

The Towner House

History Preserved for Future Generations

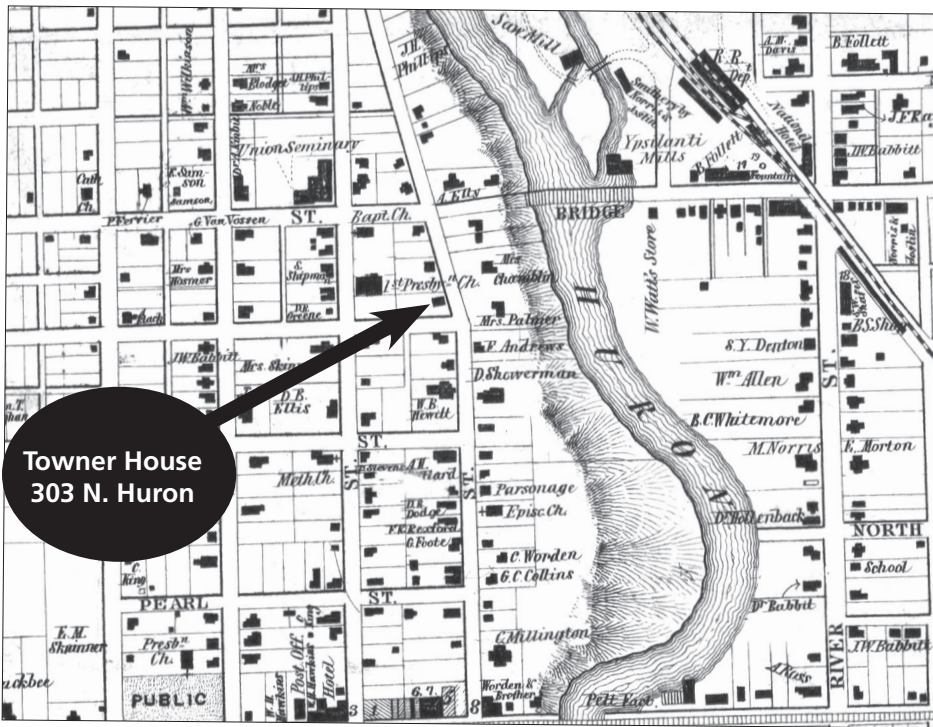
By John Harrington, President Towner House Foundation



Woodruff's Grove was established as a pioneer settlement in 1823. Judge August Woodward of Detroit bought acres around Woodruff's Grove and plotted it for a village.

Many Americans at that time had sympathy and support for the Greek struggle for independence from Turkey. The actions of Demetrius Ypsilanti, a Greek general, so impressed Judge Woodward that he suggested the village be named "Ypsilanti". An action of the Michigan State Legislature created the settlement of Ypsilanti in 1832.

Westward expansion brought many new settlers to the Ohio Valley region. The road from Detroit to Chicago, now Michigan Avenue, was opened in 1835. The Central Road railroad



Late 1830s map of Washtenaw County, Michigan : from actual surveys / by G.R. Bechler & E. Wenig, engraved by B. Matthias. (Library of Congress)

started train service through Ypsilanti in 1838.

John Pierce, Michigan's first Superintendent of Public Instruction, urged the Michigan Legislature to establish a school for training teachers in 1837. Michigan Normal College was founded in 1849, which is now Eastern Michigan University.

Against this backdrop of major developments, homes in Ypsilanti started to change. The movement away from log cabins and simple wood frame homes to a more stylized type of structure had begun.

Marcus Lane and Argden Ballard purchased the property where the Towner House now resides for \$181.37 in February 1836. In April of 1837 Mr. Ballard and his wife quit their claim to the deed for the sum of \$500. Marcus Lane became the sole owner. Both men made significant contributions to other major buildings in the neighborhood, notably the Ladies' Literary Club and the Breakey Mansion. Marcus Lane was one of the first lawyers in this area and later became a judge.

He was one of the founding members of the Vigilance Committee to maintain law and order within Ypsilanti. He was also one of the original partners in the first banking endeavor to form in this community. Marcus Lane died in 1840. The executor of his estate was John Geddes, a well-known businessman, who operated a saw mill, flour mill and plaster mill.

The current building at 303 North Huron still stands on its original stone foundation. It is post and beam construction with most of the original beams still intact. The style is Greek Revival which was very popular in the 1830-1840s. The current structure is the same size and shape as the original structure built in 1837.

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In March of 1842 the property was sold to Charles Lane, brother of Marcus. He lived in the house for 5 years then sold it to John Warden. After a few months John Warden sold it to Lew Morey who lived there for four years. In March of 1851 the house was sold to Nancy Spencer Towner, widow of Ephraim Towner. Nancy had several children from a previous marriage including Jennette Spencer. Ephraim had eight children by his first wife Anna who died in child birth in 1816. Norman Towner was his youngest.

Norman Towner and Jennette Spencer married in May of 1854. Step brother and step sister became husband and wife. With the death of Nancy the couple moved into the home around 1858.



Norman Towner

Norman became City Clerk in 1870. His later job was as a bookkeeper for a local farm implement company. The couple had five children, two of whom died at a young age. The remaining three children, daughters Anna and Caroline and son Tracy lived in the home their entire lives.



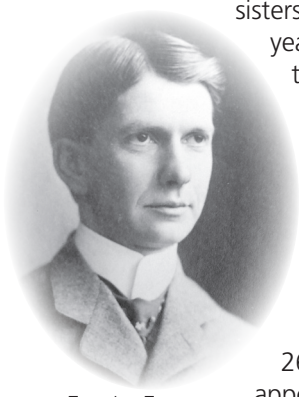
Jennette Spencer

Because of the almost 100 years of occupancy by the Towner family, the home received its name "The Towner House".

Anna graduated from Michigan State Normal College in 1880. She was a career teacher in the Ypsilanti Union School. She died in 1949 at the age of 89.

Caroline taught voice at the Conservatory under Professor Frederic Pease. She died in 1951 at the age of 95.

Tracy Lay Towner was educated in the early public school system of Ypsilanti called the Old Seminary, as were his



Tracy Lay Towner

sisters. After several years of apprenticeship, Tracy attended the University of Michigan Law school and graduated in 1888.

At the age of 26, Tracy was appointed to the Circuit Court as a commissioner; the youngest person to hold that position up to that time. He became Ypsilanti's City Attorney and was elected Mayor, serving from 1910-1912. Tracy worked as an insurance attorney until his death in 1943. His office was located in the Ypsilanti Savings Bank building at 1 South Huron Street (the current City Hall). Neither he nor his two sisters ever married.

While the Towners owned the house, additions were added and a garage was built, more than doubling the size of the original structure. Since the Towners had no heirs, the house was left to St. Luke's Episcopal Church.

In 1951 G.L. Stewart and his family bought the house and occupied it until 1968. For the following 4 years the house was a rental property. The First Presbyterian Church of Ypsilanti purchased the property in 1972. The church razed a newer house that was located between the Towner house



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and the church building. Their next step would have been to demolish the Towner House.

A group called the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation was formed to save the Towner House from demolition. A lease agreement between the Presbyterian Church and the Heritage Foundation was formed in 1975. Gary Decker, who worked in the EMU theater department, moved into the house. A new heating system and other improvements were made at that time. After 6 years, Gary Decker moved out

and the lease between the Heritage Foundation and the First Presbyterian church expired.

A very significant event occurred in 1978 when the City of Ypsilanti passed the Historic District Ordinance. This law made a large part of central Ypsilanti a historic district. Buildings located within the designated area could not be demolished or altered without consent of the Historic District Commission. Ypsilanti became the second largest Historic District in the State of Michigan, and the Towner House is within its boundaries.

The Ypsilanti Historical Society, which operates the Historical Museum located at 220 North Huron, leased the Towner House for a Children's Museum starting in 1982. The purpose of the Children's Museum was to provide a hands-on learning for children under the age of 16.

Elementary age school children were invited to the Towner House for demonstrations and activities illustrating



Towner House pre-1999 prior to the removal of all of its additions.



Don Randazzo restoring the back of the house after the removal of the additions.



Towner House 1999 prior to exterior renovations.



Towner House 2014 after exterior renovations.

early life in Ypsilanti. The Presbyterian Church and Historical Society signed a 10-year lease but by 1990 the Children's Museum ceased to exist.

The Towner House fell into disrepair and in 1992 petitions were submitted to the Historic District Commission (HDC) for permission to demolish the structure. The HDC denied the request and a lengthy court battle began between the church and the City of Ypsilanti. By 1999, a consent agreement between both parties was reached using a mediator. It called for the removal of all of the additions back to the original structure and the installation of a new roof structure. The final piece of the agreement called for a committee of citizens to be in charge of maintenance and repair of the building. The length of the agreement was 25 years.

The group became the Towner House Foundation, LLC recognized by the Federal Government as a 501(c) 3 non-profit entity. Between 2000 and 2007, the Foundation painted the structure, repaired windows and doors, replaced front and back porches, resided the back west wall and repaired the west wall foundation.

For the first time in many years the Towner House looked good. Internally the house is just a shell, plaster is falling from walls and ceilings. It needs all of the mechanicals; heating, wiring and plumbing which is estimated to cost over \$100,000. Without the ownership of the property, the Towner House Foundation could not apply for grants to start the interior restoration. To make things worse, a major recession hit Michigan in 2009 leaving

many non-profit organizations struggling for money. In 2012 The Towner House Foundation started negotiations with the Church and, on December 30, 2014, the Towner House Foundation purchased the property from the First Presbyterian Church. Eastern Michigan University's Preservation Department has offered to partner with the Foundation to help preserve and rehabilitate the building.

Many thanks go out in large part to the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation and its financial support in the purchase of the home, to the City administrators and legal boards that worked with us throughout the process of the purchase. Finally, to the First Presbyterian Church membership and Session, without their help none of this would have been possible.



Interior shots of the Towner House as it stands today. Left photos shows the original timbers that still exist, knob and tube wiring and the Michigan basement foundation. Center and right photos show two of the first floor rooms that are in need of repair.