

GAZETTE

The Historic Kansas City Foundation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of greater Kansas City's heritage, neighborhoods and historic built environment. The Gazette is the official publication of the Foundation.

A Quarterly Newsletter

Volume 37-No. 2-Summer/Fall 2012

Feature: Louis Curtiss and the Politics of Architectural Reputation

Midwestern Maybeck? Louis Curtiss's life (and death) outside the canon

Page 1

HKCF Presidential Address

New president Jake Wagner, PhD. discusses the future and direction of the organization.

Page 3

MO Preservation Most Endangered

Most endangered historic buildings across the state; 3 Kansas City buildings listed

Page 7

18th and Vine Update

Pouncey building demolished, HKCF applies for grant to stabilize district

Page 7

Ambassador Hotel Opens Downtown

Luxury boutique hotel in historic Gate City National Bank building

Page 7

Important Notice

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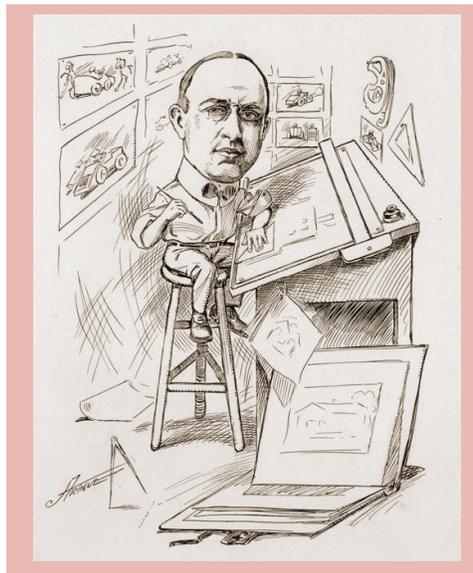
Page 8

Louis Curtiss and the Politics of Architectural Reputation

Essay by Keith Eggener
First published online by the *Design Observer Group*

How and why does an architect become famous? What difference does it make to anyone other than the architect and his cohort?

Outside of Kansas City, Missouri, where he lived and worked between 1887 and his death in 1924, Louis Singleton Curtiss is virtually unknown. Within, he is



Caricature of Louis Curtiss, from *As We See 'Em: A Volume of Cartoons and Caricatures of Kansas Cityans*, 1908.

sometimes called the city's most innovative and important local architect. [1] His powerful patrons included newspaper publisher William Rockhill

Nelson, streetcar magnates Thomas and Bernard Corrigan, and railroad and restaurant entrepreneur Frederick Henry Harvey. For them and others he designed buildings around Missouri and as far afield as West Virginia, Illinois, Texas, Nebraska and New Mexico. Typical of his times, Curtiss began as a revivalist serving up competently prepared, if unremarkable, historicist fare to his Midwest clientele. This changed around 1903 when more progressive currents — Prairie Style, Vienna Secession, and Art Nouveau — first touched his work. [2]

More significant than this fashion consciousness, however, was his emerging artistic maturity and confidence, his growing ability to synthesize diverse elements in creative and unexpected ways, resulting in an increasingly cohesive, consistent and distinctive body of American modern architecture. At their best, Curtiss's designs are comparable in their creative eclecticism to those of far better known

Continued Page 2

contemporaries such as Bernard Maybeck or Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue. Moreover, Curtiss was a structural innovator of the first order, designer of some of the earliest buildings in the world to employ caisson foundations, rolled steel columns and glass curtain-walls. Yet he remains an enigmatic figure about whom little has been written and little is known. A look at Louis Curtiss provides a view into not only a fascinating and largely forgotten early 20th-century American practice but also into the mechanisms and implications of architectural fame.

Publications on Curtiss are few. Most important are: a slim, menacingly titled, hard-to-find book of 1991, *Stalking Louis Curtiss*, by Kansas City historians Wilda Sandy and Larry Hancks; and a short though pioneering article published in 1963 by Fred Comee, a traveling architectural metals salesman who became interested in Curtiss while working in Kansas City in 1957 and began investigating him in his spare time. [3] From these one gains an outline, much of it speculative, of the life and architectural output of a private and peculiar man.



Louis Curtiss, Bernard Corrigan House, Kansas City, Missouri, 1912. [Photo from the Historic American Building Survey, courtesy of the U.S. Library of Congress.]

Born Louis Curtis (he added the second "s" by 1887) in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, in 1865, Curtiss may have studied architecture at the University of Toronto and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris; local newspapers of his era sometimes said he did, perhaps because he told them so, but no records have been found to support these claims. [4] Chicago city directories show a "Louis Curtis, draughtsman," living in that city between 1884 and 1887 [5]; it's not clear that this is the same man — Louis Singleton Curtiss — who arrived in Kansas City in 1887 and began

drafting for the architect Adriance Van Brunt (apparently a cousin of the more famous Henry Van Brunt, who moved his office from Boston to Kansas City that same year). Between 1890 and 1892 Curtiss served as assistant to the Superintendent of Buildings for Kansas City, in whose employ he seems to have proposed and designed the pioneering caisson foundations used at the old City Hall (1890), three years before similar foundations were first used in Chicago at Adler and Sullivan's Stock Exchange Building. [6] In 1890, Curtiss partnered with Frederick C. Gunn, and over the next 10 years they built at least a dozen buildings, including Kansas City's stately Renaissance-revival Baltimore Hotel (1898), and the domed, Beaux-Arts Missouri State pavilion for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In 1895-96 and again in 1898 Curtiss traveled to Europe. The specific purpose of the first trip is unknown, though by its end he'd submitted a design for a "palais de justice" to a Paris salon. During the second trip he made studies related to his work on the Baltimore Hotel. [7]

On his own after 1899, Curtiss designed more than 200 buildings and projects, including private houses large and small, apartments and hotels, restaurants, theaters, churches, courthouses, banks, private clubs, automobile garages, railroad depots, and office and retail buildings. [8] He maintained a small office staff — an assistant architect, a draftsman, a young apprentice and a messenger — and he appears to have done all his own structural designs. Exposed to smallpox in 1905, he was quarantined for several months. After his illness, Curtiss's work grew more independent from academic revival styles, more his own — idiosyncratic, inventive, overtly modern. Over the next 10 years he produced his most distinctive and important designs: the Boley Building in Kansas City (1908-09), with its white terracotta-clad corners and cornices framing six-story glass screens hung from cantilevered floor slabs, arguably the first building in the United States to employ true glass curtain walls (nine years before Willis Polk's far more famous Halladie Building in San Francisco) [9]; the Bernard Corrigan House (1912), a large, steel-framed, reinforced concrete residence on Kansas City's Ward Parkway that combined Prairie Style design features (low-slung horizontality, broad overhanging eaves, rows of casement windows, built-in planter urns,

art glass) with lavish surface ornament inspired by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Vienna Secession; and the starkly modern railroad buildings in Joplin, Missouri, and around Texas, with their rationalist emphasis on the structural frame, their broad expanses of glass and over-sized Secession-style ornament.



Top: Louis Curtiss, Boley Building, Kansas City, Missouri, 1908. [Photo by Keith Eggener] Middle: Louis Curtiss, Henry G. Miller House, Kansas City, Kansas, 1921. [Photo by Nate Hofer] Bottom: Louis Curtiss, Jesse Hoel House, Kansas City, Kansas, 1916. [Photo by Nate Hofer]

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

These are both inspiring and challenging times for historic preservation in Kansas City. More than four decades after the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, the field of historic preservation is a well-established and time-tested institution for the improvement of quality places in our region and the nation. At the same time, we face economic conditions that make our job even harder and political attitudes that undermine the effectiveness of the preservation.

As I travel throughout our region I see evidence of progress toward better urban redevelopment that celebrates and restores our historic landmarks and districts. The use of state and federal tax credits has had an amazing impact on downtown redevelopment and the restoration of key buildings and districts throughout our city. Neighborhood organizations are actively engaged in preservation, and willing to do even more work to protect the qualities of place in their neighborhoods. Younger residents of our area are actively interested in urban neighborhoods and engaged in the work of restoring older homes, commercial buildings, and neighborhoods.



At the same time however, the preservation challenge continues to grow every day. The foreclosure crisis has destabilized neighborhoods throughout the region and has left many more vacant housing units in its wake. We struggle to maintain housing quality and affordability. Surprisingly, we still have to make the case that preservation is part of the solution. And we continue to battle for the policies that support preservation – especially the historic tax credit program within the State of Missouri.

Over the next few years the HKCF staff and board will continue to work on our basic mission of preserving our critical historic resources and increasing the role of preservation in local economic development. We will continue to advocate for the policies and projects that maintain the unique assets of our region and preserve the sense of place. But we need your help and support to continue this work.

It is our goal to expand the membership and impact of our organization. Please tell your family and friends about HKCF and what we're doing. A few facts may help:

- We are the longest standing preservation organization in Kansas City – since 1974
- We are the local partner with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and we are actively working on a number of initiatives with the Trust staff in the Chicago regional office.
- Over the past decade we have successfully advocated for the preservation of numerous landmarks and we have had a number of preservation successes in Kansas City, including most recently the Cosby Hotel and the Country Club Plaza.
- We remain active in identifying additional historic resources that need greater protection – from the unique organic architecture of Bruce Goff to the historic neighborhoods in the Green Impact Zone of Missouri.

As the in-coming President of HKCF I have big shoes to fill. Over the past few years Scott Lane has provided excellent leadership during a time of growth and challenge for our organization. Please join me in thanking Scott and other members of our board for their critical service to preservation in Kansas City.

If at any time you have questions about the direction of HKCF – please feel free to contact me at president@historickansascity.org. And make sure to take a look at our website as we continue to grow and develop our on-line presence.

Yours in preservation,

Jake Wagner

After 1914 the volume of Curtiss's work dropped off dramatically, a decline he experienced alongside other progressive American architects of this era. Scholars have linked this downturn to the outbreak of war in Europe and the resultant nationwide economic slump, and to a widespread shift in taste away from progressive modes like the Prairie Style toward more reassuringly conservative revival styles. [10] In Curtiss's case the downturn was also likely connected to the recent deaths of two important patrons, William Rockhill Nelson and Bernard Corrigan. [11] Whatever the specific reasons, Curtiss's glory days were past. The last 10 years of his life were spent designing relatively modest modern houses around Kansas City. Most involved a synthesis of Arts and Crafts and Prairie Style themes, with Spanish Colonial or Orientalist accents: low pitched or hipped red tile roofs, walls of rough stone or stucco, built-in planters, extensive terraces, elaborate wooden lattices — painted red like Chinese lacquer — screening ample glazing. The Jesse Hoel House of 1916 and the Henry G. Miller House of 1921, both located in Kansas City's Westheight Manor subdivision, are exemplary. [12] Curtiss was lucky to complete one or two such commissions per year.

As Andrew Saint has demonstrated, ever since architecture's emergence as a profession in the mid-18th century, its most ambitious practitioners have been conscious of the economic and reputational advantages to be gained by cultivating an individualistic persona. [13] Recurring roles have included the craftsman, intellectual, businessman or entrepreneur, technician, showman, visionary, or politician. Curtiss, like certain others of his day — Frank Lloyd Wright with cape and cane, Bernard Maybeck in smock and beret — styled himself a bohemian artist-aesthete, and in that role he left a distinct impression on his fellow Kansas Citians. All available accounts paint him as eccentric and outside the mainstream, flamboyant even, a dandy bedecked in flashy all-white outfits and a pince-nez, chain-smoking custom-made cigarettes that he ordered from a New York manufacturer in lots of 10,000. He

was an early devotee of the motorcar, president of the local Automobile Club, and a notably fast and reckless driver. He employed a large and unusual vocabulary and often used it to make grand pronouncements. He paid his rent in gold coins, before moving to an opulently furnished, Oriental-themed downtown Kansas City apartment/studio building of his own design. He held séances and fussed with Ouija boards. [14] Such modestly unconventional behavior may or may not have been affected to draw attention; it did so regardless.



Top: Louis Curtiss, Studio and Apartment, Kansas City, Missouri, 1908. [Photo by Nate Hofer] Bottom: Louis Curtiss, Baltimore Hotel, Kansas City, Missouri, 1899. [Postcard ca. 1900]

Yet Curtiss kept the curious at bay. He was an isolated figure, professionally and personally. [15] He rarely spoke with reporters, said little about his background, and published nothing about his work. His buildings — though sometimes briefly noted in publications like *American Architect and Building News* or *Construction News* — were illustrated only once during his lifetime in a national publication, in *Architectural Record* in February 1904. [16] He had little contact with his family, sometimes claimed to be an orphan, and added that second "s" to his last name, possibly to distance himself from his

origins. A life-long bachelor, his heart was reportedly broken in 1906, when the object of his affections, one Grace Griffin, married another man; some years later he was sued by a Kansas City artist for attempting to "alienate the affections" of the man's wife, but this affair seems not to have lasted. [17] He had few close friends or colleagues and, after his early years, declined memberships in civic or professional organizations. In one version of his will, he asked that his personal papers be burned upon his death before an observer from the Masonic lodge. [19] Toward the end of his life he became increasingly reclusive, rarely leaving his house or admitting people to it. Exhausted and alone, he died at his drafting table in June 1924, one week before his 59th birthday, possibly of cystic kidney disease. [19] His grave in Kansas City's Mount Washington Cemetery remains unmarked to this day.

Upon first seeing his buildings about a decade ago, I registered Curtiss as a sort of Midwestern Maybeck. [20] The two men did their most important work around the same time and that work shares certain formal similarities, suggesting a common theoretical underpinning, a similar approach to design. Maybeck's education and theoretical influences are well understood; evident bases for his architecture include Viollet-le-Duc's emphasis on craftsmanship and revealed structure, and the Arts and Crafts's concern with the natural, the picturesque, and with "feeling." Curtiss's intellectual formation is undocumented, yet his architecture evinces similar preoccupations likely fueled by similar sources. Each man tended to combine rationally expressed structure with lavish non-structural ornament of his own invention. Evidently rooted in academic traditions, both were wide-ranging eclectics, creative synthesizers well versed in a variety of period styles yet also actively engaged with contemporary programs and conditions, and with progressive ideas about form, technology and new materials. [21] (Both, for instance, were early experimenters with reinforced concrete construction.) Of the two, Curtiss was more drawn to contemporary avant-garde design — borrowing as he did from Wright and

the Vienna Secession, the latter of which Maybeck called a passing fashion lacking conceptual order [22] — yet both men set great store in the freedom to experiment, in personal expression and artistic originality. Each positioned himself between a recent revivalist past and a newly opening world of radical invention.



Louis Curtiss, interior of the Standard Theatre (Folly Theater) vaudeville hall, Kansas City, Missouri, 1900. [Photo by Nate Hofer]

Known biographical overlaps between the two men are few but suggestive. Born within three years of one another, both were linked with the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris — Maybeck certainly, Curtis reputedly. Both started working in the U.S. at around the same time: Maybeck in 1886 with Carrère and Hastings in New York and Florida, Curtiss one year later in Kansas City with Adriance Van Brunt. In 1889, Maybeck moved to Kansas City to establish an independent practice. There he found a wife (Annie White, whose brother Mark later moved to California and oversaw the construction of some of her husband's projects), but had difficulty finding design work. After less than a year, Maybeck moved to San Francisco (at the urging of Willis Polk, who had worked in Kansas City during the late 1880s before heading west himself). It's tempting to think that within Kansas City's small circle of professional architects Maybeck and Curtiss would have met — as Curtiss and Polk surely did — especially if both were, or at least claimed to be, École graduates. It seems likely that they did meet.

Today, Curtiss, a virtual unknown, stands well outside the canon of American architecture. Maybeck, the subject of numerous books and articles, including studies by influential critics and historians such as William

Jordy, Esther McCoy and Reynar Banham, is firmly inside. [23] Most published surveys of American architectural history include discussion of Maybeck, as do many texts on international modern architecture. In her 1991 book *American Architects and the Mechanics of Fame*, Roxanne Kuter Williamson placed Maybeck high on her index of famous American architects. [24] Late in life Maybeck received the AIA's Gold Medal, its top honor. In 1981, he became one of a handful of American architects ever to appear on a U.S. postage stamp. [25] Today, the San Francisco-based Maybeck Foundation exists to "vigorously protect, preserve and advance in public thought [his] buildings, ideas, drawings, artifacts, and reputation." [26] Curtiss, meanwhile, lies buried in his unmarked grave, his name only now and again appearing in a footnote or flitting across lightly trafficked portions of the blogosphere. [27]



Left: U.S. postage stamp, 1981, featuring Bernard Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco, 1915. Right: Palace of Fine Arts rotunda. [Photo from the Historic American Building Survey, courtesy of the U.S. Library of Congress]

Why is Curtiss so much less celebrated than Maybeck? The answer has less to do with the quality or character of each man's work than with factors extrinsic to design. In her study of American architectural fame, Williamson emphasized the importance of contacts and timing to an architect's achieving lasting recognition. Right person, right time: most celebrated American architects were apprenticed to other celebrated architects at the very moment when the senior figures were producing the works that first made them famous. [28] Indeed, Maybeck's time with Carrère and Hastings fits well within this pattern. Further, outside of this presumably formative relationship, Maybeck was a far more social animal than Curtiss, with a much wider set of personal and professional networks to nurture and sustain him. He was, for

instance, an active member of the AIA and of organizations such as the Hillside Club, an influential force in shaping the Bay Area's distinctive architecture culture. He taught architecture and engineering at a major university (Berkeley), where his archives are preserved, and where he mentored numerous students who carried forth his lessons and sometimes sought to honor his legacy. Curtiss's record, on the other hand, shows no particularly distinguished mentors; he was a loner who distanced himself from his family and his peers, never married, took no students, and maintained no affiliations with an alma mater. He joined a few professional and social organizations early on, but he let these memberships lapse and grew increasingly isolated in his final years. [29]

Related to timing is the issue of longevity. Maybeck outlived Curtiss by 33 years, thriving until age 95, while Curtiss died at 58. Prior to the 1950s, his last decade, Maybeck was discussed only a few times in national publications; after this things changed, partly due to his sheer endurance. He received the AIA Gold Medal in 1951, at age 89 — a lifetime achievement award for one who'd lived long enough to become an institution, a living link to an earlier era. He lived long enough, that is, to be rediscovered, long enough to give interviews to those pursuing his revival, long enough to hand over his papers to those genuinely interested in preserving them, long enough to help shape his own legacy. [30]



Louis Curtiss, Roland Bruner House (Mineral Hall), Kansas City, Missouri, 1903. [Photo by Keith Eggener]

While timing and professional contacts are undoubtedly important to an architect's gaining lasting recognition,

so too are other factors: family background and connections, schools attended, self-promotion and publicity. One additional issue about which Williamson says little, but which scholars of world history such as Ian Morris have recently highlighted, is geographical location. "Maps, not chaps," Morris pithily writes, arguing that collective human history is powerfully shaped by geography. [31] On the individual level, it is clear that whatever their comparative talents, Maybeck was simply better situated to achieve long-term recognition than his Kansas City contemporary. Maybeck lived and worked in a dynamic urban conglomeration made up of numerous well-connected cities and towns. At the center of this region was a city whose many prosperous, well-educated, artistically attuned residents had long valued, studied, protected and promoted their local architectural heritage. With his Palace of Fine Arts (1915), Maybeck gave them a highly visible and much beloved landmark, one visited and commented upon by multitudes who might otherwise care little about historic architecture, including the countless tourists who've long flocked to this picturesque region. Additionally, since the late 19th century the Bay Area has been one of America's intellectual centers, with many colleges and universities, including two — Berkeley and Stanford — of world-class standing. These institutions have hosted legions of scholars ever on the lookout for research and publication topics. Alongside them have been generations of local writers, book and magazine publishers, filmmakers, amateur history buffs, and many others with an abiding interest in local architecture. [32]

Curtiss's Kansas City, on the other hand, was and is a smaller city than San Francisco, and it's part of a much smaller metropolitan region. Its tourist trade is miniscule compared to San Francisco's, and the nearest major research university and architecture program are 40 miles away in Lawrence, Kansas. [33] *Paris of the Plains* it may once have billed itself, but for many coastal residents of the U.S. it remains a city of regional importance and middling distinction, a

bright but largely unknown patch of light in the middle of fly-over country. With very few exceptions — Steven Holl's 2007 Bloch Wing for the Nelson-Atkins Museum being a prime example — its architecture is not the stuff of formal or historical canons. For the most part, entrance to the canon of American architectural history has been gained through one of a few large cities of national economic, cultural and/or political reach: New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco. The relatively recent advents of mass-market publishing, cheap rapid transportation and electronic communications have not substantially changed this situation. Nationally and internationally prominent architects — from Burnham and Root to Moshe Safdie — may have worked in Kansas City, and even enhanced their reputations there, but the foundations of those reputations were built elsewhere.



Louis Curtiss, Victor Beutner House, Kansas City, Missouri, 1911. [Photo by Nate Hofer]

Artistic canons are, in effect, cultural reservoirs, sanctioned and fostered by critics, historians, publishers, teachers, students and the public writ large. A canon is a basis for judgment, a presumptive guarantor of quality, and a path of least resistance: it's easier to process the familiar than to absorb or evaluate the new or unknown. Once canonized, an artifact or individual's value is intensified and more or less secure. Canonical items are survivors of history and selection, and for this they are granted certain privileges. They stand at the centers of perceptual fields — wheat separated from chaff, the primary exemplars of particular constellations of characteristics. Often

they are upheld as unique, yet this uniqueness is misleading, when it is not patently false. Once part of broader social and cultural discourses, canonized things and people are left to stand more or less alone, made to seem more singular or original than they were when new; related artifacts or individuals, when they are recognized at all, appear derivative beside them — "school of X." Canons, in short, are like lenses that focus our attention on one spot and thus limit our view of the broader field. However useful or even necessary, however fluid, they can be especially restricting to neophytes, students particularly, who generally lack the time or knowledge to go beyond them. Canons define and limit what gets published, taught and learned, and in the case of architecture, they influence what gets built and preserved by subsequent generations. They skew both our view of history and the content of our built environments. [34]

In the current canon of American architectural history, Maybeck fills one role that Curtiss might: early 20th-century eclectic designer, academically trained but with progressive, experimentalist tendencies. Calling Curtiss a Midwestern Maybeck (or "The Frank Lloyd Wright of Kansas City," as the Kansas City Public Library's website deems him [35]) is a way of quickly placing and superficially understanding him, of filing him away and ultimately dismissing him as of no more than local or regional interest. Yet Curtiss — like other similarly alluring and little known figures around the country — operated within a rich, complex cultural framework of his own time and place. Stories like his may cause us to shift our emphases and challenge our often limiting and simplistic assumptions about history, including those that place a few towering, isolated figures on postage stamps, while others who worked beside them are left to dwell in obscurity. Such stories add texture and nuance to the broader field of American architectural history. For this, at least, they are well worth getting to know.

18th and Vine Update

The Pouncey building, located at 1505 East 18th Street, has been demolished by emergency demolition order. An engineer's report concluded that the building was in structural failure. The loss of the building, which was the office of the first African American lawyer in Kansas City, Leona Pouncey Thurman, is another unfortunate case of demolition by neglect for the historic Jazz District. The Historic Kansas City Foundation has applied for a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to hire a professional consultant to complete a preservation plan for the district and has engaged the Downtown Council and the City of Kansas City for their support.



Pouncey Building at 1505 E 18th Street

Ambassador Hotel Opens Downtown



Ambassador Hotel Bar and Dining Room

The Ambassador Hotel, located in the former historic Gate City National Bank building at 1111 Grand Boulevard, opened just in time for the All Star Game in July 2012. The boutique hotel has 43 rooms, a fitness center, meeting facility and full service restaurant and bar. Contemporary art and furnishings create a sleek and luxurious interior. Classic vestiges of the old bank, including a marble foyer, a lobby with 20-foot-high ceilings and a fireplace, were preserved. The project was co-developed by Paul Coury with the Tulsa based Ambassador Hotel Collection, and Jason Swords with the Kansas City based Sunflower Development Group.

MO Preservation: Most Endangered

Missouri Preservation announced its list of Most Endangered Historic Places on Wednesday May 30, 2012 at a press conference held in St. Joseph at The Frank L. Sommer house, which is one of the places named on this list. Others named are listed below, in no particular order. Currently in its twelfth year, the program has sought to bring statewide attention to endangered places through a media campaign and offers support services to the properties on the list. Nominations are received from citizen preservationists throughout the state.

The Frank L. Sommer House (“The Cracker House) – Buchanan County

The AAA Building – The City of Saint Louis

The Lyric Theater – Phelps County

Barns of Missouri – Statewide

The Pouncey Building – Jackson County

The Diamonds Restaurant – Franklin County

Kemper Arena – Jackson County

The Charles and Bettie Birthright House – Dunklin County

School Buildings of Missouri – Statewide



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For a complete description of these buildings and buildings on the watch list, please visit: <http://www.preservemo.org/>

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