

Devaluing our heritage

By Steve Wiser

Special to The Courier-Journal

How does an 1851 (or earlier) historic building get demolished without a civic outcry? Especially since during its nearly two centuries of existence, this building had been occupied and a beloved gathering space, most recently with the popular restaurant John E's. This is what the Buechel neighborhood and preservation community has been asking itself over the past week. The George W. Hikes Jr.

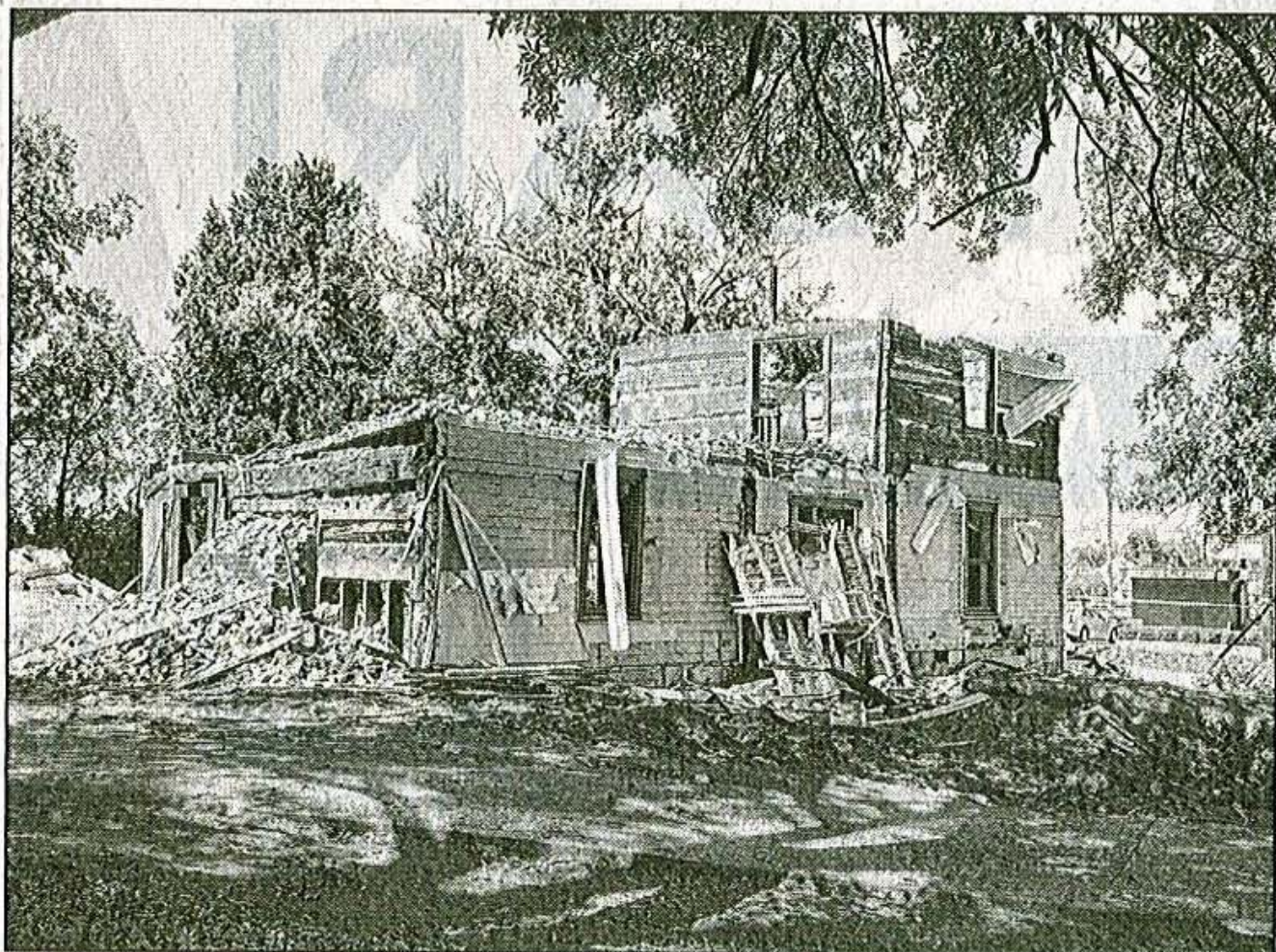
House (3708 Bardstown Road) which stood somewhere between 160 to 200 years, was unceremoniously hauled off to the dump this past weekend.



Steve Wiser

Why? Is there some sort of exciting new development set to take its place? No known plans have been announced yet. Did it pose a safety concern? No significant structural collapse was imminent. It also was not in deteriorated condition, unlike the many other distressed urban properties that seem to take years to get razed. Perhaps the owners couldn't sell it? No "For Sale" sign was placed on the property.

Maybe it wasn't of landmark quality? No, this house was one of five owned by the Hikes Family after which Hikes Lane and Hikes Point are so named. In fact, this house might have been the oldest of this group since only it was composed of rough-hewn timber, the type that George Hikes Sr. cut when he came to Jefferson County in 1785. The Hikes family (Sr., Jr., wives, etc.) are all buried just to the south of their former



The George W. Hikes Jr. House on Bardstown Road, which stood somewhere between 160 to 200 years, was demolished last weekend.

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home. And, this house was also most likely an important African-American site, since it probably was built by slaves.

Several things contributed to this tragic, historic loss.

First, the demo notice was not prominently posted within public view.

Second, an email notice that didn't highlight the significance of this property was sent to a small, select list of people.

Third, there is a perception in certain circles that heritage and preservation are not major economic development initiatives. How this attitude still persists is perplexing after the financial success of West Main Street, NuLu, Bardstown Road/Frankfort Avenue corridors, Old Louisville, Twin Spires, and the overwhelming accolades from out-of-town visitors who marvel at our scenic historic environment. This also goes against the city's sustainable strategy, since the rehabbing of an existing building is the most "green" of construc-

tion.

And, last, there is a feeling that after the high-profile preservation struggles involving Colonial Gardens and Bauer's Restaurant, saving such notable structures had become too controversial and the landmark process needed to be "lessened."

Instead of a distinctive, job-producing, tax-generating, locally based business, there is now a vacant lot.

While it is hoped that a remarkable new landmark design will be constructed here, the cynical expectation is that a generic, suburban-style national chain like a drug store will soon stand where George Hikes built a house to last many lifetimes. This trend will continue to reduce Louisville's quality of life and uniqueness.

Steve Wiser is a local architect, and historian. He has written extensively on Louisville history and architecture. His new book "Historic Houses of Louisville" will be out this fall.