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FOR INFORMATION CALL

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City Clerk Jim Owczarski
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Historic Preservation, Clerk's Office team up to document condemned convent

With the pending demolition of historic St. Mary's Convent at 3516 W. Center St., Milwaukee's Historic Preservation Commission is teaming up with the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Public Information Division of the City Clerk's Office to collect photos of the building and document its history on an interactive website that will be made available to the public.

Demolition of the convent began this week. Asbestos abatement is also underway, and the whole process will take several weeks.

"The St. Mary's Convent has been a fixture in Milwaukee life for more than a century," **Historic Preservation Commission staff member Carlen Hatala said.** "While it's a shame that there's nothing the city can do to save this old building, we couldn't allow all this history to simply disappear."

The collaborative project is currently in its early phases. But **City Clerk Jim Owczarski** said his directive to use in-house talent to do the important documentation work was easy to put into action.

"We're pleased that there's no need to put taxpayers on the hook for hefty web developers' fees," Owczarski said. "With a little cooperation and coordination, we have all the expertise we need on-hand to create a website that's both informative and exciting."

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Condemned convent/ADD ONE

St. Mary's Convent has stood at the corner of W. Center St. and N. 35th St. since its construction in 1900. Originally three stories tall and built of iconic cream city brick, the convent housed Salvatorian nuns who tended to the elderly beginning in 1903. The nursing home portion of the building was originally called St. Mary's Home for Old Ladies in city directories, was later renamed St. Mary's Home for Aged Ladies and finally came to be known as St. Mary's Nursing Home (men were admitted to the nursing home for the first time in 1979). Nuns lived in the building, as well as young women training to take their vows.

Throughout the 20th century, the faces and uses of the convent continued to evolve. The firm E. Brielmaier & Sons, which is believed to have designed the original building, also built additions to the convent in 1920, 1925, 1938, 1941 and 1953. The building housed a high school that had been transferred from the nuns' St. Nazianz location to Milwaukee in 1926, and began accepting lay students in 1948 to prepare for the opening of the new Divine Savior High School at N. 100th St. and W. Capitol Dr.

By the late 1990s, most of the nuns had moved to other facilities, and in 1999, Faith Works, a faith-based program for recovering male addicts, made its home in the original part of the convent before leaving several years later. The City of Milwaukee acquired the property and shopped it around to developers, but was unable to find an entity willing to take on the immense task of rehabilitating the convent.

Facing vast challenges, including vandalism and theft, significant water damage from a leaking roof, hazardous materials abatement and nuisance complaints from neighboring properties, city officials opted to condemn and demolish the building. With the completion of a Memorandum of Understanding between the state's Historic Preservation Office and the city, the Department of Neighborhood Services has found a contractor and this week began the work of demolition and abatement.

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Condemned convent/ADD TWO

And through it all, staff from the Historic Preservation Commission has teamed up with the Public Information Division of the City Clerk's Office to document the final condition of the St. Mary's Convent, while reaching out to the Wisconsin Historical Society and digging back into city archives to chronicle the building's past. The resulting project will culminate in the creation of a web site later this year that will be hosted by the city.

"Unfortunately, there's just no safe way to allow members of the public to personally experience this unique, historic building in its current state," Hatala said. "But through the power of the internet, we're excited to be able to offer an exponentially greater number of people the opportunity to view and learn about this remarkable cornerstone of more than a century of Milwaukee life, for years to come after its planned demolition."