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FOR INFORMATION CALL

August 28, 2014

City Clerk Jim Owczarski
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City website ‘preserves’ former St. Mary’s Convent

While only a vacant lot remains where St. Mary’s Convent once stood at the corner of W. Center St. and N. 35th St., history buffs worldwide can now explore the iconic building and its history using a new section of the City of Milwaukee website.

The Public Information Division of the City Clerk’s Office, in conjunction with the **Historic Preservation Commission**, the **Wisconsin Historical Society** and the **Sisters of the Divine Savior: North American Province**, have launched the website to document the convent, which was demolished last year after officials determined that the historic building was beyond saving. Built in 1900, the convent played a storied, multifaceted role in the city’s history, serving multiple roles including a home for a religious congregation, a nursing home, a school and a rehab clinic.

The new website, including a collection of photos and a history of the building, is now online at milwaukee.gov/stmarysconvent.

“I’m very proud to be able to offer members of the public the chance to experience St. Mary’s in a way that would not have been possible in person,” City Clerk Jim Owczarski said. “While it’s a shame Milwaukee had to lose this venerable, north side landmark, the convent and its rich history live on through the wonders of technology.”

Owczarski added that, with the help of HPC and the Sisters of the Divine Savior, the website was designed in-house at no additional cost to the city.

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Historic convent/ADD ONE

Originally three stories tall and built of iconic Cream City brick, St. Mary's 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.

Sister Carol Thresher, SDS, provincial superior of the Sisters of the Divine Savior, explains the significance of St. Mary's for her religious congregation, also known as Salvatorian Sisters. "In addition to its service to the elderly, this building was our home and 'motherhouse' for nearly a century. As such, it will continue to hold a special place in our hearts and our history." Sr. Carol adds, "Our province has collaborated enthusiastically with the City of Milwaukee, the Historic Preservation Commission and the Wisconsin Historical Society in launching this new website. What an exciting way to honor the memory of this important twentieth-century, neighborhood anchor and landmark."

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.

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Historic convent/ADD TWO

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 building was demolished in January 2013 under the condition that the city undertake this effort to document the convent online.

The new website will be hosted for the foreseeable future on the city's servers, Owczarski said, leaving open the possibility that it could be expanded and augmented by input from members of the public who had a history with the building.