

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

PRYOR AVENUE IRON WELL

(Written Spring, 1987)

I. NAME

Historic: Pryor Avenue Iron Well

Common: Same

II. LOCATION

1710 East Pryor Avenue

Legal Property Description: In the public right-of-way on the north side of East Pryor Avenue between South Wentworth and South Superior streets in the city of Milwaukee.

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

Henry J. Balconi, Superintendent
City of Milwaukee, Water Department
841 North Broadway, Room 402
Milwaukee, WI 53202

V. YEAR BUILT

1882; c. 1920's

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Pryor Avenue Iron Well is located in the brick paved parkway between the sidewalk and the curb in front of 1710 East Pryor Avenue. It is sited in a nineteenth century working class residential area of small, frame, Victorian houses.

The Iron Well consists of a 20-inch square exposed aggregate concrete monolith with a moulded cap. A pipe spews water into ground level basins on the east and west sides, while a drinking fountain basin projects from the north side about halfway up the approximately five-foot tall shaft. A wooden access panel on the south side conceals the plumbing located inside the wellhead. All but the north side has been covered with cement plaster in recent years.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The Pryor Avenue Iron Well is historically significant as the last surviving example of the public wells that once provided drinking water in modest neighborhoods such as Bay View. It is important as a still functioning reminder of a now vanished type of public utility that was

indispensable in the years before all of the houses in Bay View were provided with running water.

VIII. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This artesian well was begun in 1882 as a public works project to provide a source of safe drinking water and fire protection for the Bay View neighborhood. Drilling began in October, but proceeded slowly due to the difficulty of penetrating the glacial drift. By early December, the well was only 500 feet deep, after which the drilling proceeded at a more rapid rate. By January 6, 1883 pipes had been drilled to a depth of 1275 feet and soon thereafter reached the final depth of 1500 feet. At this point the water was under sufficient natural pressure that it provided a constant supply of pure water to this mother well as well as to a system of satellite wells and fire hydrants throughout the area serviced by a system of pipes radiating out from it under the streets. The system was essentially complete by 1888.

The original well was reportedly little more than an exposed run of pipe with spigots at which residents could fill their water containers. By the 1920s, the present concrete monolith had been built. By this time, all of the houses in Bay View had been hooked up to the city water system, but the well has remained popular because of the excellent taste of the spring water. The well, with the familiar line of people drawing water, has become a popular landmark. In 1980 the importance of the structure as a local landmark was recognized by a Common Council resolution. A brass plaque on the well commemorates that act.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Pryor Avenue Iron Well be designated a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria one and nine of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 2-335(2)(e).

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. These guidelines shall be applicable only to the Pryor Avenue Iron Well. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Materials

1. Unpainted exposed aggregate concrete should not be painted or covered with other materials.
2. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with other materials.
3. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or was unavailable when the well was constructed. If restoration is contemplated, consider removing the smooth concrete finish and restoring the original finish.

B. Form

Retain the present shape. If rebuilding is required, rebuild to duplicate the present configuration.

C. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the well and the Bay View Historic District.

D. Site Features

New plant materials, fencing, paving and lighting fixtures shall be compatible with the architectural character of the Bay View Historic District.

NAVAL ARMORY

