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From: Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project <wislgbtqhistory@gmail.com@ccsend.com>
Sent: Tuesday, February 14, 2023 1:54 PM
To: Historic Preservation Commission
Subject: BREAKING: Developers seek to demolish 140-year-old Historic Third Ward survivor

For Immediate Release



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Developers seek to demolish 140-year-old Historic Third Ward survivor
Former Wreck Room Saloon faces an uncertain fate

Milwaukee, WI. - The former [Wreck Room Saloon](#) (266 E. Erie St.,) one of the most unique and most storied properties in the Historic Third Ward, has quickly become one of Milwaukee's most endangered buildings -- despite being listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1984 and being protected by local historic designation since 2013.

The building, constructed in 1884, survived the Great Third Ward Fire -- but it may not survive to see its 140th anniversary.

Joseph GenCap Triangle LLC, a partnership between two developers, has not yet filed a demolition permit. However, they have requested demolition of the building as part of their proposed redevelopment of the triangular parcel. Although the building is protected at the national and local levels, it can still be demolished if the correct process is followed.

Tomorrow, the developers will seek a recommendation to demolish from the Historic Third Ward Architectural Board. The Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project stands with the Milwaukee Preservation Alliance in preserving our historical properties for future generations.

Please join the PUBLIC MEETING tomorrow, Wednesday, February 15 at noon at the Historic Third Ward Architectural Review Board (525 E. Chicago Street.)

We strongly encourage all who oppose the demolition to join tomorrow's meeting, speak to the important history, heritage and legacy of this building, and fight for its continued survival.

About the Wreck Room Saloon

Although most remember the [Wreck Room](#) as a hypermasculine space, the property was built in 1884 by Catherine Foley as a neighborhood saloon and inn. She is believed to be the first single woman to own and operate a tavern in the Historic Third Ward. Her thriving business was pivotal in the neighborhood's recovery from the Great Third Ward Fire of 1892, when 440 buildings were destroyed and entire city blocks were reduced to ash.

When Foley died in 1896, the building was acquired by the Miller Brewery and used as a tied-house tavern for several decades.

In July 1972, Wayne Bernhagen and partner Bill Kindt opened the Wreck Room Saloon. At the time, the neighborhood was commercial by day and virtually abandoned by night. Greatly inspired by Chicago's Gold Coast, the Wreck Room was officially Milwaukee's first leather bar. The tavern's popularity exploded by the mid-1970s, when it became an anchor of the Third Ward "Fruit Loop," which also included The River Queen, The Factory, M&M Club, and others, greatly expanding Milwaukee's LGBTQ nightlife beyond Walker's Point.

The Wreck Room was home to the Silver Stars Motorcycle Club. It was also the birthplace of the Annual Dairyland Classic Softball Invitational, which began in 1978 as the Wreck Room Classic, and is now one of the longest-running LGBTQ sporting events in the nation. Bernhagen hosted annual street fairs from 1976 to 1994 to celebrate the bar's anniversary. The Wreck Room opened a Sacramento location in 1978 that lasted over a decade.

By the late '80s, the AIDS crisis had reached catastrophic levels in Milwaukee. Third Ward redevelopment also brought gentrification that changed the twilight character of the area. Sadly, Wayne Bernhagen passed away in 1987, but his business partner Bill Kindt vowed to keep the business going.

Gentrification continued to challenge the Wreck Room into the 1990s. MIAD attempted to buy the Wreck Room three times, and Kindt refused twice. Finally, he reluctantly accepted an offer in July 1996 that was ten times what he and Bernhagen had paid for the building. On July 15, 1996, Wreck Room closed forever. When the M&M Club closed in 2006, all traces of the Third

Ward "Fruit Loop" -- and the LGBTQ heritage of the neighborhood -- were reduced to memories.

The tavern was occupied by the MIAD Student Union until a tragic 2013 fire vacated the space. MIAD sold the building in 2015. Developers, claiming the building was beyond repair or restoration, sought demolition -- but the city responded with local historic designation protections. And now, they are trying again.

What will happen now? It's up to you.

Speak out! Be heard. Be seen!

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About the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project

Founded by Don Schwamb, the [Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project](#) seeks to reconnect Wisconsin with its lost LGBTQ history. Since 1995, the Project has become the state's largest digital collection of historical LGBTQ media. The project provides independent consulting, walking tours, presentations, publications, and research services. The Project is independent, not-for-profit, self-funded and volunteer-run.

The Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project Inc. is a sponsored project of the [Cream City Foundation Inc.](#), and accepts tax-exempt donations through the Foundation as our 501c3 fiscal agent.

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