signs, re-painted only the necessary details, and sealed the paintings with acrylic urethane finish.



"Selz Chicago" and "Kelly Clothing" signs after the 2020 restoration project

A sign from 1913 in Queen Street in Ontario, Canada that reads "Loew's leads in Toronto. Show starts daily 9:30 AM" was also recently restored to resemble its original appearance. This project completed by Lori LeMare Studio Inc and was overseen by the Ontario Heritage Trust. The restoration includes the repointing of mortar, removal and cleaning of several layers of paint, replacement of some individual bricks, hand cleaning the surface, use of a clear, breathable mineral paint to coat the original sign, which was then finished with a breathable colored paint to restore the negative space of the sign.



Photograph of the Queen Street "Loew's" sign in 1942



Photograph of the Queen Street "Loew's" sign before the Restoration Project



Photograph of the Queen Street "Loew's" sign after the Restoration Project

### **Removing Paint from Brick**

The process of removing paint from brick can be extremely difficult to execute correctly, which is why it is best for the structure and the environment to leave the paintings alone. When removal is desired or it is necessary for a restoration project, however, the first course of action should be to assess the integrity of the wall underneath to ensure it can withstand any removal method. Testing a section of the wall before beginning the project can be helpful in determining the state of the structure. Generally, it is best to avoid chemical and mechanical methods as they are abrasive, pose many safety concerns, use more resources, and are likely to damage the mortar of the brick. Using a water-based cleaning method first can loosen up the paint to allow it to be more easily scraped off. Paint can be stubborn, particularly older, industrial, often lead-based paint that was used for these painted advertisements. When the gentle removal approach does not work, then it may be time to move onto a chemical or mechanical method.

**Chemical removal methods** usually include applying a layer of paint remover, which will then bond with the paint, causing a reaction that breaks the paint particles down. Once the reaction occurs, the wall should be rinsed so that the remover and the paint are cleared from the wall. Chemical methods are likely to create a rinse-water disposal challenge, and can also damage the mortar of the brick.

**Mechanical removal methods**, like sand-blasting, usually require a pressure system that sprays sand or other abrasive chemicals on the wall, which will penetrate the surface, allowing the paint to come off. The pressure used in mechanical methods is often too abrasive for the brick underneath, and can cause the bricks to crumble at an accelerated rate. Sand-blasting also can release particles of paint, sand, and any chemicals used into the air, creating an environmental safety issue. If water and/or chemicals are used, there will also be a rinse-water disposal issue.



## CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

### *Ghost Sign Classification Criteria*

- Painted Directly on the exterior brick of a building
- 50 Years old or older
- Signifies the use of a building at a certain point in time OR advertises a product that demonstrates some aspect of the city's cultural history
- Faded to a noticeable point

*Over the course of this research, nineteen signs in La Crosse have been found to fit the criteria necessary to be classified as a Ghost Sign. Five additional signs were documented, but there has not been enough data collected regarding their age, therefore they do not (yet) meet the fifty-year age requirement. Additionally, one sign was found to fit all of the criteria aside from residing on a brick structure. The inventory collected includes all of the signs found to fit the criteria, as well as a few that should be considered although they deviate from the Ghost Sign classification criteria. The inventory created marks the signs according to the criterium that they do or do not follow.*

## THE GOALS

- **Create an understanding for the Historical significance of Ghost Signs**
  - Preserve historically/culturally significant signs
    - Artistry of painting?
    - Embody some aspect of La Crosse's cultural history?
- **Create concrete guidelines for classifying Ghost Signs**
- **Create Language regarding Ghost signs to include in our Municipal Code so that restoration can occur**
  - Explicitly differentiate Ghost Signs from other types of signs included in our sign code
    - "Art"? "Historical Signs"?
  - Include Ghost Sign restoration guidelines and requirements
    - Restoration Permits?
    - Material Disposal plans/requirements?
  - Include Ghost Sign removal restrictions
    - Should it be prohibited?
- **Find partners that are interested in or can perform the restoration**

## RESOURCES

[Oxford English Dictionary \(oed.com\)](https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/lookup-keyword-in-the-oxford-english-dictionary/ghost-sign)

<https://www.claybrick.org/news/500-years-average-brick-lifespan>

<https://mcgillrestoration.com/reasons-why-you-shouldnt-paint-your-brick-building/>

<https://www.preservationtexas.org/allmep/ghost-signs>

[Why This Common Reno Project Is So Controversial - Bob Vila](#)

<http://www.drkenjones.com/ghostsigns/AboutGS.php#:~:text=The%20sign%20should%20not%20be,The%20sign%20should%20be%20authentic>

## RESTORATION PRODUCTS & RESOURCES

[https://www.edisoncoatings.com/Home/Coatings/coatings.html?gad\\_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMIpoOtstDYhQMVsDfUAR2FZAi8EAMYASAAEgJq3PD\\_BwE](https://www.edisoncoatings.com/Home/Coatings/coatings.html?gad_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMIpoOtstDYhQMVsDfUAR2FZAi8EAMYASAAEgJq3PD_BwE)

<https://royalstonecare.co.uk/brick-cleaning-dos-and-donts/>

<https://www.kindhomesolutions.com/the-4-best-paints-for-painting-brick/>

[https://www.beeckmineralpaints.com/painting-bricks?gad\\_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMInv-R6qvbhAMVEE1HAR3uLAFhEAAAYASAAEgKqa\\_D\\_BwE](https://www.beeckmineralpaints.com/painting-bricks?gad_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMInv-R6qvbhAMVEE1HAR3uLAFhEAAAYASAAEgKqa_D_BwE)

## SUCCESSFUL RESTORATION PROJECTS

[https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/government-politics/a-ghost-sign-on-charlottesvilles-downtown-mall-is-coming-back-to-life/article\\_aebde8cc-1146-11ee-9df4-4b8671c21b16.html](https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/government-politics/a-ghost-sign-on-charlottesvilles-downtown-mall-is-coming-back-to-life/article_aebde8cc-1146-11ee-9df4-4b8671c21b16.html)

<https://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg/ewg-home/learn/ghost-sign>

<https://hiddencityphila.org/2021/09/not-fade-away-the-aesthetic-debate-behind-preserving-ghost-signs/>

<https://savingplaces.org/stories/your-citys-ghost-signs-have-stories-to-tell>

<https://signsforsuccess.biz/brick-wall-murals-wont-alter-damage-building/>

<https://savingplaces.org/stories/faded-glory-the-restored-ghost-signs-of-mooresville-north-carolina>

<https://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg/ewg-home/learn/ghost-sign>

## **Proposal to amend the municipal code to include Ghost signs**

### **Intent Statement:**

In order to promote and practice heritage preservation in La Crosse, it is in our best interest as a municipality to survey and attend to the early building structures of our community. The majority of early La Crosse buildings and settlements are made out of brick, a durable material that is self-sustaining in the way that it is breathable and can rid itself of moisture naturally. With the industrial revolution came the artistry of advertising, which propelled the practice of hand-painting advertisements on the side of brick buildings. These advertisements are now referred to as ghost signs. The presence of ghost signs allows us to see hints of the culture of a community from long ago. However, recent discussions have found that paint can be very damaging for brick material in the way that it corks the pores of the brick, compromise the integrity of the material underneath.

Many local business owners have inquired about what can be done with ghost signs, if they are to be protected, if they can be restored, if they should go untouched, if they can be removed, or if they can be covered up. Without recognition of ghost signs in the municipal code, it has been difficult to respond to these kinds of questions. This has been a tough debate in numerous communities in the way that ghost signs are important to understanding a community's history, yet it is just as, if not more important to preserve the foundation of the buildings underneath. This document includes definitions of ghost signs and terms related to the issue, an inventory of ghost signs in La Crosse, further information on the health of brick structures, as well as examples of efforts from other communities to address the issue.

### **Example Ghost Sign Definitions (from other municipalities):**

- *"Ghost sign means a faded painted sign that is more than fifty (50) years old that remains from an earlier time. Ghost signs provide evidence of the history of the use of the building, product, service, events, or activities of the community."* **(Mesquite, TX)**
- *"A sign of historic nature and character painted on the side of a building. These signs generally serve no current purpose with regards to commercial or noncommercial advertising."* **(Arkadelphia, AR)**
- *"A painted wall sign that remains from an earlier time or advertises the use of a building that provides evidence of the history of the use of the building or activities of the community. A "Ghost Sign" is not considered an off-premise sign."* **(Oak Park, IL)**
- *"A remaining image of a hand painted sign on the exterior of a building or structure that existed prior to 1970"* **(Clarksville, TN)**

- “A sign, painted upon the façade of a building, that is in excess of fifty (50) years old and which generally advertises an extinct business” (**Helena MT**)

### **Related terms and definitions:**

- **Brick**
  - “A small rectangular block typically made of fired or sun-dried clay, used in a building” (Oxford dictionary)
- **Illuminated light capsules**
  - “Intricately mapped projections that resurrect ghost signs, the faded historic advertisements painted on the sides of buildings” ([Faded ‘ghost signs’ given new life in Astoria - OPB](#))
- **Mortar**
  - “A workable paste which hardens to bind building blocks such as stones, bricks, and concrete masonry units, to fill and seal the irregular gaps between them, spread the weight of them evenly, and sometimes to add decorative colors or patterns to masonry walls.” (Wikipedia)
- **Mural**
  - “A painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall” (Oxford Dictionary)
- **Obsolete product**
  - A product that is “no longer produced or used; out of date” (Oxford Dictionary)
- **Patina**
  - “A usually green film formed naturally on copper and bronze by long exposure or artificially (as by acids) and often valued aesthetically for its color” (Merriam Webster)
- **Projection**
  - “The Presentation of an image on a surface” (Oxford Definition)
- **Removal**
  - “The action of taking away or abolishing something unwanted” (Oxford Dictionary)
- **Restoration**
  - “The action of returning something to a former owner, place or condition” (Oxford Dictionary)
- **Revitalization**
  - “The action of imbuing something with new life and vitality” (Oxford Dictionary)
  - “The process of making something grow, develop, or become successful again” (Cambridge Dictionary)



**La Crosse Ghost sign inventory:**



**Leithold Music Building & Jules Buildings  
(116 4<sup>th</sup> Street S & 327 Pearl Street)**



**Leithold Music Building (North wall)  
(116 4<sup>th</sup> Street S)**



**Doerflinger Building (Alley)  
(400 Main Street)**



**Amanda's Academy of Dance  
(329 Division Street)**



**319 Main street**



**511 Main street**



**602 State Street**



**605 State Street**



**413 3<sup>rd</sup> Street**





115 3<sup>rd</sup> Street



107 3<sup>rd</sup> Street



600 10<sup>th</sup> Street



111 7<sup>th</sup> Street



510 Island Street



**1200 Caledonia Street**



**1200 Caledonia Street**



**1213 Caledonia Street**

**Criteria for Ghost sign Designation:**

- Painted directly on the brick of a building
- 50 years or older
- Signifies the use of a building at a certain point in time OR advertises a product that demonstrates the culture of the city at the time it was produced
- Faded to a noticeable point



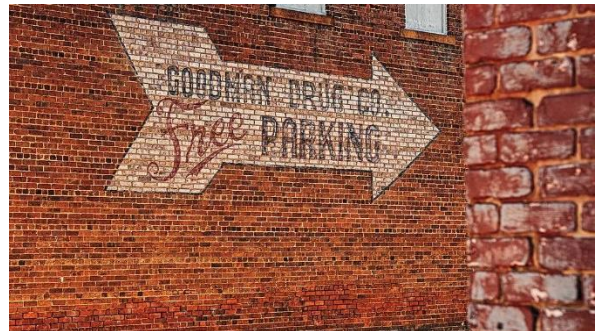
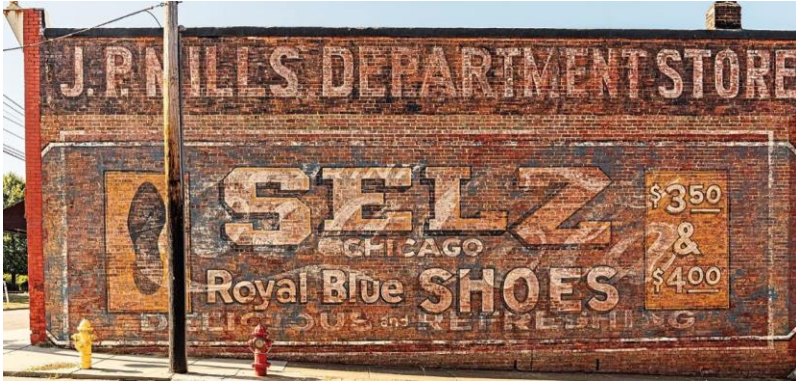
### **Issues surrounding the life span of brick:**

- According to the **Clay Brick Association**, 500 years is the average lifespan for brick, and in the right environment will be able to remain serviceable for nearly 650 years.  
(<https://www.claybrick.org/news/500-years-average-brick-lifespan>)
- **McGill Restoration**, a structural preservation company explains that once brick is painted, it is immediately compromised, and exposes the structure to more possibilities of damage. Brick is a material that is naturally breathable and can release moisture from rain and other environmental factors on its own. When paint is introduced, the brick is now stripped of its porous nature that allow for the moisture to be released, trapping moisture in the brick which leads to erosion. (<https://mcgillrestoration.com/reasons-why-you-shouldnt-paint-your-brick-building/>)
- **Preservation Texas**, a non-profit organization, headquartered in San Marcos explains that: “repainting a historic sign can destroy the patina that is associated with its authenticity” (<https://www.preservationtexas.org/allmep/ghost-signs>)
- **The Historic National Trust** suggests that it is usually better to re-paint ghost signs a sympathetic color rather than to remove the paint. The paint removal process will often be more destructive to the face of the brick as it often removes the mortar and or its soft jointing, compromising its appearance and structural endurance.

### **Successful Restoration Projects:**

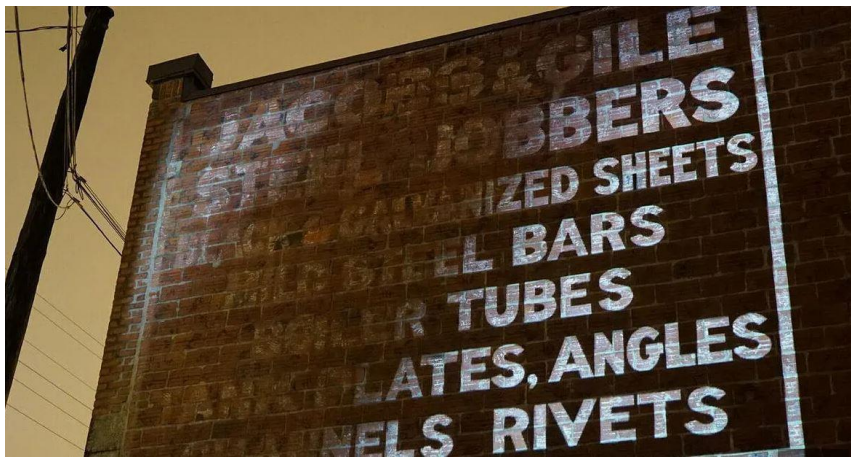
#### **Mooreville, North Carolina in 2020 (Member of Main Street America Program)**

- Brushcan Custom Murals & Hand painted signs was granted permission to restore three historical signs, not making them look “new”, rather enhancing the details that were faded to preserve the history of the signs.
- They cleaned the signs, sealed them with acrylic urethane finish, then painted only the details necessary to make the signs readable still– mimicking the way that painters used to mix colors, and allowing the paintings to still look naturally weathered.
- Residents of Mooreville have been pleased and feel a sense of pride in both the aesthetic of the town and their community’s dedication to preserve its history
- <https://savingplaces.org/stories/faded-glory-the-restored-ghost-signs-of-mooreville-north-carolina>



### Winnipeg, Canada (2017)

- Artists are using light to digitally project old advertisements on the original buildings
- This story argues that painted signs are significant as they are individual and not a mass product, giving each sign distinct character
- The story argues that the feeling of a city comes from the collection of unique buildings, artifacts and landmarks
- <https://savingplaces.org/stories/your-citys-ghost-signs-have-stories-to-tell>



### Charlottesville, VA downtown Mall sign restoration 2023

- This project was done to “amplify the authenticity of our historic district”
- The community believes that it is their responsibility to preserve “these fragile historic assets”
- The project restored an entire wall of ghost signs on the city’s Downtown Mall
- The cost of the project was \$32,000 and was covered by the Charlotte-based Coca-Cola Consolidated (since several of the signs were for Coca-Cola)

\*\*\*This article has since required a subscription to The Daily Progress to view, though it did contain images of the signs that were restored

- [https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/government-politics/a-ghost-sign-on-charlottesvilles-downtown-mall-is-coming-back-to-life/article\\_aebde8cc-1146-11ee-9df4-4b8671c21b16.html](https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/government-politics/a-ghost-sign-on-charlottesvilles-downtown-mall-is-coming-back-to-life/article_aebde8cc-1146-11ee-9df4-4b8671c21b16.html)



### Ontario Heritage Trust, Queen Street project

- “The restoration process included hand-cleaning the wall’s surfaces in preparation for a new coating. Following cleaning, the original ghost lettering was protected with a clear, breathable masonry coating of mineral paint and then colored paint was used to restore the negative space of the sign, which brought out the lettering, making it legible again.”
- The restoration was completed by Lori LeMare Studio Inc. (an experienced ghost sign restoration and decorative artist team)
- [The Loew’s heritage sign: The restoration of a ghost sign | The Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre \(heritagetrust.on.ca\)](https://heritagetrust.on.ca)



### Philadelphia Hidden City Organization

- Instead of restoring ghost signs with paint, the Artists on this project used digital illumination to recreate historical images, projecting them onto the wall of the original image
- [hiddencityphila.org/2021/09/not-fade-away-the-aesthetic-debate-behind-preserving-ghost-signs/](https://hiddencityphila.org/2021/09/not-fade-away-the-aesthetic-debate-behind-preserving-ghost-signs/)





### **Global Credit Union:**

- “Conformable wall mural film that goes up with heat and looks like a mural, but no penetrations in the wall are required, and it will come down clean later without damaging the wall”
- “The murals are 8 feet x 10 feet each. The graphics were printed on 3M porous wall film, which is designed to conform to any rough or porous surface. It produces a painted-on look without the permanence of paint. Best of all, the removable adhesive allows for easy removal with no residue left behind.” (<https://signsforsuccess.biz/brick-wall-murals-wont-alter-damage-building/>)



### **Material Suggestions for painting/restoring signs:**

- Best Masonry Paint: Loxon
  - o “If you’re looking for a paint that was specifically designed with brick in mind, look no further than Sherwin Williams Loxon. Loxon is a concrete and masonry coating that

offers fantastic weather protection. Unlike some other masonry products, it was designed to be more breathable. This allows the paint to act more like standard acrylic paint and reduces the risk of blistering and peeling. Loxon is versatile and can be used on bare, or previously painted concrete, stucco, masonry, and cement boards. We love that it comes in both flat and satin sheens and we are confident that you'll love the finished look." (<https://www.kindhomesolutions.com/the-4-best-paints-for-painting-brick/>)

- [https://www.beeckmineralpaints.com/painting-bricks?gad\\_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMInv-R6qvbhAMVEE1HAR3uLAFhEAAyASAAEgKqa\\_D\\_BwE](https://www.beeckmineralpaints.com/painting-bricks?gad_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMInv-R6qvbhAMVEE1HAR3uLAFhEAAyASAAEgKqa_D_BwE)

### Arguments *against* restoration:

- Texas Preservation
  - "Repainting a historic sign can destroy the patina that is associated with its authenticity"
    - **Patina:** A layer that is formed on a (stone) surface that is a result of oxidation or chemical process ([Patina - Wikipedia](#))
  - [Painted Advertising Signs aka "Ghost Signs" — Preservation Texas](#)
- Drken Jones: American Ghosts
  - "The sign should not be restored or recreated. Many signs have been restored, sometimes badly, sometimes so well that it is difficult to tell if the sign is or is not original. I found many restorations were more recreations, having no resemblance to the original graphics. The sign should be authentic. Many signs are new creations. For example, Central City and Blackhawk, Colorado, have added murals that look like old signs but advertise non-existent products. I also ran into some signs in New Mexico that were painted by the art department for a motion picture. Some of these are intentionally distressed to look old.
    - The sign should contain something interesting or unique. There are lots of interesting features of signs. I love the 'Where's Waldo' type of signs with the overlapping graphics making deciphering the contents a challenge.
    - There are some products, such as Coca Cola and Mail Pouch Tobacco, whose signs have become icons by themselves.
    - There are some signs that are interesting for their period fonts or graphics.
    - The signs should not be too recent. My guideline is that any sign that has more than six digits in the phone number is too new.
    - There are signs for long forgotten and quaint products, such as various patent medicines, that are time-capsules of another era. One of my favorites is the 'Dr.

Hoffman's Red Drops' sign in St. Louis, Missouri, that cures 'Colic, Cramps, and Cholera Morbus'.

- And then there are the signs with some social commentary unintentionally built in, such as the sign on a cafe in Huntington, Oregon, that states 'White Help Only'."
- <http://www.drkenjones.com/ghostsigns/AboutGS.php#:~:text=The%20sign%20should%20not%20be,The%20sign%20should%20be%20authentic>

### **Considerations for our municipal code regarding Ghost signs:**

- Define Ghost Signs, Brick, and (Ghost Sign) Restoration
- Consider Ghost signs to be non-conforming signs or classify them as Art to differentiate them from modern day signs
- Address the effects of paint on brick
- Require that no sign shall be restored without having a valid sign permit for the restoration
  - An application must be submitted to the city for the Heritage Preservation Commission to review
  - A permit can be attained after review and approval from the Heritage Preservation Commission
- Include requirements of the restoration process (IF the application is approved):
  - The building owner must complete the project through an eligible restoration artist who will then properly:
    - Clean the sign
    - Seal the sign with a porous seal
    - Retouch the Sign with porous paint, mimicking the original painters' efforts (Colors, Artistry, Aesthetic) while preserving the aged image of the sign