

# FINAL HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

## HENRY H. BUTTON HOUSE

(Written Fall, 2002)

### I. NAME

Historic: Henry Harrison Button House

Common: Button House/David Barnett Gallery

### II. LOCATION

1024-1026 E. State Street

Legal Description: SUBD OF BLOCK 105 IN NW ¼ SEC 28-7-22 BLOCK 105 N 52' LOT 6  
& E 75' (LOTS 7-8 & S 8' LOT 6)

4<sup>th</sup> Aldermanic District  
Alderman Paul A. Henningsen

### III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

### IV. OWNER

David J. Barnett  
1024 E. State Street  
Milwaukee, WI 53202

### NOMINATOR

Susan Comstock

### V. YEAR BUILT

1875<sup>1</sup>

### ARCHITECT

E. Townsend Mix<sup>2</sup>

### VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Henry Harrison Button House is located at the northwest corner of E. State Street and N. Waverly Place in what is known as the Yankee Hill Neighborhood. The house and grounds

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<sup>1</sup> Milwaukee Sentinel July 24, 1875 and December 31, 1875.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

once occupied a spacious 180-foot by 127-foot parcel consisting of three lots. Today the property has been reduced to an L-shaped parcel dimensioned at roughly 180-feet by 75-feet by 128-feet by 52-feet by 52-feet. To the east of the house is Juneau Park and across from the house is a small green square bounded by E. State St., N. Astor St., N. Prospect Ave. and E. Kilbourn Ave. The neighborhood is characterized by a mix of 19<sup>th</sup> century houses and mansions dating mostly from the 1870's through the 1890's, early 20<sup>th</sup> century apartment buildings, and 19<sup>th</sup> century churches.

The two and a half story Italian Villa style residence is the most embellished of the few surviving mansions from the 1870's. It sits back from the sidewalk behind a grassy bermed lawn planted with numerous bushes and trees. An asphalt-surfaced parking lot is located at the rear in what would have been the back yard. The Button House features an asymmetrical plan and is built of pressed cream color brick trimmed with carved sandstone and elaborate carved woodwork. It rests on a limestone foundation fashioned out of smooth ashlar blocks. The combination gable-hip roof is clad with asphalt shingles and has a flat deck with balustrade at the top. Traditional to the Italianate style is the use of broad overhanging eaves, pediment-like gables and pairs of brackets or consoles marking the corners and gable returns.

The Button House has two principal elevations fronting State Street and Waverly Place/Prospect Avenue. The State St. elevation is the primary façade and features a center entrance with two doors and elaborate porch supported by clusters of three decorative posts. To the left (west) of the porch is a gabled bay that is framed by brick pilasters. To the right (east) of the porch is a wing with a radiused corner. The west gabled bay is beautifully articulated with a three-sided bay window on the first story and a pair of segmental arched windows at the second story. These latter windows are crowned with a hood supported by ornate scrolled consoles or brackets. A round arched window at the attic story is framed by the prominent gable whose pediment returns are supported by paired, highly detailed brackets. The wing to the right or east of the porch is simpler in treatment and features single windows on each of two stories.

The east elevation carries through the same elaborate treatment as the front. Its main feature is a prominent bay framed by pilasters that support a gable that matches the one at the front of the house. In this bay is a three-sided, two-story bay window, the second story of which is slightly smaller than at the first story. An attic window is positioned in the gable end. To the left of this prominent bay are located slender windows on the first and second stories. At the southernmost end of this elevation in place of windows are located a niche on the first story and ornamental rectangular plaque on the second story.

The west elevation is more utilitarian in character. It is divided into three bays, the centermost one of which projects slightly and is crowned by a gable that matches the ones on the front and east facades. Slender windows are located on the upper and lower stories and correspond to room arrangements within. We know from historic photos that a small porch was once located at the center bay but it has been removed. The door leading out to the porch had been converted to a window.

The rear elevation consists of a small service wing with hip roof that is utilitarian in character. Slender windows are positioned to correspond to the room arrangements within. One door, on the wing's west face, features a small stoop. Another door, on the north face, has been bricked in. A garage has been constructed in the basement of this wing, accessed from Prospect Avenue on the east. The garage opening has been clad with Lannon stone and features a large, wood, paneled overhead garage door.

The wood, stone and masonry details of the Button House make it an impressive example of high style 1870's architecture and are a testament to the beautiful custom work of architect Edward Townsend Mix. The wood trim is exceptional. Ornate mouldings are paired with unique brackets and consoles at the porch, gables and in the unique hood over the paired second story windows of the front elevation. Spikey foliate forms, almost thistle-like and reminiscent of Gothic design, are repeated as a theme throughout both as incised design and in full relief. Bulbous drop pendants accent the porch and second story hood. Even the soffits are arranged into panels by thick, rounded Italianate mouldings.

Windows are varied throughout and add to the complex and lively textural exterior. Most are slender in profile, consisting of one over one sash and are framed in brick. Many are segmentally arched but windows in the attic story feature round arched tops. Plain stone keystones accent the bay windows on the south and east elevations while the keystones at the rear display foliate designs. The west façade features segmental hoods over the windows while other windows on the south and east have flat architraves. Stone sills are consistent throughout and some are embellished by small corbels with foliate designs. Stone banding is also used to accent the bay windows and displays more of the foliated design. Similar framing and banding can be found at the sculpture niche on the east elevation.

Very few portions of the Button House are left unadorned. The bay windows display unique chamfered corners with their niche-like recess filled with wood moulding and framed by stone plaques cut with a trefoil design. Decorative ironwork shows up in the cresting over the east bay window and the grilles over the ventilation ducts in the fascia. The chimneys are generally arranged in pairs and feature elaborate strap work, panels and corbelled tops.

An historic photo of the house and evidence on the building's exterior show that alterations have been made over time. Although some of these have been significant, they do not diminish the architectural importance of the house. The removal of the upper stage of the center tower is the most obvious change to the building. It once featured a large round arched opening with tracery-like windows and was capped with a hip roof and prominent finial. Also gone is the second story pedimented door at the tower. It has been altered to the three-part window present today. The broad front stairs were once enclosed by knee walls that terminated in large plinths. The two separate entry doorways replaced what traditionally would have been a double-door entry. Also removed were a striking wraparound porch that extended off the front porch to the east and a small side porch that was located at the west elevation. A change in the pattern of the foundation from regular blocks of stone to a random ashlar pattern shows the general dimension of this side porch. A door at the rear wing has been blocked in and fire insurance maps show that a small porch was once located at the east face of this rear wing. It also appears that the balustrade at rooftop deck has been rebuilt. The historic view of the house shows that State St. has been widened and much of the front lawn was eliminated. The Buttons themselves changed the estate-like character of the property when they built houses for the granddaughters at the north and west ends of the property. Underground parking was added in the basement of the rear wing.

## **VII. SIGNIFICANCE**

The Henry Harrison Button House is significant as one of the best and only surviving Italian Villa style residences in Milwaukee. The style came into full flower in Milwaukee in the 1870's in the fashionable Yankee Hill neighborhood and there were once a number of towered picturesque mansions in the area. The Button House is the only survivor in the neighborhood. It demonstrates the lavish detail that was expended on residential design where all the decorative elements were custom designed from exterior to interior. It has been featured in

Richard W.E. Perrin's book, Milwaukee Landmarks (1968, 1979) and H. Russell Zimmermann's The Heritage Guidebook (1978).

The Button House is also significant as an important surviving residential commission of architect Edward Townsend Mix. Mix was the first professionally trained and most significant architect in the city from the 1850's through his death in 1890. His commissions included prominent commercial, institutional, religious and residential buildings many of which were featured in publications about Milwaukee. The Button House is the best surviving Italian Villa style residence by Mix in the city and shows him a master of fine detail. It is a visual landmark in the Yankee Hill neighborhood.

## **VIII. HISTORY**

### Yankee Hill Neighborhood

Yankee Hill was early Milwaukee's premier residential neighborhood. The high ground east of the Milwaukee River had originally been owned by fur trader Solomon Juneau. With the coming of the white settlers in the 1830's, Juneau's land quickly became the seat of government, finance, and business in the new town of Milwaukee. The pioneers who settled this part of Milwaukee were predominantly from New England and New York State and this section soon was known as "Yankee Hill" or "Yankeeburg" as the Germans called it.

Yankee Hill is characterized by regular rectangular blocks laid out in grid fashion by Solomon Juneau in 1835. The street names reflect early American presidents (Jefferson, Jackson, Van Buren) as well as Milwaukee pioneers (Juneau, Knapp and Ogden) and other nationally prominent individuals of the day (Cass, Marshall, Astor, Franklin).

Yankee Hill originally encompassed nearly 40 blocks between Jefferson Street, Wisconsin Avenue, Ogden Avenue and Lake Michigan. Residential development began early and consisted mainly of simple frame houses although some brick houses were also built by the late 1840's. While all traces of the earliest frame houses have disappeared, there are three brick houses that at least partially date to the 1850's: the James S. Brown double houses (1852) at 1122-24 N. Astor Street now housing Zita; a part of the Hale-Cary-Hansen House (1853) at 1227-37 N. Cass Street and part of the William Metcalf house (1854) at 1219 N. Cass Street.

Despite the preponderance of Yankees living in the area, Milwaukee's growing population of German-Americans was also represented by such individuals as John Dietrich Inbusch, Herman Berger, Christian Preusser, Edward Diederichs and John William Bielfield.

Yankee Hill reached its peak of development in the 1870's and 1880's. Large Italianate and Victorian Gothic mansions predominated in the 1870's such as for C. T. Bradley, Jason Downer and Elias Friend. Queen Anne, Romanesque and Chateausque styles became popular in the 1890's as for George P. Miller, Professor Klauser, and the Bloodgood-Hawley families. The streets having most status included Cass, Astor, Marshall and State Streets and Kilbourn and Juneau Avenues. Living here were industrialists, publishers, financiers, and entrepreneurs and officers of corporations.

Construction tapered off as the neighborhood became completely built up. The well-to-do families began moving up the lakeshore, building on available sites along Prospect Avenue and in the new North Point neighborhoods. Milwaukee's growing population and the spread of the downtown commercial area north and eastward into Yankee Hill put pressure on the

neighborhood for more intensive land use by 1900. The large spacious lots surrounding the existing Yankee Hill mansions began to be subdivided and rental units were built. A few fashionable row houses were built as well. As apartment living became socially acceptable, apartment buildings began to replace the old single-family residences. The zenith of apartment construction occurred in the 1920's when tall luxury apartment hotels like the Astor and the Knickerbocker were built. The onset of the great Depression halted apartment construction in the neighborhood sparing many old houses from demolition, but in 1941 dozens of fine old residences were razed to permit the widening of Kilbourn Avenue into a boulevard.

The greatest changes to the neighborhood have taken place since the 1960's. A large-scale urban renewal project leveled everything west of Van Buren Street and north of Kilbourn Avenue. Between Ogden and Lyon Streets all of the buildings were razed for a proposed freeway spur that was never built. The spot demolition of numerous old houses to make way for parking lots and new buildings has also taken a heavy toll on the housing stock. Recent challenges have included the proposed construction of high-rise apartment/condominium towers that will change the pedestrian friendly character of the neighborhood.

Today, a much smaller Yankee Hill survives in the 18 blocks between Wells Street, Ogden Avenue, Van Buren Street and Prospect Avenue. Small clusters of surviving 19<sup>th</sup> century houses have been designated historic districts: Cass/Wells Streets Historic District (local and National Register); Cass/Juneau Historic District (National Register); and First Ward Triangle Historic District (local and National Register). Some individual buildings have been designated as well including the James S. Peck House (local designation) and the Robert Patrick Fitzgerald House (local designation). To the average person Yankee Hill really embodies the term "historic district" with its collection of early high style, well-preserved residences found no where else in the city. The character and ambiance of the mix of old mansions and early 20<sup>th</sup> century low rise apartment buildings give an urban sophistication unique to the city and has made the neighborhood one of the most popular with tourists and residents alike.

### The Button House

The prominent residence that Dr. Henry Harrison Button built at 1024-26 E. State St. is one of the finest Italianate houses to survive in the city and is an important building in the Yankee Hill neighborhood. It was constructed during Yankee Hill's peak of prestige and prosperity when a number of landmark mansions were erected that became icons in early guidebooks of Milwaukee. The Button House is one of the few reminders of the pioneer wholesale druggist who helped shape the commercial history of Milwaukee. It was built when he was 57 years old and at the height of his business and social prominence.

Henry Harrison Button was born at Wallingford, Rutland County, Vermont on August 28, 1818. He was the youngest son of Lyman and Rachel (Boardman) Button, was educated in local schools and left the family farm to attend Brown University at Providence, Rhode Island where he graduated in 1842. He went off to study medicine under Dr. Spears in Brooklyn, New York, worked as a private tutor at a gentleman's family in Virginia and later received his medical certificate from Dr. Mott of the University of New York. Button married the daughter of a prominent Providence, Rhode Island cotton broker, Elizabeth Arnold Pearson on December 31, 1847.<sup>3</sup> He practiced medicine in Brooklyn for about four years before relocating to Milwaukee in the fall of 1848.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jerome A. Watrous, ed., Memoirs of Milwaukee County, (Madison, Western Historical Association, 1909), vol. 2, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> The Badger Pharmacist, No. 8 April 1936, pp. 2-3.

Button was encouraged to come to Milwaukee by Thomas A. Greene, a friend and distant cousin of Button's wife Elizabeth Arnold Pearson. The fortunes of Greene and Button would be linked from young manhood until their death. Greene was a native of Providence, Rhode Island (born November 2, 1827) and almost 10 years younger than Button and from a well-to-do though strict Quaker family. Greene resisted family pressure to become a physician and instead went into pharmacy. He was also interested in the natural sciences. He made the acquaintance of Henry Button in the early 1840's and in 1848 visited the Buttons in Brooklyn where the two discussed going west. Greene headed out first and on his way to the gold fields of California he stopped along the shores of Lake Michigan and discovered that the store of Henry Fess Jr. was for sale in Milwaukee. Greene purchased the store, invited the Buttons to join him and the rest is history. As a physician, Button was familiar with the compounding of prescriptions and the operations of drug stores. He decided to forsake the medical field for business but was commonly known as "Doc" Button throughout his life.<sup>5</sup> According to local historian Louis Conard, Button found that "the tempting pecuniary benefits of commercial enterprise were more alluring than the labors of a pioneer physician."<sup>6</sup>

The two men signed a partnership agreement on October 1, 1848 to operate a wholesale and retail drug business in Milwaukee and remained in business together for the rest of their lives. The early years were frugal ones and for the first nine years each partner drew an annual income of about \$850. From the start the partners recognized the profitability of wholesaling and phased out filling prescriptions and selling drugs in small quantities to individual customers. By 1858 the business assets were estimated at six times the original investment and the business only continued to grow during the Civil War and expanded thereafter. The partners divided the duties of the business so that Thomas A. Greene handled the buying and selling while Henry Button handled finances and acted "as a sort of social representative of the house". Greene made sales trips in the summer while Button made sales trips in the winter. In addition to sales, these trips allowed the partners to see how their customers were doing and whether those communities were thriving.<sup>7</sup>

The business incorporated in 1873 and changed its name from Greene and Button to Greene and Button Co. Thomas A. Greene served as the president, Charles H. O'Neil served as the secretary, and Henry Harrison Button served as treasurer. After the deaths of the partners in the 1890's Button's son Charles P. became president of the reorganized company and it was renamed Jerman, Pflueger and Kuhmsted Co. in 1895. Greene's son Howard served as secretary-treasurer. It is not known why the name change occurred, especially since the business had a fine reputation and dated back to the city's pioneer era. It may reflect the infusion of new capital with new investors. Charles A. Jerman was the vice-president. Otto Kuehmsted was a salesman for the company as was William F. Pflueger. Both were probably investors as well. After Charles P. Button's untimely death at age 45 on May 5, 1897, his mother Elizabeth A. Button took over the presidency and retained this position through 1902. The company reorganized once again as the Milwaukee Drug Company in 1906.<sup>8</sup> Howard Greene served as the company's president at this time. Members of the Button family remained principal stockholders of the company, however.<sup>9</sup> City directories show that the company became Milwaukee Drug Inc. around 1937/1938 when Greene left Milwaukee and

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Louis Conard, ed. History of Milwaukee County from its First Settlement to the year 1895 (Chicago: American Biographical Publishing Company, {1895}), vol. I, p. 239.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Watrous, p. 60.

the business eventually closed around 1945/1946. At the time of its closing Milwaukee Drug Inc. was one of ten wholesale drug companies in the city.

Doc Button was a popular man, both in social and business circles, and was called “a man of literary tastes and domestic habits”. He also held many offices. He served as a trustee for the Unitarian Church for over twenty consecutive years. He was president of the Milwaukee Merchants’ and Manufacturers’ Association, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, a director of the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, director of the Milwaukee Gas Company, president of the American Drug Club, director of the Steam Supply Company, and one of several vice-presidents of the Milwaukee Civil Service Reform Association. He was also on the first board of trustees for the prominent college preparatory school Markham’s/Milwaukee Academy in 1864. He was a member of the Psi U Greek fraternity.

That Button was a prosperous man is without doubt. He appeared in the Milwaukee Sentinel’s list of the forty-eight most prosperous men in Milwaukee in 1866, ranking eighteenth behind bankers Alexander Mitchell and Charles F. Ilsley, tanners Fred Vogel, Guido Pfister, Rufus Allen and George W. Allen, boot and shoe manufacturers Charles T. Bradley and William H. Metcalf, hardware wholesalers John Nazro and Robert Haney, brewer C. T. Melms, miller Edward Sanderson, warehousemen L. J. Higby and Angus Smith, wholesale dry goods dealer Lester Sexton, and furniture manufacturer A. D. Seaman among others. Button’s partner Thomas A. Greene followed in the listing with the identical income as his partner, \$15, 442. Button and Greene were in the highest income bracket for druggists.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Button was said to be fond of travel and spent all of 1873 in Europe with his family and visiting as far south as Naples and Florence. He traveled to nearly every state and territory in the union.

Mrs. Elizabeth Button was also socially prominent and active in the community. She was on the board for the Home for the Friendless, a director of the Athenaeum Association (Woman’s Club of Wisconsin), a director of the Wisconsin Training School for Nurses, on the Board of Managers of the Women’s Christian Association, and solicited donations for the Wisconsin Indian Association.

It was in this period of personal prosperity that Button undertook the construction of his mansion on State Street. The family had lived in the Yankee Hill neighborhood for decades, first on Cass Street between E. Wells St. (formerly Oneida Street) and E. Kilbourn Ave. (formerly Biddle Street), then on Jackson Street. Button purchased three lots from James Patton on May 12, 1870 creating a parcel 180-foot by 127-foot in dimension. He held onto the property for five years before beginning work on his house in the late spring of 1875. The Milwaukee Sentinel indicated that it “promises to be one of the finest residences in town”. The \$30,000 house was built of pressed local cream city brick and trimmed with stone.<sup>11</sup> When one takes into consideration that the average worker made less than \$1,000 annually, the house was definitely in a class of its own. Fire insurance maps show that there was a large frame coach house at the northwest corner of the property.<sup>12</sup> The Button house was one of a number of costly residences that Mix was designing or had just completed for prosperous

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<sup>10</sup> Milwaukee Sentinel, August 1, 1866, p. 1 column 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., May 27, 1875 p. 5 column 2; July 24, 1875; December 31, 1875 p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Rascher’s Fire Insurance Maps of the City of Milwaukee, Chicago: Rascher Fire Map Publishing Company, 1888, vol. II, p. 158. Sanborn Insurance Maps of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1894 vol. I, p. 24 and 1910 vol. I part II, p. 44.

residents in the Yankee hill neighborhood. Mix himself lived just up the block at the southwest corner of Waverly Place and Juneau Avenue.

The new home must have been the scene of many gala occasions given the prominence of the Buttons. At the time the Buttons occupied this house, two of their three children, Charles Pearson and Louise, were living with them. Eldest son Henry Harrison Button Jr. was living nearby on Lyon Street. Son Charles Pearson Button, the youngest son, was said to be the first student from Milwaukee to have graduated from Harvard. An early big social event at the house was the wedding of daughter Louise M. Button to Helmus M. Wells in September 1879. The reception was a stylish affair with fine food, floral decorations and the music of Bach's orchestra. The bride's father built a house for the newlyweds nearby on Franklin Street. The lot itself cost \$6,000 while the house was worth \$10,000.<sup>13</sup> Tragedy struck the Button house in December 1884 when a fire in the barn destroyed a carriage, a cutter, a single buggy and double harness. Along with damage to the barn, the losses totaled \$2,000. The barn was later rebuilt.

Button was to enjoy his mansion for fifteen years. Dr. Button died at home on February 14, 1890 at age 72. Death was attributed to heart failure following a chill some days before. He was said to have been greatly affected by the death of his son-in-law Helmus Wells a month earlier on January 2, 1890 and Dr. Button had been in an "enfeebled condition" for some time.<sup>14</sup>

Widow Elizabeth and her son Charles P., a bachelor, continued to live at the house after Dr. Button's death. Charles by this time had left Greene & Button to own and manage the Phoenix Knitting Works which he greatly expanded into one of the prominent regional businesses and which eventually came to occupy three major buildings in the Historic Third Ward. Charles is responsible for the construction of the landmark Button Block at 500 N. Water Street designed by Crane and Barkhausen and built in 1892. It was constructed as an investment property and the family's wholesale drug business never occupied this fine building. Conard's biography of Charles Pearson indicated that the building served as "a lasting monument to the beloved husband and father."<sup>15</sup> After his father's death, Charles becomes president of Greene & Button Co. Charles died unexpectedly at age 45 in 1897 and his mother Elizabeth transferred the family home to the Waverly Investment Company, presumably a family-owned business. In 1903 the family built two additional houses on the property, one to the west and one to the north for granddaughters Louise Button Taylor and Alice Elizabeth Button Wright, both daughters of Doc and Elizabeth's son Henry H. Button Jr. Local architect Henry Messmer designed the two matching houses, addressed at 1021 Waverly Place and 1018 E. State Street. The ownership of the houses was later transferred to each of the granddaughters in 1907.

Elizabeth Button died on October 24, 1908 at age 88 and the mansion came under the ownership of son Henry H. Button Jr. Since he and his family lived elsewhere the Button house was most likely rented out. We do not know who occupied the house between 1909 and 1919. By this time Yankee Hill was losing its exclusivity, as well-to-do families were moving to the North Point neighborhoods and further up the north shore. Henry H. Button Jr.'s wife Elizabeth Emma Lyne Button became the owner upon her husband's death in 1919. She converted the house into a duplex in 1920 but it retained its upper crust cache. Tenants in these years included Orrin W. and Harriet Robertson, president of Western Lime and Cement

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, June 30, 1879 p. 8 column 3; August 29, 1879 p. 2 column 4

<sup>14</sup> "Death of H.H. Button". *Evening Wisconsin*, February 14, 1890, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Conard, vol. 2, p. 374.

(1921), John M. and Grace Lindsay of Lindsay Brothers (1921-1932), and Fred L. and Frances Pierce treasurer of Cutler-Hammer (1922-1933). The house was vacant in 1934 and 1935. Later tenants included Joseph T. and Ruth H. Johnson, president of the Milwaukee Company (1939-c. 1948) and William F. and Brigette Pabst, salesman for the Benjamin M. Weil Company and later vice-president of the Milwaukee Company (1936-1955). In her senior years widow Elizabeth Emma Lyne Button lost the house in foreclosure in 1941, ending 71 years of Button ownership of the property.<sup>16</sup>

The house subsequently passed to the Milnette Realty Company, then Dr. Herman C. and Sara Schumm in 1948. Dr. Schumm used 1024 E. State Street for his medical office and initiated the transition from residential to commercial use of the property. Dr. Herman C. Schumm (1889 – 1956) was the son of Army officer Herman Schumm and attended schools in various parts of the country as his father was transferred from post to post. Schumm graduated with a Bachelor of Science in 1911 from the University of Pennsylvania and received the degree of Doctor of Medicine from the same institution in 1914. After serving in Europe during World War I Schumm began private practice in Milwaukee in 1919 and specialized in orthopedic surgery. He was a member of the surgical staff of the Milwaukee County Hospital, Columbia Hospital, Children's Hospital and Wisconsin General Hospital. He was a member of the Milwaukee Academy of Medicine, the Milwaukee County Medical Society, the Wisconsin State Medical Society, the American Medical Association, the Milwaukee Surgical Society, the American Orthopedic Society, and the American College of Surgeons. Schumm was also associate professor of orthopedic surgery at the medical school of the University of Wisconsin. Social memberships included the University Club of Milwaukee and the Michiwaukee Golf Club.<sup>17</sup> Schumm died in 1956.<sup>18</sup>

The next owner of the Button House was Dr. Ralph P. Sproule who acquired the property on August 31, 1956.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Ralph Piggins Sproule (1894–c.1970) was born and educated in Milwaukee and received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Wisconsin in 1916 and his medical degree from Northwestern University in 1919. He began practice in Milwaukee in 1920. He specialized in the treatment of the eye, ear, nose and throat and was on the staff of Columbia Hospital, the Johnston Emergency Hospital, and Milwaukee Hospital. Sproule also served as bronchoscopist at Milwaukee Children's Hospital and was the oculist for the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway Company and the Chicago and North Western Railway in addition to the Milwaukee & Sault Sts. Marie and the Pere Marquette Railroad companies. His professional associations included the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Oto-Laryngology, the American Laryngological, Rhinological and Otological Society, the American Board of Oto-Laryngology and the American College of Surgeons. Local affiliations included the Milwaukee County Medical Society, the Milwaukee Academy of Medicine, and the Wisconsin State Medical Society. He also served as president of each of these last three societies and was the youngest man to have held that office up to that time. Sproule married into the prominent Trostel tanning family and his club memberships included the Tripoli Temple, Milwaukee Club, University Club, Milwaukee Country Club, Town Club and City Club. He and Ilse A. Trostel had two sons (Ralph and John) and a daughter Phoebe.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Sproule was the one who added the basement garage to the Button House in 1956. He moved his practice from offices in the Bankers Building on E. Wisconsin Avenue to the Button House

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<sup>16</sup> Deeds. Vol. 1779 pp. 675-676. Milwaukee City Directories.

<sup>17</sup> John B. Gregory, History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin (4 vols.; Milwaukee: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1931), vol 4, pp. 713-714.

<sup>18</sup> Milwaukee County Register in Probate. Herman C. Schumm. 355-205/215.

<sup>19</sup> Deeds. 3616-135/8.

<sup>20</sup> Fred L. Holmes, Stability, Progress, Beauty. Vol. 5, 1946, pp. 61-62. Gregory, vol. 4, pp. 721-722.

around 1958 and used the second unit as his residence. Son Ralph was also a physician and worked in the Button House with his father and Dr. Herbert G. Schmidt. Juneau Park Opticians was also located on the premises.

In October 1968 the Button granddaughter Mrs. Taylor, sold her house on Waverly Place to the Sproules, thus reuniting the north part of the lot with the original Button mansion. The Taylor house was subsequently demolished in 1971. The Wright house next door to the west at 1018 E. State Street stayed under separate ownership after Wright's death and was demolished in the 1990's. The site now serves as a parking lot for an adjacent apartment building at 1006 E. State Street. Dr. Sproule died around 1970 and his widow continued to occupy number 1026 while leasing the offices to other businesses as the Associated Equity Investors Ltd., Wisconsin Discount Securities, Courtside (sporting goods) and Hyde Park Investment. The ownership passed to State Street Investors in 1982 and David J. Barnett acquired the property in 1985. David Barnett began using the Button house for his gallery and it remains so today.

### The Architect

Edward Townsend Mix (1831-1890) was Milwaukee's premier architect during the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His firm received many of the city's important architectural commissions, especially during the 1880's when large projects like the Exposition Building and the Chicago; Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Depot required special engineering as well as consummate design. His clientele included many of the city's movers and shakers like Alexander Mitchell as well as prominent businesses like Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company and religious institutions. In the 1870's and 1880's Mix's firm often ranked first when the value of the year's building commissions in Milwaukee were tallied. Among the surviving examples of Mix's work are: the Robert Patrick Fitzgerald House, 1119 N. Marshall Street (1874); the J.L. Burnham Block, 907 W. National Avenue (1875); the Mackie Building (Chamber of Commerce), 225 E. Michigan Street (1880); The Mitchell Building, 207 E. Michigan street (1878); and the Grand Avenue Congregational Church (Irish Cultural & heritage Center), 213 W. Wisconsin Avenue (1887). Most of these buildings are listed in the National Register or are locally designated.

Mix was born in New Haven, Connecticut on May 13, 1831, the eldest of six children. His father, Edward A., was a sea captain of Welsh descent. His mother, Emily M. (Townsend), was of English descent, and her family was also in the sea trade. Mix's father and maternal grandfather had distinguished themselves in trading missions to India. Because the elder Mix' job kept him away from home for extended periods, his wife is credited with the early education of young Edward.

In 1836 the elder Mix interrupted his maritime career and moved the family west to Andover, Illinois and purchased a large farm. Farming soon bored Captain Mix, and in 1845 he moved the family back to New York and accepted command of another ship. Young Edward T. subsequently entered the academy at Batavia, New York to prepare himself for a career in mathematics. At the academy he took an interest in sketching that was to lead to his future career. In the short term, after leaving the academy, Mix worked in a variety of jobs including clerking in a Wall Street shipping house, being a dry goods employee, a grocer's clerk, a canvasser for a city newspaper, a draftsman in a patent attorney's office, and a clerk in a real estate firm. Finally in the summer of 1848, at age 17, he became the assistant of architect Major Sidney Stone in New Haven, Connecticut, and spent seven years with him learning the profession. In 1855 Mix moved to Chicago and took a job as foreman in the office of architect William W. Boyington, who was possibly a classmate of Mix's at Major Stone's office. Within a

year, Mix became Boyington's partner and came to Milwaukee to supervise the construction of the Newhall House Hotel, a choice commission won by the partners. The partnership came to an end when Mix decided to remain in Milwaukee and open his own office.<sup>21</sup>

Mix received two public school commissions in the late 1850's and was appointed State Architect in 1864 by Wisconsin Governor Fairchild. His tenure lasted until 1867, and he supervised all state building projects including the first state capitol building.

The decade of the 1870's, when the Button House was built, was a particularly busy one for Mix. Despite the nation-wide economic downturn, many of the city's prominent businessmen were building large commercial blocks or new residences and religious congregations were also erecting more substantial houses of worship. Although we do not know just how many staff members worked for Mix at this time in the 1870's we do know that his chief draftsman was Walter A. Holbrook who later became partner in 1881. For the number of commissions the firm was handling the architect's office must have required a number of draftsmen in addition to Holbrook. The numerous residences during this time included the substantial remodeling of the Alexander Mitchell home into a Second Empire masterpiece (the Wisconsin Club today), the James Patton house (razed), the Victorian Gothic C.T. Bradley house (razed), the Italianate Elias Friend house (razed) and the Victorian Gothic Jason Downer house (First Ward Triangle Historic District). In addition, Mix had a considerable number of commissions throughout Wisconsin like Villa Louis in Prairie du Chien as well as out of state like the Larrabee house in Clermont, Iowa. The local houses tended to appear in the Milwaukee guidebooks and booster publications of the time period and were used to show that Milwaukee was in the mainstream of architectural design. Mix was a master of design and produced very beautifully detailed high style buildings for his clients.

We do know that Mix traveled to other parts of the country to keep current with developments in the architectural field and also subscribed to important architectural periodicals. This, along with skilled staff, helped him maintain his leading position in Milwaukee. Mix left Milwaukee from 1888 to 1889 to supervise a couple major skyscraper projects he had designed for clients in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He also designed a number of houses and commercial buildings there as well, all of which have been demolished. Mix was a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and from 1888 to 1890 he was president of the Wisconsin Architectural League. He died in Minneapolis on September 23, 1890. Although somewhat altered, the Henry Harrison Button House remains as the largest and most embellished of Mix's Italianate residences in the city.

## THE ITALIANATE STYLE

Sixteenth century palazzo designs of the Italian Renaissance and the country homes of rural Tuscany provided the architectural vocabulary for a popular residential style of the mid-nineteenth century called the Italianate. It was popular for residential construction in Milwaukee between about 1850 and 1880.

The Italianate had its roots in England and John Nash is credited in designing the first English house in the style in 1802. By 1820 the Italianate was appearing in pattern books and by the 1830's had become the most popular non-Gothic style of the Picturesque movement. The form came to America in the 1830's and was popularized by Alexander Jackson Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis in their various treatises and publications.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Conard, vol 2, pp. 445-448.

<sup>22</sup> Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1981), pp. 69-72.

Early examples show the stark planar surfaces, symmetry and cubic form that were evolving from the earlier Greek Revival and Federal styles. Later examples tended toward more flamboyant use of towers, irregular massing, cupolas and highly detailed ornament. Towered examples are often referred to as Italian Villas and had their origins, as mentioned above, in the vernacular farmhouse style of rural Italy. Many of the Italianate houses in Milwaukee feature low hip or shallow pitched gable roofs, round or segmentally arched windows and a variety of ornamental details including wide overhanging eaves with brackets, carved window enframements and chamfered square posts on porches.

In Milwaukee the Italianate style reflected an era of growing affluence when rich and middle class alike could afford to embellish their houses with applied ornament. Architectural detail could be copied out of pattern books or obtained from local or regional millwork companies. Expensive looking but economically-constructed carpenter-built houses were common in this era due to the availability of mass-produced, machine made, scroll-sawn, and laminated wood ornament. In the case of expensive projects, custom designed, hand crafted ornament would be utilized to provide the richest possible surface texture and visual appeal and it was often coordinated with the interior millwork to create a unified architectural statement.

Italianate houses were also constructed of local cream-colored brick and were similar in design and composition and massing to their frame counterparts. They took on a special character from the uniformity of their pale yellow brick walls. Window surrounds were frequently constructed of projecting brick. Stone was used for sills, lintels and keystones on the more expensive houses although wood and sheet metal hoods were common on middle class examples. Corners were sometimes accented with quoins or pilasters. The foundations were either of brick or limestone.

The heyday of the Italianate in Milwaukee came in the 1870's when the city's pioneers were making their fortunes and the middle class had reached a comfortable standard of living. Although there were once hundreds of residential examples of the Italianate style, urban renewal and redevelopment have reduced this number to a handful. Numerous imposing Italianate mansions and villas were located in the Yankee Hill neighborhood and along Prospect Avenue, West Wisconsin Avenue, and the near west side but virtually all have been razed. Modest examples can be seen on the Lower East Side, the Brady Street area, Walker's Point, near West Side and Yankee Hill neighborhoods. The Button House, recognized as one of the city's showpieces from the day it was built, is the lone survivor in the mansion class. Its outstanding decorative work shows not only the inventiveness of architect E. Townsend Mix, but also the virtuoso performance of skilled artisans.

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## **IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Henry Harrison Button House be given historic designation as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-5, e-6 and e-9 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e) of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

e-5. Its embodiment of the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen.

The Button House is one of the best surviving Italianate/Italian Villa Style residences in the city. Although there are scattered examples of the Italianate in the Walker's Point neighborhood, west side and south side, none show the degree of embellishment of the Button house. The towered Italianate was the most costly form of the style and reserved for those of prosperous means. The architectural details alone are unique in the city and help to give us a glimpse of the inventiveness of the 1870's.

e-6. Its identification as the work of an artist, architect, interior designer, craftsman or master builder whose individual works have influenced the development of the City of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin or of the United States.

Edward Townsend Mix was the city's premier architect from the 1850's through 1890. While a number of Mix's important commercial and religious buildings survive like the Chamber of Commerce Building/Mackie Building, the Mitchell Building, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, and St. Paul's Episcopal Church, not as many residential structures are still extant. The Button House is the most important of the Italian Villas designed by Mix to survive from the 1870's.

- e-9. Its unique location as a singular physical characteristic which represents an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the city of Milwaukee.

The Button House is probably Yankee Hill's most memorable residential building. Its location across from Juneau Park, fronting a small green square and adjacent to busy Prospect Avenue gives it high visibility and makes it a cornerstone of the Yankee Hill neighborhood.

## **X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES**

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

### **A. Roofs**

Retain the roof shape. Skylights or dormers are discouraged but may be added to roof surfaces if they are not visible from the street or public right of way. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline, overhang or pitch. If replacement is necessary, duplicate the appearance of the original roofing as closely as possible.

### **B. Materials**

#### **1. Masonry**

- a. Unpainted brick, terra cotta, or stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural terra cotta or stone. This is historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- b. Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles that were unavailable or were not used when the building was constructed. The use of mortar consisting only of Portland cement is prohibited due to the damage it will cause to brick. Use a mortar formula that matches the original.
- c. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting limestone, terra cotta, brick or cream brick surfaces is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone.
- d. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed.

## 2. Wood/Metal

- a. Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance. Due to the intricate nature of the decorative features on the Button House, repair of existing details with epoxy-based products or infill with matching wood species is recommended over wholesale replacement of elements.
- b. Retain or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that do not duplicate the appearance of the original materials. Covering wood trim with aluminum or vinyl is not permitted.

## C. Windows and Doors

1. Retain existing window and door openings. Retain the existing configuration of panes, sash, surrounds and sills, except as necessary to restore to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing fenestration by enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes. Avoid changing the size or configuration of windowpanes or sash. Use storm windows or protective glazing which have glazing configurations similar to the prime windows and which obscure the prime windows as little as possible.
2. Respect the building's stylistic period. If the replacement of doors or window sash is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design and material of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements. Avoid the filling-in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as glass block or concrete block. Avoid using modern style window units, such as horizontal sliding sash or casements, in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building. Vinyl or metal clad prime window units are not permitted. Glass block basement windows are not permitted, except on elevations where they will not be visible from the street.
3. Steel bar security doors and window guards are generally not allowed. If permitted, the doors or grates shall be of the simplest design and installed so as to be as unobtrusive as possible.

## D. Porch

The open porch at the front of the Button House shall not be enclosed or filled in, as this is a major design feature of the building.

## E. Trim and Ornamentation

There should be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and appearance.

F. Additions

No additions will be permitted on the front (south) or east elevations of the building, as this would destroy the character of the building. Any other addition requires the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the addition's design compatibility with the building in terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design, color, and materials, and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the principal elevations or is visible from the public right of way.

G. Signs/Exterior Lighting

The installation of any permanent exterior sign or light fixture shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign or light with the historic and architectural character of the building. Existing signage can remain until such time it is replaced. Plastic internally illuminated box signs are not permitted.

H. Site Features

New plant materials, paving, fencing, or accessory structures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building if visible from the public right of way.

I. Guidelines for New Construction

It is important that new construction be designed to be as sympathetic as possible with the character of the structure.

1. Siting

New construction must respect the historic siting of the building. It should be accomplished so as to maintain the appearance of the building from the street as a freestanding structure.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk, the expression of major building divisions including foundation, body and roof, and individual building components, such as overhangs and fenestration that are in close proximity to a historic building must be compatible to and sympathetic with the design of the commercial building.

3. Form

The massing of the new construction must be compatible with the goal of maintaining the integrity of the building as a freestanding structure. The profiles of roofs and building elements that project and receded from the main block should express the same continuity established by the historic building if they are in close proximity to it.

4. Materials

The building materials, which are visible from the public right-of-way and in close

proximity to the building, should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions, and combinations of cladding materials used on the building. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.

#### J. Guidelines for Demolition

Although demolition is not encouraged and is generally not permissible, there may be instances when demolition may be acceptable if approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. The Commission shall take the following guidelines, with those found in subsection 9(h) of the ordinance, into consideration when reviewing demolition requests.

##### 1. Condition

Demolition requests may be granted when it can be clearly demonstrated that the condition of a building or a portion thereof is such that it constitutes an immediate threat to health and safety and is beyond hope of repair.

##### 2. Importance

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is of historical or architectural significance or displays a quality of material and craftsmanship that does not exist in other structures in the area.

##### 3. Location

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building contributes to the neighborhood and the general street appearance and has a positive effect on other buildings in the area.

##### 4. Potential for Restoration

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is beyond economically feasible repair.

##### 5. Additions

Consideration will be given to whether or not the proposed demolition is a later non-historic addition that is not in keeping with the original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.