

SCHENECTADY

Restoring 3rd Stockade house

BY KATHLEEN MOORE
Gazette Reporter

A Stockade resident who swears he's not an ardent historic preservationist has just finished restoring his third historic house, even going to the effort of researching the original owners and applying for a historic house marker.

Robert Woods unveiled the new Myndert Wemple marker at 107 N. Ferry St. on Sunday.

"It's kind of closure in the effort to renovate the house. It's kind of putting the seal on it, to say, 'It's completed,'" Woods said.

Woods, an architect, has lived in the house since 2000 while he slowly worked on a full renovation. But he didn't do it out of a devotion

to historic architecture.

"I'm in the Stockade as much because it's a nice urban neighborhood as because it's historic," he said. "Renovation adds interest toward preserving the neighborhood. I find there's a real value to promoting urban, livable cities."

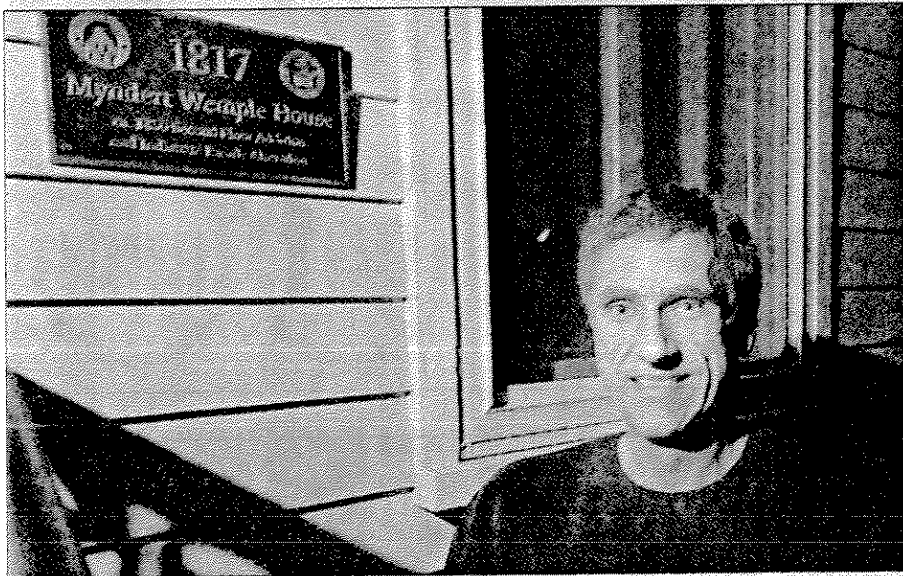
But he won't take that too far. He's not going to rip out all modern elements in favor of a 19th century re-creation when he renovates a house.

"I'm not a preservationist, per se," he said. "People think modern, it's so cold and unacceptable. I think it's possible to blend the two, if you do it right."

He's happy to restore elements

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a labor of love



Robert Woods of North Ferry Street in Schenectady's Stockade stands at the entrance to his home Monday, next to a historical marker placed on the home this past Sunday. The home, built in 1817, is called the Myndert Wemple House.

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Stockade

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that are missing from an otherwise intact historic room, but he doesn't want to re-create a fake history where nothing remains of the building's origins.

"It gets misleading. You have to be honest about building," he said. "If a room needs some small item, I'll replicate it. But when it gets to a portion of the house where there's nothing historic, I won't make it look old," he said.

But passersby won't be able to guess at his modern leanings by peering at the exterior of 107 N. Ferry St. It's as historic as they come.

"It was all there. I just repaired some of the broken pieces," Woods said.

It took six years to finish the house. At the same time, he also restored 108 N. Ferry St., which needed only two years of work. Now that both houses are done, he's moving next month to a new challenge: 32 Front St.

When he sells each house, he manages to break even, although he said it would be cheaper to refurbish the properties in a less painstaking way.

"I take on projects that other people would rarely touch because it's not really financially profitable," Woods said. "But as an architect I am always looking for other challenges."

He's also a bit of a rebel when it comes to the Stockade historic

mindset. He's opposed to more blue signs, the large historic markers that offer details about certain buildings and the historic events that occurred there.

"We don't want to over-inundate the neighborhood with too many signs," he said.

And he thinks some new construction should be protected as fervently as the old.

"The library is an excellent example of modern architecture. It's a real pity they're proposing an addition in the front that will significantly impact the look of the building," he said, adding that the relatively new Unitarian building on Wendell Avenue should also be on a list of modern buildings worth preserving.

NEW SIGNS

The modern buildings list may be a long fight, but others in the Stockade have accepted his argument about the proliferation of signs. He's proposed that they install granite markers in the sidewalk, which could enhance a walking tour but aren't as noticeable as the tall blue signs.

Stockaders are also trying to offer more detail about their houses in their historic house markers. The typical marker has just the date and

original owner's name, but Woods' new markers offer architectural details as well.

"We were encouraged to add just a little bit more," he said. "It would give them information about the style or the site. I think it's an enhancement — it adds a little bit more interest for the people walking down the street."

Those who walk by 107 N. Ferry St. will learn that his house was built by Myndert Wemple in 1817. In 1850, the new owners added their own vision, putting in a second floor and an Italianate facade.

The only question left is, which Myndert Wemple?

As many as three Wemples may have held that name at the same time, at the turn of the 19th century. And none of them had any reason to build houses in Schenectady.

One of the Myndert Wemples was taken prisoner as a child by Native Americans during the Revolutionary War. The natives also burned down his house in Montgomery County and killed his father. Myndert was later released, but little is mentioned of him after his capture.

However, he may have ended up with in Madison County with the Senecas, who asked for a descendant of Myndert's blacksmith

grandfather to help them repair tools and arms. Around 1800, a Myndert Wemple was sent by George Washington to fulfill that request.

According to the Madison County historical accounts, the Senecas gave him a one-mile tract of land and he opened a well-traveled tavern in a town later named Wempsville in honor of him.

At the same time, another Myndert Wemple — or possibly the same one — was gaining attention for an unusual business.

He was part-owner in a Chittenango, Madison County, cotton mill that, in 1811, was considered one of the first signs of modern commerce in the Mohawk Valley, according to published accounts in the Fonda Family Genealogy.

Neither of those Mynderts seem to have reason to be building houses in Schenectady, but Woods tracked the deeds back to 1820 and found that a Myndert Wemple had built several houses on what is now North Ferry Street.

"I think he was building for his family," Woods said.

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