

Heritage Hill

A Brief Overview and
Suggested Walking Tour

Overview

The Heritage Hill Historic District is one of the largest historic districts in the country. Stretching north to south from Crescent St. to Pleasant St., about seven blocks, and east to west from Union Ave. to Lafayette Ave., about four blocks, Heritage Hill was the first neighborhood developed in the Grand Rapids area and is located in the heart of the city, a central piece of downtown Grand Rapids. Though it has been through struggles and controversy, Heritage Hill is now seen as one of the greatest assets to the Grand Rapids community.

Heritage Hill consists of around 1,300 homes of a variety of styles and sizes. Most of the homes were built between the 1840s and 1920s for single-family residences. Since its development, major changes have occurred in the area, both for better and for worse. In the 1930s and 1940s, many houses were turned into apartment buildings to help accommodate young professionals interested in living downtown. Also, in the 1960s and 1970s, many large houses were converted into multi-unit residences or office buildings. During these years intense efforts of preservation began as many local residents took into account the beauty and uniqueness of Heritage Hill and saw these changes as a set back for the community. These efforts in the late 1960s and early 1970s have contributed to Heritage Hill staying primarily a residential neighborhood with only few small office areas scattered throughout.

In 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act was passed. This legislation created The National Register of Historic Places, with the intent of preserving historic and archaeological sites. In 1971 Heritage Hill was added to the National Register of Historic places, becoming the first district to use federal law to save historic resources from being affected by federally funded efforts. Though changes continue to be made to areas of Heritage Hill, federal law now legislates any adjustments within the historic district. Residents and owners of Heritage Hill homes must have legal permission from the City of Grand Rapids Historic Preservation Commission in order to follow through with any changes made to their homes. Some see this as a struggle for the community as it limits growth and change. However it is overall seen as a great system for preserving the beauty and character of one of the oldest neighborhoods in Michigan.

Heritage Hill can easily be looked at as two different neighborhoods. Divided at Cherry Street, there are many obvious differences between the north and south sides of the neighborhood. The north side, built mainly between the 1870s and 1890s,

contains many more mansions and was housing for the nineteenth century business elite. The south side was developed later, mainly between 1900 and 1930. The houses on this end hold more of a middle class feeling than on the north side. The Cherry street divider has been one of the most redeveloped areas containing both office buildings and apartments, though it still offers many single residence homes.

The architecture of the homes in Heritage Hill is one of the neighborhood's greatest assets. There is great variability within the styles and sizes of the homes but are overall described by David and Marilyn Hanks as "homes solidly built with spacious and gracious interiors in a location convenient to the city's best offerings." Within Heritage Hill there are sixty different architectural styles registered, highlighted by Greek Revival, Gothic, Dutch Colonial, Bungalow, and Craftsman styles. The vast variety of styles offers a unique feeling that adds to the overall appeal of the community. In addition to the many different styles, there is an extra sense of community throughout the neighborhoods. Almost all of the houses in Heritage Hill have large front porches. This may not seem like a big deal, but modern architecture tends to eliminate the front porch, often replaced by a garage on the front of the house. This minor, yet very important, factor of the architecture goes a long way in helping explain why Heritage Hill has become such a popular community.

The Heritage Hill Neighborhood Association was formed in 1968 and has been an integral part of keeping the district preserved. The main goal of the earliest members was to stop a variety of urban renewal projects that had planned to destroy about 75% of the district. With the successful efforts of the association, Heritage Hill was able to thrive. The main purposes of the association are now vastly different, with the main goal being to help build a healthy, historically preserved community where people can live and work in a secure community. Issues currently facing the association are land use, crime and safety concerns, preservation, parking and traffic, education, and general quality of life issues. A monthly meeting is held by the association, which is open to the public, allowing residents to have a voice.

For thirty-eight years Heritage Hill has showcased its beauty to the public through its tour of homes. For a small fee of \$15, the tour offers non-residents the opportunity to see a vastly different style than the homes that many of them live in today, as well as providing current residents the opportunity to see other homes in the area. The annual tour is held on the first full weekend in October and offers entrance into eight to twelve homes per year. In each house tour guides are stationed in each room of the house, ready to point out unique aspects and recount stories of the history of every inch of the home. In addition to the tours of the homes, visitors are encouraged to walk around the neighborhood, taking in all that Heritage Hill has to offer.

Through sustained efforts, Heritage Hill has stayed a landmark for Grand Rapids and continues to flourish. With a diverse population, breathtaking architecture, and rich community, Heritage Hill has thrived as one of the most important neighborhoods in the city.

Beginning at Lyon and Prospect, acknowledge that the block of schools demonstrates much of the history of Heritage Hill. The schools were built as an asset to the community, but came at a cost of many beautiful homes being torn down. However three homes were relocated, not torn down, including 412 Lyon.

Walk south down Prospect; you are currently on the north end of Heritage Hill. Point out the size and elegance of the homes. Note especially some of the windows, doors, and other unique architectural aspects of the homes. Many of the homes on this block of Prospect are built in Italianate style.

Continuing to look at the Italianate style, go west (right) to Lafayette; turn south (left). On your right, 55 Lafayette was built for Thomas Gilbert. Gilbert organized the Union Benevolent Society, which was the originator of Blodgett Hospital. Hospitals and medical centers are growing immensely in Grand Rapids, and Gilbert was one of the main factors in bringing this to the area. On the left, 44 Lafayette was one of many homes that the Heritage Hill Neighborhood Association was able to purchase and save from being demolished in 1977.

Continue east on Fulton. Fulton is the highest traffic road in Heritage Hill. On the left is Davenport College. Davenport has done a great job of integrating itself into the community without destroying many buildings.

Turn south on Gay Street. On your left, 20 Gay has one of the most unique interiors of any Heritage Hill homes. In the home you will find both a pipe organ and an operating elevator. It is being renovated into a bed and breakfast. On your right is "Peaches", a bed and breakfast. It is an affordable \$109/night.

Continue west on Washington; make a quick stop north on College. Point out 15 College, on your left, one of the few Dutch Colonial Revival style homes in the country; and the only one in Grand Rapids. Turn around and go south on College. On your right you will see the Voigt House, a beautiful example of Chateausque style. Stop here. The Voigt House is one of the most historical homes in all of Grand Rapids. The home has been beautifully restored but has many of its original furnishings and decorations. It has been made into a museum and is open to the public every Tuesday from 11 AM to 3 PM as well as every second and fourth Sunday of each month from 1-3 PM for guided tours with a small admission fee.

Continue south toward Cherry. On the left you will see the WOOD TV 8 news station. Behind the TV 8 station is the Heritage Hill Neighborhood Association Office, in case anyone wants to stop and get more information. On the right, at the corner of College and Cherry, is a home known to most as "The Castle". This amazing home has been turned into a dentist office.

Turn right on Cherry. On your left is where the annual summer picnic is held for all residents of Heritage Hill. Cherry street also features many more office buildings than the rest of the neighborhood. It is often acknowledged as being a divider of sorts between two halves of Heritage Hill. Turn left on Madison, notice and point out that

the homes tend to be smaller and less extravagant on the south side.

Continue down Madison, point out the differences between the homes on the North and South ends. Where the homes on the North side tend to be more Traditional, Victorian era homes, the south side offers a greater variety of styles and sizes. Once you reach the Meyer May House, on your left at the corner of Madison and Logan, stop. The Meyer May House is a privilege to have in Grand Rapids. The Meyer May House is an original of the most famous architect in U.S. history, Frank Lloyd Wright. It was built in 1908, but was completely restored in 1987 by Steelcase. Since its renovation it has become open to the public for guided tours on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 AM to 2 PM as well as Sundays from 1 to 5 PM. Unlike the Voigt House, this tour is free.

As you walk down Logan, notice the brick roads that have been restored to create an authentic, rustic feel. Continue east on Logan; turn north (left) on Paris. It is good to mention that a couple blocks away, on Union just south of Pleasant, is the boyhood home of Gerald R. Ford. The block was recently added to Heritage Hill in an attempt to preserve the memory of the former President.

At Paris and Cherry, turn right. Point out the two apartment buildings across on Cherry as well as the businesses on the south corners. Again, this is typically seen as a dividing point for two halves of Heritage Hill. Continue to Union; turn left.

At the corner of Union and Cherry is the *Friant House*, better known to many people as the home of former mayor John Logie. One of the few Romanesque style homes in Grand Rapids. Offers a unique combination of stone and wood exterior. Continue north on Union until you reach Lake Drive.

Tour ends at intersection of Fulton/Lake Dr./Union.