

March 16, 2021

To the honorable Chair and Commissioners:

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The Milwaukee Preservation Alliance supports permanent historic designation of a portion of S. Superior St. as the Puddlers' Cottages Historic District. This collection of homes represents the most cohesive remaining collection in the City of an important and increasingly rare building form of local historic significance. We believe the district has significance under criterion e-1 for its association with Bay View's industrial history. As a collection, these buildings are the best remaining place in the City to visually tell the story of the former Bay View Rolling Mill. We also support significance under criteria e-4 for the district's unique ability to portray, through the distinctive form of these small cottages, the lives of the workers who helped build the new community of Bay View; and e-5 as a largely intact collection of early industrial worker housing.

With the mill itself demolished in 1939, these properties and a few scattered others are all that remain to tell the story of the early economic and architectural development of the neighborhood, which came into being explicitly as a company town (Milwaukee's first) surrounding the mill. The buildings were very likely built in the late 1860s and served as affordable housing for mill workers forming molten metal into iron. They exemplify the somewhat paternalistic tenor of industry at the time, where mill owner Eber Ward chose to provide his workers with housing based on a belief that homeownership improved worker productivity and encouraged civic responsibility. These buildings are among the very few left to tell this story of the relationship between managers and workers in early Milwaukee industry, and as a collective unit tell this story particularly effectively.

While changes to the properties have occurred over time, they retain integrity of location, design, setting, and association. Their description as contributing to the 1982 National Register Bay View Historic District remains true today: "Although they have been altered somewhat, they are still clearly recognizable as the single-story, frame, gable-roofed, rectangular cottages built by the Milwaukee Iron Company on the land it purchased and subdivided to provide for employee housing." Especially in contrast with the properties surrounding them, the 20'x40' homes are eminently recognizable.

Finally, it is important to note the buildings' vernacular character. These "ordinary buildings" can hold just as much cultural and architectural significance as their more high style kin and are important to ensure the stories of the "ordinary people" who inhabited them are not lost. There is a long history of recognizing the historic significance of vernacular architecture in historic preservation, and thoughtful preservation practices recognizes the need for lesser integrity hurdles to ensure their stories are not lost.

For these reasons, we believe this row of homes along S. Superior St. deserves designation as a historic district and urge the Commission's support. Thank you as always for your hard work on behalf of the people and places of Milwaukee.

Respectfully,

Jeremy Ebersole  
Executive Director  
Milwaukee Preservation Alliance