

Do Small Places Matter?

Saving Vernacular Pre-1870 Cottages in Davenport's Hamburg Historic District

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Introduction

Davenport, Iowa, has a rich collection of 19th and early 20th century residential buildings located in its old urban core.¹ Among these are some of the city's early homes, small vernacular cottages built prior to 1870.

In 2016, many of these cottages, most less than a thousand square feet, particularly those built of wood, are underused, under maintained and some are under threat of demolition. This report will explore the genesis of this early building type, especially those in the National Register Hamburg Historic District. The threat to small early homes exists throughout the city, but the focus on one district provides an object lesson in how challenges to deteriorated historic buildings can vary as well as the technological, attitudinal and regulatory challenges facing these homes. Finally, it will recommend best practices that could enhance the survival of these cottages.

Davenport's Historic Preservation Landscape

In the 1970s and 1980s, Davenport began a process to survey and list buildings in the National Register. When the process was completed, more than 1600 buildings were included, either as part of a multi-property listing process which noted most as contributing structures in one of seventeen National Register Districts or as individually listed structures outside one of these districts. When the city's Historic Preservation Commission and ordinance was established in the early 1990s, its powers included the right to approve or deny demolition permits for all listed properties. An unusual part of the ordinance requires the Commission to direct staff to initiate a local landmarking process for any building for which a demolition permit is denied.²

There was a rich assortment to survey. Davenport was founded in 1836. From an 1840 population of 600, the city steadily grew to about two thousand until the coming of the railroad in 1856 when the first bridge across the Mississippi River was completed. The city jumped from a population of 1,848 to 11,267 in ten years. By 1870, the city was briefly the largest in Iowa, with over 20,000 residents.³ Davenport continued to grow rapidly in population through the first two decades of the twentieth century, then steadily but more slowly after that, with a population of 102,000 by 1980. City boundaries tripled between 1920 and 1960.⁴ Between 1980 and 1990, the impact of the farm crisis shrank the city's population. Her inner core retained a large number of earlier residential buildings, many generous in size. Supply exceeded demand; there were many reasonably priced options for people wanting to live in historic homes or districts. Small cottages were not in demand.

Vernacular Cottages: Context and Description

Included in the National Register surveys and listings were early vernacular cottages. The majority are side gable buildings but gable front houses are also found. While a few are stone or brick,⁵ many were constructed of wood clapboard. The lumber industry was a key driver of the town's early economy. Logs floated down the Mississippi River from the great forests to the north, made the easy-to-use material readily available to a growing city. (Attachment 1).

Many of these cottages are one story but others are story and a half or petite two-story buildings. Construction dates for some were noted during the city's survey process, but many were left undated. The Hamburg Historic District ("Hamburg"), whose approximately 290 extant homes include many built by German immigrants, retains a handful of these small buildings. Much of the growth of this neighborhood took place after 1870, with large

¹ This area comprises about five square miles, starting at the Mississippi River and moving north for twenty blocks to Locust Street, east to the Village of East Davenport and west to Division Street.

² "Chapter 17.23 Historic Preservation," Davenport Municipal Code, accessed September 21, 2016 at <http://clerkshq.com/default.ashx?clientsite=davenport-ia>.

³ "Population of Davenport," accessed September 21, 2016, at <http://www.davenportlibrary.com/genealogy-and-history/local-history-info/history-faq/population-of-davenport/>.

⁴ "Annual Report of the City Officers of the City of Davenport," Davenport, Iowa, March 31, 1920, and "Annual Report of the City Officers of the City of Davenport," Davenport, Iowa, March 31, 1955 and March 31, 1960.

⁵ Harry E. Downer, *History of Davenport and Scott County Iowa, Illustrated*, Vol I (Chicago, The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1910), 980. The first brick was manufactured in Davenport in 1836. Brick manufactories were located around the city and in the county.

houses of some of the city's most successful business people replacing earlier smaller homes on scattered sites. Some are so grand that the area came to be known as "The Gold Coast."⁶ Early cottages remained, side by side with the mansions. Historic research reflects the economic diversity among residents. (Attachment 2).

With the city's rapid 19th century growth, many small first period buildings were lost as the town grew and the earliest built areas near the river were redeveloped. Only one residence and one church are identified as remaining from the 1830s. One building, built as a college and later converted to a house, has portions dating to the 1840s. All three of these buildings are also locally landmarked.⁷

The city does not retain a detailed list of every National Register property. Some years ago, likely using the National Register listings, staff compiled a "Davenport's Most Significant Properties" list of about 400 of the National Register buildings and sites.⁸ It includes thirty seven houses with construction dates prior to 1870. The list includes another seventy seven houses of uncertain age; an estimated fifteen of these were built before 1870.⁹ Early cottages all over the city are underrepresented in this "Most Significant" list.

Many of the early multiple listing nominations are considered "thin" by today's standards.¹⁰ For example, paperwork for many contributing buildings, including those in the Hamburg, had no historic information recorded.¹¹ Only a few dozen, those considered most significant, were given site inventories.

It is clear that more work is needed to comprehensively assess how many buildings date from this early period. For example, the "Most Significant" list includes only fourteen houses of all sizes in the Hamburg that pre-date 1870. The District is nearing the end of a formal National Register re-survey. The draft will be reviewed by the State National Register Committee (SNRC) in October. In that survey, forty seven district buildings are identified as dating prior to 1870.

Not all of Davenport's or the Hamburg's earliest buildings are small. Some are large in scale or have significant history or architectural features. When these are threatened by demolition or deterioration, public outcry can lead to the city or citizen engagement that looks for solutions for saving these buildings. More difficult are the cottages, of more humble scale, with few outstanding architectural attributes.

Identifying very early construction dates is hampered by the fact that city directories did not list street addresses until 1890, the first local Sanborn maps date to a relatively late 1886 and the first detailed Birdseye view to 1875. Complicating this lack of early detail is the fact that smaller homes were often occupied by people who left little written history.

The narrative of any historic district is incomplete if it no longer includes examples of buildings that represent the full spectrum of all the people who spent their lives there. The Hamburg is such a district. Without office workers and factory hands who fueled their businesses or tradesmen who shod their horses or delivered ice, the prosperous

⁶ Bill Wundram, "Fabled Old 'Gold Coast' Is Now 'Apartment Row,'" Davenport Morning Democrat, July 20, 1958.

⁷ The Claim House at 1329 College was built in 1832. St. Anthony's Catholic Church dates to 1838 and a much altered residence at 517 W. 7th Street includes part of Iowa College dating to 1848.

⁸ The list was likely compiled by a former HPC liaison who has since passed away. The list includes no rationale as to why these properties were chosen for inclusion. List in possession of author but is not available online.

⁹ Estimate based on author's knowledge of the buildings on the list. Sixty two buildings of all types (commercial, residential, ecclesiastical) have firm construction dates that predate 1870. The undated list includes ninety seven buildings of all types—more than one quarter of the entire list. Most of these clearly postdate 1870, but some do not.

¹⁰ Marlys Svendsen, Jim Jacobsen, Paula Mohr, in discussions and an email with author, September-December, 2014. At the time of the Davenport surveys, the National Park Service, responding to overwhelming response generated by the interest in the Bicentennial, had introduced the MPL process and had limited the amount of information that could be submitted. Svendsen prepared the Davenport nominations and Jacobsen was the National Register reviewer for the Iowa SHPO. Mohr categorized the nominations as "thin" in her 2014 email and has used the term since in discussions with author.

¹¹ Copies of Hamburg original survey sheets in possession of author.

families of the Hamburg could not have existed. The lives of both should be represented to future generations through the buildings they left behind.

A Case Study in the Hamburg

Recent examples of HPC actions that addressed issues with two pre-1870s buildings within the boundaries of the National Register Hamburg Historic District offer a contrast in how differently fine architecture and vernacular construction can be viewed. Both had been designated as contributing buildings in the District.

The Lambrite-Iles-Petersen House (1856) at 510 W. 6th Street was a badly deteriorated Italian Villa House; its owner was unwilling to sell the property or address its deterioration. While the building had become inhabitable, the building had retained integrity. It rang three of the National Register significance bells: Architect and architectural style, association with historic events and owners with important historic connections.



Lambrite-Iles-Petersen House, 1856. Hamburg Historic District. Condemnation process allowed city to take possession and find new owners. Early Iowa example of a wood frame Italian Villa. Significant architect and owners. Undergoing restoration/rehabilitation. Author photo.

Concerned neighbors began a push to demand action from the city, with a formal resolution, meetings with officials and speeches before the HPC and the City Council urging legal action to save the property.

After almost three years, in an unprecedented move, the city condemned it,¹² gave compensation to the owner and succeeded in finding a new owner who has begun restoration.

The Dietrich Tegrunde House, formerly at 928 W 6th Street, was a circa 1862 one-story cottage. It was a code-compliant occupied rental located next to a converted pre-1860s building that had been rehabilitated as a café to feed the homeless. The not-for-profit group that owned the café came to the Historic Preservation Commission asking permission to tear down the Tegrunde house, declaring its tenant “a nuisance.” They had agreed to pay the owner \$17,500 for the building if they could get a demolition permit.¹³



The Dietrich Tegrunde House, 1863. Hamburg Historic District. Increasingly rare ante-bellum example of workman’s house in the district. Wood clapboard concealed by asphalt brick underneath aluminum siding. Functional rental at the time of demolition. Demolished 2015 to create green space. Photo from HPC staff report.

The building rang no National Register bells; it was a much altered vernacular structure with little architectural integrity or significance. Original wood clapboard siding had been covered with vinyl; windows had likely been replaced. The house was originally owned and by a German shoemaker and laborer who lived and sometimes worked out of the home.

When demolition was proposed, there was no outcry to save the building other than concerns expressed by several HPC members. In the discussion before the HPC, those seeking the permit categorized the house as not being,

¹² Tom Warner, Davenport City Attorney, in remarks made September 15, 2016, at the “Nuisance Properties and Preservation: The Lambrite-Iles-Petersen House, A Case Study,” presentation at the 2016 Preserve Iowa Summit. The author was a panel participant. Warner has commented on this unique use of the condemnation process during other discussions.

¹³ “Historic Preservation Commission Staff Report,” City of Davenport Historic Preservation Commission Meeting, January 13, 2015, accessed September 14, 2016, at http://www.cityofdavenportiowa.com/egov/documents/1420836794_45389.pdf. Additionally, as a member of Davenport’s HPC, the author was present at the work session and subsequent HPC meetings at which demolition of the Tegrunde house was discussed and voted on, October, 2014-January, 2015. The petitioners mentioned that the tenant had an unruly pit bull and that they wanted to create a green space for their customers at the café.

“one of your important buildings.”¹⁴ The HPC city staff liaison researched the building, finding solid attribution that Tegrunde had lived on the property beginning in 1862; although exterior architectural integrity had been compromised, he opined that its status within the neighborhood context might allow it to rise to the level of a local landmark and recommended that the SHPO be contacted for an opinion. No examination was made of the interior.

The response by the Iowa SHPO did not offer a formal recommendation. It acknowledged that the building could be an early rare example of a building where domestic and business activities were intermingled, but questioned how much original material existed under later siding or in the interior.¹⁵ Without a firm direction from SHPO, staff did not recommend local landmarking of the building. By a vote of four to two, the HPC upheld the staff report, allowing demolition to go forward. Unlike neighborhood reaction to the Lambrite-Iles-Petersen House, no one from the Hamburg appealed to the HPC in writing or in person to locally landmark the Tegrunde house.

Technological, Regulatory and Attitudinal Challenges

As the contrasting fates of the Lambrite-Iles-Petersen and Tegrunde houses illustrate, several factors work against small vernacular buildings, particularly wood, when they come into the crosshairs of demolition.

From the standpoint of technology, their construction material makes them subject to more rapid deterioration than structures of stone or brick. Davenport is characterized by “a humid continental climate with hot summers and no dry season” and annual rainfall of close to forty inches a year. Snowfall is generally light, allowing the frostline to extend to a statewide average of fifty eight inches into the earth; foundations are subject to a freeze/thaw cycle.¹⁶ Destructive insects like termites and carpenter ants are active in the area. Without proper maintenance including sound roofs and solid paint coverings, wood buildings in Iowa can quickly deteriorate.

That they are both small and constructed of wood makes these buildings easy to alter. While old brick or stone cottages can be damaged by inappropriate repointing, the likelihood of exterior surfaces being encased in aluminum or vinyl is less likely. The same is not true for wood clad buildings. The clapboard on the Tegrunde house was covered with rolled brick asphalt in 1945.¹⁷ At the same time, door and window openings were trimmed in wood, likely altering the relationship of the window faces to the plane of the building. No permit exists for its conversion to aluminum siding. Alterations such as these have occurred to all wood clad cottages in the district with the exception of one sided with wood shingle. Owners of two others have chosen to remove 20th century asbestos siding to reveal original exterior wood. Other changes like replacement windows also impact integrity.

Regulatory issues also work against these buildings. In determining National Register eligibility, both integrity and significance are measured. With original materials lost or buried, or original details destroyed or removed, integrity is missing. Addressing significance is also a challenge; when built, many of these buildings were of the simplest construction with few architectural details. Often, they are not the work of masters nor were their owners people of note. A nomination that focused their contribution of a specific architectural style or illustrating early construction techniques is hard to argue with so much integrity lost.

Dr. Paula Mohr, architectural historian for the Iowa SHPO, whose basis of evaluation is the Secretary of the Interior Standards, believes vernacular buildings like the Tegrunde house are difficult to save, “at midnight” since

¹⁴ Statement made at HPC work session, October 7, 2014.

¹⁵ “Historic Preservation Commission Staff Report,” January 13, 2015.

¹⁶ “Average Weather for Davenport, Iowa, USA,” accessed September 20, 2016, at <https://weatherspark.com/averages/30105/Davenport-Iowa-United-States> and “What is the Frostline in Iowa?” accessed September 20, 2016, at <https://www.reference.com/geography/frost-line-iowa-18418a7778058edf#>.

¹⁷ “Davenport Building Permits,” microfiche, Richardson-Sloane Collection, Davenport Public Library.

they are often altered and do not fall into easy categories of integrity or significance.¹⁸ Dave Cordes, a former member of the Iowa State National Register Committee (SNRC), says that during his tenure on the SNRC it was almost a given that vernacular buildings did not meet National Register criterion C, architecture. He believes that attitude has shifted but arguing for significance for many of these buildings can still be a challenge.¹⁹

Davenport's preservation ordinance also works against these buildings. In seeking a demolition permit, an owner can petition based on economic hardship. For a house like the Tegrunde building, assessed at \$14,690,²⁰ it is a simple matter to arrive at rehabilitation costs that far exceed building value.

Finally, attitudes can also impact outcome. Those petitioning for demolition believed that there would be no issue with the neighborhood given the humble nature of the house.²¹ The most impacted, residents of the Hamburg, did not challenge the decision. Having won a hard fought battle to save Lambrite-Iles-Petersen property, perhaps there was no energy left to fight for the Tegrunde building. Davenport, like many cities in the rustbelt, has more old buildings than dollars to rehabilitate them. Small buildings tend to fall to the bottom of the list when preservationists, developers or city planners are reviewing where to place dollars and time. Their fate does not rise to the level of action until a threat is presented; often, there is not enough time to save them.

New threats arose in the second half of 2015 for twelve National Register properties, including some in the Hamburg. Davenport initiated a new round of proposed demolitions. Among those proposed in the Hamburg but later removed was a two story cottage at 517 Ripley Street; another cottage at 814 W. 8th Street made the final list. Neighborhood residents were successful in halting its demolition. In another neighborhood, demolition proceeded on an individually listed early cottage.

“Don't It Always Seem to Go That You Don't Know What You've Got Till It's Gone”²²

A fresh approach combining knowledge, reshaping both the narrative around the past and regulations surrounding historic properties and reimagining the future may help change the future trajectory for small vernacular buildings in Davenport.

Davenport preservationists need to understand much more about their building inventory. Residents of the Hamburg and those living in the East Village, another historic district, have researched their own histories for many years in an effort to enhance a skimpy knowledge base. The new more comprehensive Hamburg survey that lists forty seven buildings predating 1870 can assist the neighborhood in weaving a new story of the Hamburg that paints a more accurate portrait of the neighborhood in the 19th century and the variety of economic and class diversity that developed there. The same could be true for other districts surveyed in the 1980s.

As a city, Davenport needs to take another look at how it manages historic preservation and historic properties. Its ordinance is almost unchanged since its 1991 adoption. The requirement to implement local landmarking for any building refused a demolition permit has generated decisions that create controversy and have often cast historic preservation in a bad light. Individuals seeking demolitions are often allowed to do so without presenting the specified financial information required in the ordinance.

On a positive note, renovated cottages provide an alternative solution to people interested in living in an historic district but not in managing the square footage that come with larger homes. As either starter homes or

¹⁸ Paula Mohr, in discussion with author, September 19, 2016. Mohr is also the Certified Local Government Coordinator for the Iowa SHPO.

¹⁹ David Cordes, in discussion with author, September 23, 2016. Cordes owns property in the Hamburg. He also served as administrator for Terrace Hill, the Iowa Governor's residence from 1999 to 2006, the Iowa SNRC from 1990 to 2000 and the National Trust Board of Advisors from 1996 to 2005.

²⁰ “Historic Preservation Commission Staff Report,” January 13, 2015

²¹ Stated in the discussion at October 7, 2014, work session at which the author was present.

²² Joni Mitchell, “Big Yellow Taxi,” Ladies of the Canyon, 1970.

apartments, for young people starting out or seniors interested in downsizing, small cottages can be rehabbed to be energy efficient, convenient and cozy. Iowa historic tax credits are available for historic residences, offering 25% tax credit or rebate for qualified expenses. The threshold for residences is 25% of the building's assessed value or \$25,000, whichever is lower. Properties slated for rental can receive both state and federal credits. The lack of ornate historic detailing could work in favor of keeping rehabilitation costs relatively low for these little buildings.

Gateway Redevelopment Group, a not-for-profit working in the Hamburg, has begun rehabilitation of one of the severely deteriorated neighborhood cottages, documenting its progress online.²³ Perhaps a successful rehab will bring attention to this new housing option, and help residents and city staff revise their approach to dealing with other buildings awaiting rehab.

Dave Cordes notes that preservationists are often accused of gentrifying once affordable areas and driving out residents with modest incomes. In a neighborhood where large homes can be more costly to buy and operate, smaller residences can be an affordable option that helps maintain the very economic diversity that categorized the Hamburg in its heyday.²⁴

²³ The home is the cottage at 517 Ripley, once slated for demolition by the city. A record of progress can be found at www.grgdavenport.org.

²⁴ Cordes, 2016.

Attachment 1: Examples of Davenport Pre-1870 Cottages



924 W. 5th. 1857. Hamburg. Ruhl House. Vacant and boarded. Deteriorated wall conditions in some areas. Author Photo.



1226 W. 6th Street. 1850. Individually listed. Paustian House. Currently in use. Photo from Scott County Assessor's website.



517 Ripley Street. 1850s-60s. Hamburg. Post and beam construction. Wood clapboard concealed under asbestos and rolled brick siding. Undergoing rehabilitation. Author Photo.



2101 E. 12th Street. Late 1850s. Village of East Davenport. Workers Cottage. Demolished 2016. Photo from HPC packet.



522 Gaines Street. 1861. Hamburg Historic District. Petersen House. One story with raised basement with parged walls. Vacant. Vinyl over wood clapboard. Author Photo.



814 W. 8th Street. 1867. Hamburg Historic District. Sternberg House. Wood shingle siding. Boarded and on city's 2015 demolition list. Neighbors were able to get it removed from demolition. Photo from Davenport Public Works packet.

Attachment 2: Hamburg Historic District. Simple and grand houses, c 1873-1909 showing the diversity of stock within the neighborhood. Homes of both the city's business elite and those who worked for them. Author Photos.



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