

Preservation Unit Sees 'Architectural Treasures' in City

By BOB RIEL

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About 30 members of the Providence Preservation Society (PPS) received a daylong tour of Woonsocket's "architectural treasures" yesterday, from the churches and textile mills to the Cato Hill Historic District and the North End mansions.

The PPS, which is interested in historic preservation efforts, embarks on two tours a year. Last year, the group visited Bristol and Fall River, according to Carol Hagglund, education and tours coordinator.

Yesterday's visit began with the viewing of "Woonsocket, Rhode Island — The Americanization of a Foreign City" at Woonsocket High School. The slide show was presented by Martin Crowley, Raymond Bacon and Lawrence Poitras, three of the show's four producers.

The film explains the reluctance of the city's French-Canadian population to be assimilated into American life, and details the process by which this eventually happened.

The tour group then went down Cass Avenue to St. Ann's Church, where Marcel Fagnant explained the history of the church and its murals.

The church was built in 1914 by architect Walter Fontaine. The murals were painted during an 11-year period, and are considered by some to be the most beautiful in the country.

Crowley and Poitras served as guides during a bus tour of the Social and Privilege street districts. The group saw the remaining Social tenements, once the dominant feature of Social Corner. They were also shown the Farm Street apartments built by industrialist Edward Harris for workers in his Privilege Street mills.

A walking tour of the North End was next on the agenda. The guides pointed out the modest mansions built by prominent city residents during the middle and late 1800s. Starting on Prospect Street, the group also walked along Woodland, Upland, Glen and Oakley roads.

Crowley pointed out that the older homes have carriage houses on the property, while the newer homes have garages. The tour was shown the Oscar J. Rathbun home, considered the most impressive in the North End.

Much of the neighborhood was owned by Harris, Crowley said, until his family sold the estate to James Mullen and it was divided into house lots.

One of the few remaining vestiges of Harris' home are the pillars at Harris Avenue and Blackstone Street, which once marked the entrance to his property. Homestead Road is what used to be Harris' driveway.

The group broke for a catered lunch at Union St. Jean Baptiste. Here, Edgar Martel explained the history of the society, which began as several city organizations formed to keep alive the French language and culture.

Following lunch, the PPS members were taken through the Cato Hill Historic District by John O'Hearn and N. David Bouley of the Department of Planning and Development.

The restoration projects in the district were explained to the group. Poitras also showed the inside of his Cato Street home, which was built in 1865 and restored extensively during the last six years.

From there, the tour went to the Providence and Worcester Railroad Depot, and saw the many restoration projects along Main Street, including the recently completed Unity Building.

City Hall and the Buell Building, home of *The Call*, were also pointed out to the group before the tour concluded at the Hanora Mills apartment complex now being constructed. Bouley also explained the hydroelectric plant to the visitors.

Most PPS members left saying they have a much better understanding of Woonsocket and its people.

Kay Tucker of the state Department of Economic Development said she never realized the extent of the city's historic preservation efforts. She suggested that more publicity be given to the work, citing the good reviews given to similar projects in Newport and Providence.

Wendy Nicholas, PPS executive director, took a number of pictures throughout the day. She said she hopes to use the pictures Thursday, when she is scheduled to speak at the "745" Breakfast on "The Benefits to the Community and to Business from Historic Preservation."