

Preserving Butler

The 1828 Shaw House is at top of must-save list

By Patricia Lowry

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Butler boasts many historic buildings but has never done a survey to reveal more about their architectural significance.

As in many mostly rural counties, the crown jewel of Butler County architecture is the 1887 courthouse, whose clock tower, fortunately, still dominates the town of Butler. This great sandstone building, designed by Pittsburgh architect James P. Bailey in a blend of Richardsonian Romanesque, Gothic Revival and Chateausque elements, faces a public square surrounded by 19th-century and contemporary buildings.

Many turn-of-the-century commercial buildings on Main Street are intact, and the town has a wealth of older homes and churches in various states of preservation.

Because Butler has no landmarks preservation group, that role falls to the Butler County Historical Society. Its director, Diana Ames, hopes to initiate a survey of the town's historic buildings in the coming months to determine preservation priorities.

For now, at the top of its must-save list is the Shaw House, on Jackson Street just behind the courthouse. Restoring the red brick Federal-style house is the historical society's main project.

Walter Lowrie, Butler County's only U.S. senator, built it as a summer home in 1828. The house was sold in 1836 to state Sen. Charles C. Sullivan, whose great-granddaughter, Isabella Shaw Adams, donated it to the historical society.

Because the house was in the Sullivan-Shaw family for 150 years, "it represents the way a family home has evolved over several generations of one family," Ames said. "It's so little touched by the 20th century."

About \$500,000 is needed for restoration as a house museum. The society plans a broad 19th-century interpretation due to interi-



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Butler's First United Methodist Church will be part of tour tomorrow to raise preservation funds.

or and exterior changes to the house before 1900.

The 12-room house retains its original wood and 1860s marbleized slate mantels. Grained wallpaper simulating wood panels in the center hall date to about the 1860s. Some of the house's furniture, also dating to the 1860s, is in storage.

Since acquiring the Shaw House, the society has put in a cement floor, French drain and new support posts and beams in the base-

ment with state funds. The next project will be to replace the roof's rafters and slates.

The house last was occupied by Isabella Shaw Adams' mother, who died in 1959. In the 1970s, Adams had the house listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ed Dlutowski, field associate with The Carnegie Museum of Natural History, is doing an archaeological dig on the site of the house's privy and wash-house. The base-

ment also was excavated for artifacts. Beads, pottery shards, a ceramic marble and an 1826 penny have turned up.

But it was a carpenter who found the mummified cat under the center hall floorboards. "It was a literal case of curiosity killing the cat," said Ames. The feline's hairless remains temporarily lie in state in an upstairs aquarium (the ultimate irony, if not the ultimate insult).

To raise funds for the restoration and to raise awareness of Butler architecture, the society is sponsoring its first church tour tomorrow from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The oldest building on the tour is St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church, completed in 1849. In 1964, the small red brick church gained a vestibule, central bell tower and arcade in a sensitive addition that gave the church a grand presence on Franklin Street. East North Street, perpendicular to Franklin at the church, creates a long vista for St. Peter's, which enjoys one of the most dramatic settings of any Butler church.

Inside, its best features are the altar's carved and decoratively painted wood baldacchino (canopy), brought over from Germany in 1927, and stained glass windows that bear the names of their German-born patrons. The windows came from Munich at the turn of the century.

First United Methodist Church was built of brown sandstone in 1903 at 200 E. North St. in the modified Akron plan — a chapel and Sunday school rooms open to the sanctuary, notable for its skylit, stained glass dome in a fish-scale pattern of variegated greens.

Five other churches and Butler County's only synagogue also are on the walking tour. Tickets are \$8 and available at the Shaw House; there's free parking in the lot next to the house.

Volunteers to help with the architectural survey are welcome. Call Ames at 283-8116 for more information.

(Patricia Lowry is The Pittsburgh Press art and architecture critic.)