

Central House captures modern spirit

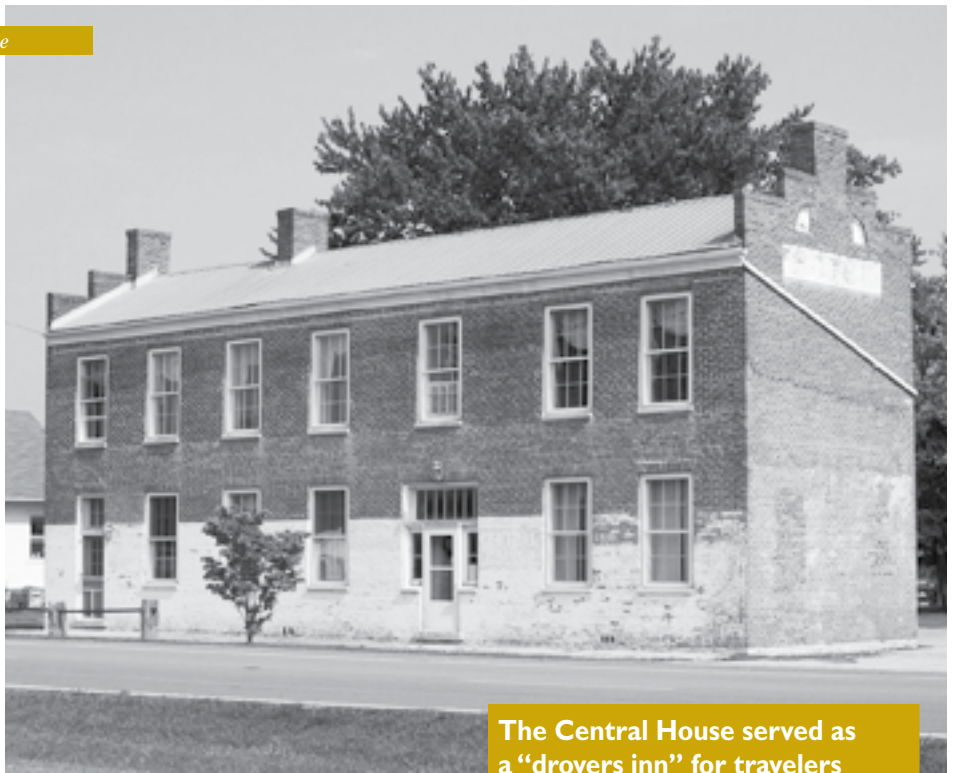
By Kent Abraham, Director, Veraestau Historic Site

Asking me to name a favorite historic building or place is like asking to name a favorite Beatles song. Which one am I listening to? If pushed to explain, I suppose I like the straight and parallel lines, the declarative symmetry, the light hand of design, the balance between dignity and repose. For me, the Central House in Napoleon is just a pleasing thing to look upon.

The “style,” if you insist, reflects Federal design elements. Buildings in the style displayed an enlightened, conservative elegance that appealed to the confident reason and intellectual strength upon which the nation was being invented. Look for it along the earliest settlement routes—rivers, canals, and early overland trails – the latter instance being the case for the Central House.

The village of Napoleon was no less than a frontier hub where several important trails crossed, most principally among them being the Michigan Road. The southeastern Indiana town was platted in 1820. As for the Central House, no one can cite its exact source of its name or the date of its construction.

The Central House is sometimes called a “drovers inn,” denoting the nearby traffic was likely of the cloven-hoofed kind. Any major trail in this part of Indiana served as a conduit to “hogopolis,” otherwise known as Cincinnati. For the most part, a drovers inn and tavern was simply a wayside hotel and stage stop. Historic Landmarks Foundation’s Huddleston Farmhouse Inn on the Old National Road falls into this



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category, although the Central House was more specifically designed for the purpose.

Along the Old National Road, especially in places like Centerville, you might note the Federalist architectural camaraderie sometimes described as “piketown architecture.” The design was firmly connected to the highway, not set back, and most often not sitting on an isolated parcel of ground. Buildings were packed tightly together, in the form of row houses, competing for access to the passing traffic. Thus it is distinctly an urban form – even if the urban setting is but a block or two long in a frontier outpost.

The Central House sits on its own lot, but as a full-service accommodation, it likely contained a livery barn and outbuildings. It is distinctly urban, however, and commands notice on the town square.

The Central House served as a “drovers inn” for travelers journeying through the village of Napoleon in the early 1800s. Several trails converged at the southeastern Indiana town, a logical stopping point on the way to Cincinnati. The Federal-style structure charms Kent Abraham, director of Veraestau and our Southeast Field Office.

There is complex psychology in its appeal. I am obviously comforted by this design. You won’t be surprised that I am not much of a Queen Anne person. I can appreciate the style, but it’s too busy, too impressed with itself, and just makes me too nervous. The Central House, on the other hand, is relaxing, gentle, luminous, even buoyant – despite being made of brick. It strikes me as very modern in spirit, built in a very new time in a new place. The mandate for a new civilization was being fulfilled, and the material culture reflected it.

Napoleon, Indiana, a bit sleepy today, was one cosmopolitan place 170 years ago, full of sensitivity to world events even though it sat on the nation's frontier. Builders of the Central House were optimistic, but not romantic. They were delighted with the possibilities of their place and time but remained serious about forging a civilization. Historic places like the Central House and the Napoleon town square will always "take us back" in a meditation of the lives once lived. Like the most powerful historic settings, it gives us an opportunity to step outside of ourselves while commanding a continuous present, transfixing us like a good piece of art.

Note: A small and enthusiastic group of boosters operates the Central House and plans to open it on a regular basis. For updates, contact Historic Landmarks' office at Vereastau, 812-926-0983, or visit www.ripleycountytourism.com.

Madison won status as a National Historic Landmark in 2006. With over 1,600 structures, Madison ranks as one of the nation's largest NHL districts. It's one of Historic Landmarks vice president Mark Dollase's favorite places.



Madison retains nineteenth-century flavor

By Mark Dollase, Vice President of Preservation Services

One of my favorite storytellers, the late journalist Charles Kuralt, wrote an article in 1972 about one of America's most interesting river towns—Madison, Indiana. I joined the town's "fan club" as a graduate student in Ball State's preservation program in the 1980s. Madison combines beautiful Ohio River valley topography, a broad array of historic architecture, and the all-important details—wrought iron fences, tin cornices, fountains, even nineteenth-century curbs and gutters—to create an environment unparalleled in Indiana.

In 1960, a group of residents led by John and Ann Windle formed Historic Madison, Inc. to preserve the community's historic architecture. Today, the organization owns 16 significant properties in town, some of which serve as museums, including the hospital and medical office of Dr. Hutchings (c.1840) and the Schroeder Saddletree Factory (1878). Dr. Hutchings' office was locked up after his death in 1903, and remains exactly as he left it—a time capsule reflecting the sometimes disconcerting world of nineteenth-century medicine. The restored Saddletree Factory captures the same authentic quality and

tells a similarly compelling story.

I also love Madison because it is not a well-preserved museum village, but an actual living, working town. There are the usual political and social intrigues, finely restored private homes as well as rundown ones, and museum houses, including the Lanier Mansion. Like other communities, Madison faces preservation challenges, from homeowners wanting to pull out their nineteenth-century windows for vinyl replacements to the conflagration last summer that nearly destroyed most of a downtown city block.

Madison is fortunate to claim at least six heritage-related organizations. One of the best advocates is Historic Landmarks' affiliate Cornerstone Society. The group's educational programs and watchdog stance have saved many buildings. Cornerstone members frequently testify before Madison's Historic District Board of Review and city council to support preserving the community's distinctive character.

Maryanne Imes, one of Cornerstone's founders and a serial restorer of several Madison homes, revived a Madison institution. Maryanne and husband Tom restored and reopened Mundt's Candies, part of Madison's downtown since 1917. Housed in an 1830s Main Street commercial building, Mundt's—known for its famous candy fish—has been featured on MSNBC, the Food Network, and in National Geographic.

When you get to visit a place like Madison, tour an outstanding museum, enjoy a Mundt's sundae or pumpkin ice cream (my favorite!), and watch the lazy river drift by—life just doesn't get much better.

Mark Dollase