



# MANHATTAN/RILEY COUNTY PRESERVATION ALLIANCE NEWSLETTER

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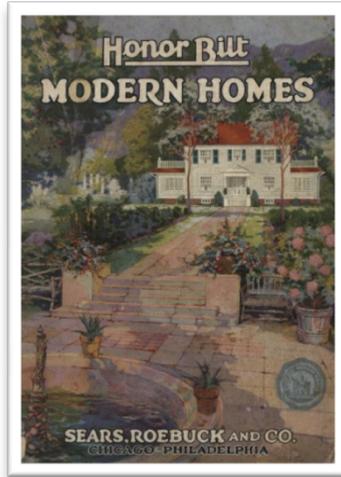
## Sears' Modern Homes

Sears, the 132-year-old retail company, filed for bankruptcy in October, after struggling in recent years and accumulating debt. Known for its mail-order catalog, Sears changed the way people shopped, as it sold nearly everything for the home, including the home itself.

In 1906, Frank W. Kushel worked for Sears as the catalog's manager for building materials. Sales of building materials were poor, and unsold inventory piled up in company warehouses. To boost sales of building materials, Mr. Kushel is credited with developing the idea of offering homes through the catalog. He suggested to Richard Sears that the company sell house plans and all of the materials needed ("History").

The first catalog – "Book of Modern Homes and Building Plans" -- was issued in 1908, and it offered 22 styles, costing \$650 – \$2,500 ("History"). The plans and building supplies could all be purchased through the catalog. A future homeowner was able to browse the images in the catalog, study the floor plans, and imagine their family living in the desired home.

By 1916, Sears began offering "kit houses." The kits included everything needed to assemble the house, from the detailed drawings and instructions, to the lumber, millwork, shingles, gutters, all hardware, light fixtures, sash weights, and paint, with parts



Above, the cover of the 1921 Sears, Roebuck and Company "Honor Bilt Modern Homes" catalog. The digitized catalog is available on [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) and is in the public domain.

numbered for ease of assembly. Once the customer selected the style, the complete home would be shipped to them by rail ("History").

In offering mail-order homes through its catalog, Sears claimed it was meeting a public demand for "substantial and comfortable homes for an industrious and thrifty people" (Honor). As people were leaving crowded cities in favor of the suburbs, middle-class families were looking for affordable options for homeownership, and Sears' catalog homes met a need for families with a limited budget.

Sears claimed that their homes were 40% cheaper than homes built the traditional way. The savings largely came from the carpentry. With all of the necessary materials provided, there was no waste. Everything was pre-cut and fitted, which saved on labor because a

carpenter didn't have to custom cut and fit components on site. The homes could also be assembled by an ordinary carpenter with no need to hire a specialty carpenter (Honor). In addition, Sears' mass production of materials reduced overall costs ("History").

Sears employed architects to develop the house plans, but the plans were not new, innovative designs. Instead, Sears understood design trends, and the plans were a reflection of popular American designs. Sears did impact home construction through the promotion of the use of asphalt shingles, drywall, and "balloon framing" with its catalog homes ("What"). Balloon framing uses long studs for the exterior walls that extend from the foundation to the roof, with intermediate floor structures let into and nailed to them. This type of framing didn't require a team of carpenters to assemble and could typically be completed by one carpenter ("What").

Plaster was the typical interior wall covering for many American homes, but plaster involved carpenters and skilled plasterers to create the plaster and lath. Drywall, which is a manufactured panel of gypsum plaster between two paper layers, was a relatively new building material when Sears began offering mail-order homes. The company saw the advantages of using drywall with its homes, including being able to ship the  
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material easily, simple installation, and lower cost (“What”).

Sears offered red cedar shingles as roofing material, but the company also encouraged the use of asphalt shingles. Asphalt shingles were relatively cheap to manufacture, easy to ship, and had the added benefit of being fire resistant (“What”).

Another plus of purchasing a mail-order home from Sears was the company offered payment plans. To be eligible, a customer would have to provide proof of ownership of a lot to locate the house, pay a small fee to Sears to set up the payment plan, and then make monthly payments. The monthly payments varied based on the model selected and the amount provided up front. Sears estimated that the typical monthly payments were about the same as what one paid in rent, but with the end result that the payee would own the home in a few short years (Honor).

The payment plan option helped many families become homeowners, but it was also a contributing factor that ultimately led to the end of the mail-order homes. Home sales were doing well, and 1929 was an especially good year for them. But, the stock market crashed in the fall of 1929, and the nation was in the Great Depression. Many customers were

unable to make their payments, leaving Sears holding millions of dollars of debt. Sears discontinued the payment plan option and discontinued the mail-order homes for a brief time in 1934. The catalog home sales were restarted, and Sears slowly began to recover, but the decision was made to end the mail-order home sales in 1940 (“History”).

Sears was not the only company to offer mail-order homes. The Aladdin Company and Montgomery Ward were other major manufacturers who also offered mail-order kit homes, but Sears was the largest in terms of houses sold. Sears didn’t keep track of the number of homes it sold between 1908 and 1940, but it is believed to be approximately 100,000 (“History”).

As the decades have passed, interest in Sears’ kit homes has increased, with owners taking pride in being able to say their homes were designed by Sears, and some communities have organized Sears’ home tours. Identifying and authenticating a Sears’ home, though, can be tricky.

Since Sears copied design trends, it’s difficult to merely look at a home’s design and see if it matches plans offered by Sears. Adding to the difficulty, Sears’ homes were intended to be customizable. Floor plans

could be reversed, exteriors could be brick or wood siding, and other components could be added or deleted to suit a customer’s desires.

To determine if a house were designed by Sears, one should look for identifying marks. Lumber was stamped, so examining the exposed lumber in attics and basements is one way to identify a Sears’ home. Millwork had shipping labels on the reverse side, and labels might be spotted behind stairs. The reverse side of drywall had an identifying label. Plumbing fixtures and door handles were marked with the letters “SR.” A title search might also show Sears as the original mortgage holder.

In Riley County, the Kansas Historic Resources Inventory lists three homes as confirmed Sears’ homes, although there are likely others yet to be authenticated. The three homes are all in Manhattan and are located at 321 Denison Avenue, 312 North 16th Street, and 511 Houston Street.

The homes on Denison and North 16th are both the design (continued on pg. 3)



Left, 321 Denison Ave. Center, 312 N. 16th St. Both homes are Sears’ “Arlington” design, model no. 145. Right, 511 Houston St., which is Sears’ “Hollywood” design, model nos. 259 and 2069.

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 known as “Arlington.” Sears described the Arlington as a Colonial with a bungalow effect. It featured a wide front porch, cobblestone chimney, a wood-beamed ceiling and a bay window in the dining room, and the plans featured a small maid’s room off the kitchen. The visible differences between the Denison and North 16th houses demonstrate the flexibility Sears’ designs offered.

The house at 511 Houston Street is the “Hollywood” model.

Sears described the Hollywood as a charming bungalow. The living room featured a nook adjacent to the fireplace at one end, which was partially separated from the rest of the living room by Craftsman colonnades. The dining room featured a wood-beamed ceiling, a bay window with a window seat, and a built-in buffet. The house at 511 Houston Street is also a contributing structure to the Houston and Pierre Streets Residential Historic District.

As Sears faces financial challenges, it’s unknown what will

become of the company and the iconic brand. The thousands of Sears homes built across the country, some over a century old, will carry on the name and the legacy of the mail-order homes.

“History of Sears Modern Homes.” *Sears archives*, 21 March 2012, [www.searsarchives.com/homes/history.htm](http://www.searsarchives.com/homes/history.htm).

Honor Bilt Modern Homes. Chicago, IL: Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1921.

“What is a Sears Modern Home?” *Sears archives*, 21 March 2012, [www.searsarchives.com/homes/history.htm](http://www.searsarchives.com/homes/history.htm).

## Will the Community House be Sold?

During a work session on Nov. 13th, the City Commission discussed the City Park Master Plan. Commissioners briefly discussed possibly selling the Community House to an unnamed private buyer, which would impact City Park because the former Parks and Recreation Department’s office building in the park would be renovated to replace the programming space lost by a sale of the Community House.

The Community House, located at 120 North 4th Street, was built in 1917-18 and is listed on the National Register and the Register of Historic Kansas Places. It was built by the Rotarians of Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma and the City of Manhattan to provide recreation and relaxation space for soldiers who were training at Ft. Riley for service in World War I. It was the first community building constructed in the U.S. During World War II, it was used as a U.S.O. The building also served as the first location for Teen Town, which was a Friday night dance gathering for local teens, and teen dances were held in the Community House from 1943 until 1958.

During the work session,

Alfonso Leyva, Park Planner, told commissioners that the Parks and Rec. Dept. had heard there was a potential buyer for the Community House, and if the sale were to go through, the department would be motivated to repurpose the former office building, located at 1101 Fremont Street, to accommodate the programs currently using the Community House. Commissioner Linda Morse commented that the former office building was created through a series of additions, and a few years ago, had been determined to be substandard. Edward Eastes, Dir. of Parks and Rec., said the staff had moved out of the building because it was too small to meet the staff’s needs, but it was still a usable structure and would be handicapped accessible. Mr. Eastes explained that the special populations programs, which used to meet in the Community House, have been unable to meet there because the building’s stair lift for handicapped access isn’t working.

Commissioner Wynn Butler said he fully supported trying to repurpose the old office building and said he views the building as an asset. In contrast, Mr. Butler viewed the Community House as a liability.



He said, “In my mind, the Community Building is a liability . . . it’s just an accident waiting to happen as far as the budget goes, should we ever have to renovate it and put it back into usable condition, because it’s just slowly deteriorating. So, I’m hopefully optimistic that we can, in fact, divest ourselves of that building without doing any damage to the historical value . . .” Commissioner Morse indicated that she was hesitant to repurpose the former Parks and Rec. office building without knowing something firm about the Community House. The discussion took place during a work session, so no action was taken.

In 2015, the city contracted with Bruce McMillan Architects to conduct a feasibility/conversion study to examine what would be involved to use the Community House for (continued on pg. 4)

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 offices for social service agencies. The base project called for keeping the gym for Parks and Rec. use, putting offices on the second floor and in the basement, mechanical and electrical upgrades, and the addition of an elevator and an exterior ramp for improved handicapped access. The estimated price tag for the base project was \$2.3 million.

The Parks and Recreation Strategic Facility Plan, which was also conducted in 2015, described the building as “structurally sound and in average condition.” The Strategic Facility Plan also said “every part of this building is in need of updating or replacement” and “the building has had periodic updates . . . but these improvements have been on an as-needed basis rather than a wholesale building renovation.” The last time the building experienced significant renovations was in 1986-87 when the performance stage was enclosed and a second-floor observation balcony was enclosed and divided into smaller rooms.

During the Historic Resources Board’s (HRB) November meeting, Jason Hilgers, Deputy City Manager, provided information to the board about a Request for Proposals (RFP) for redevelopment of the Community House, which the city plans to advertise, and he asked for input from the board. Mr. Hilgers explained that the city has found it difficult to find the approximately \$2.5 million in the budget to address the base project outlined in the study by Bruce McMillan Architects, and so when there was interest in the community to purchase the building, the initial reactions were to look at that interest and to develop a tool (the RFP) to evaluate the interest. The city, via the RFP, is expressing its interest in “selling or leasing the Community House for a redevelopment project that will make a positive contribution to the community.”

Since the Community House is located in the downtown area, Mr. Hilgers anticipated there would be other interested parties in addition to the original unnamed private buyer.

Mr. Hilgers stated that representatives of the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) had made a site visit in 2013 to identify characteristics of the Community House that shouldn’t be altered in order for the building to maintain its historic registry status, and SHPO also identified features that could be altered. Both types of items are pointed out in the RFP, and it’s hoped interested parties will be forthcoming with their plans and allow the city to work with SHPO.

Board member Kevin West said he had a problem with the city’s making an appeal to the community to pass a sales tax increase, which was approved by voters in 2017, because there was a need for more activity space, and now there’s a plan to take activity space out of the inventory. Mr. West said he also had a problem with the community’s going to the effort to get the building historically listed, then the city fails to maintain it, and even though the Community House has been in the city’s inventory for 100 years and was meeting community needs, it’s now too expensive, and the city is going to sell it off because it’s not convenient to keep it. Board member Ann Kosch said she agreed with Mr. West’s comments. Mr. Hilgers responded that the Community House has limited options for its use, mainly because of its accessibility issues. He said the city has a list of other facilities suffering from deferred maintenance that need to be replaced, and the Community House is not top of the list.

Ben Chmiel, Long Range Planner and staff liaison to the HRB, commented that if the Community House were privately owned, the private owner would be able to take full advantage of the state’s

rehabilitation tax credit for registered properties. In comparison, the city, which doesn’t pay taxes, would have to sell the tax credits at the market rate, which is typically in the range of 80-92% of their value. In addition, Mr. Chmiel said if the building were repurposed and became income producing, a rehabilitation project would be eligible for the federal tax credit of 20%. Improvements and maintenance issues would become more feasible with the help of state and federal tax credits.

If the City Commission authorizes the RFP, it would be advertised, beginning Dec. 10th, and proposals would be due on Jan. 9, 2019. Board members thought the timeline for submissions was tight, especially given the upcoming holidays. They also expressed interest in the RFP’s asking interested parties to maintain the building’s historic designation. Board member Eileen Meyer suggested adding a restriction to the Community House’s title as a safety net.

Mr. Hilgers said the RFP process would allow anyone in the community to pitch an idea, allow the city to find out if there’s an acceptable idea, and allow the city to negotiate terms. He said if the city and the interested party can’t agree on terms, then it would all go away.

The board took no formal action, as the intent of the discussion was to allow the board to provide input.

During the past 100 years, the Community House has been an important part of our community. It has been a social gathering place, and its service has encompassed two world wars, Teen Town, veterans’ activities, recreation, dances, crafts, musical performances, and it’s a much-loved community icon and important cultural resource. As the RFP process moves forward, the M/RCPA hopes city officials will be mindful of all the building has meant to our community.

## Houses Demo-ed for New Mixed Use Development

Four houses located on the southeast corner of Laramie and 14th Streets were demolished this fall. Two of the houses faced Laramie, and two faced 14th Street. The proposed structure that will replace the houses will be a mixed-use, four-story building and will include commercial and residential uses.

Below, one of the houses with demolition in progress. In the foreground attached to the tree is a vintage photo of a family, dressed in early 20th century clothing. The photo is a poignant reminder that the house sheltered many families over the years.



To learn more about the Community House and the discussions that took place in 2012, see the M/RCPA's Feb. 2012 newsletter at [www.preservemanhattan.org](http://www.preservemanhattan.org).

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## New Historic Districts

During the November meeting of the Kansas Historic Sites Board of Review, the board approved adding the Wolf House Historic District to the Register of Historic Kansas Places, and the nomination was forwarded for consideration for the National Register of Historic Places.

The Wolf House Historic District is located on the northeast corner of Fremont Street and Juliette Avenue. The structures included in the district are the Wolf House Museum, the Mansfield House, the Moses Cottage, and the Wolf Photography Studio. All of the buildings are owned by the Riley County Historical Society. The district was nominated for registry listing because of its contributions to the areas of settlement, commerce, conservation, and architecture.

The Wolf House and the Mansfield House are in their original locations. The Moses Cottage and the photography studio were moved to their current locations by Lucile Wolf in 1957 when the structures were in the way of expanding the parking lots for the Riley County Courthouse and the Carnegie Library.

The Wolf House and the Mansfield House are excellent examples of early stone structures in Manhattan and are representative works of master stone masons. Both structures were built by John Frank, who hired local stone mason John Diehl to do the construction. Built in 1868, the Frank family operated the Wolf House as a boarding house for many years.

The Wolf Photography Studio was originally located at 112 North 5th Street adjacent to the Courthouse, and the studio operated for 54 years, from 1902 until Max Wolf's death in 1956. The business was one of the longest continuously operating businesses in Manhattan.

The Moses Cottage was built by Flora Moses in 1870 and was

originally located at 421 Humboldt Street. Flora came to Manhattan with her brother as part of the free state movement.

There are also preliminary plans to create a Yuma Street Historic District. The district would generally include the 900 block of Yuma Street and would include the historic Douglass School, the Douglass Community Center, the Pilgrim Baptist Church, and the Kaw Blue Masonic Lodge.

In 2010, the African American Resources of Manhattan, KS, Thematic Nomination and Multiple Property Documentation Survey was conducted, which identified historic structures and cultural resources associated with Manhattan's African American community. The Bethel A.M.E. Church and the Second (Pilgrim) Baptist Church were listed on the National Register as a result.

The Douglass Center Advisory Board indicated it supported the establishment of a historic district. The potential district was also discussed by the Historic Resources Board during its October meeting, and board members were also supportive of a historic district.

Information about the Wolf House Historic District came from the draft register nomination.



Top, the Wolf House Museum.  
Bottom, the historic Douglass School.

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## *2018-19 M/RCPA Membership Roster*

### **\$35 Historic Level**

Dede Brokesh, Charlene Brownson, Sandra Chandler, Carole Chelz, Melvin & Randi Dale, Mike & Jan Danenberg, Marla Day, Wanda Fateley, Katharine Hensler, Kent Kellams, Debra Mercer, Dawn Munger, Larry & Sandy Murphy, Felisa Osburn, Bill Pallet, Allana Parker, Jerry & Martha Powell, Gloria Juhl Raney, Lauren W. Ritterbush, Tom & Karen Roberts, Catherine Roy-Tremblay, Sharlin Sargent, Ken & Nina Warren, Ron & Dixie West, Judith Willingham

### **\$100 Preservation Level**

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### **\$125 Corporate Preservation**

Bria Taddiken-Williams/Coldwell Banker Real Estate Advisors, Bruce McMillan AIA Architects PA, GJL Real Estate/Gwyn & Gina Riffel, Rick & Judy Glowiak, Griffith Lumber Co. Inc., Master Landscape, Riffel Property/Gwyn & Gina Riffel, Strecker Nelson West Gallery/Kevin West & Alyn Pennington West

### **\$250 Landmark Level**

David & Kathy Dzewaltowski, Dr. Patricia J. O'Brien, Barbara Poresky

### **Honorary Lifetime Members**

Rose M. Bissey (in memory of Charles Bissey), Mel Borst, Enell Foerster (in memory of Bernd Foerster), Dr. Patricia J. O'Brien, Edna L. Williams

It's time to renew! This will be your last newsletter if you haven't renewed your M/RCPA membership yet.