



## Cornerstones July 2015

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Dear Members,

Your membership enables PAL to continue offering free events such as these from the last year: the Historic Downtown Walking Tour on May 30, the Heritage Preservation Awards on May 5, and the Speaker Series featuring Jennifer Davel from the Wisconsin Historical Society on March 25. Your membership also entitles you to reduced prices on the Heritage Awards Banquet, Winter Party, and the Antique 'n' Flea Market.

Please check the mailing label on this newsletter. The due date for your membership renewal is highlighted. Our membership term is now twelve full months from the date of renewal. Just return the membership form from the back page to continue helping PAL preserve La Crosse and area history. Our membership form can also be found on our website: [www.preservation-alliance.org](http://www.preservation-alliance.org). Thank you for your support.

### **We need help painting!**

PAL moved and preserved two buildings that sit on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Badger Streets. Thanks to help from Habitat for Humanity, we are able to get both buildings painted this summer but we also need volunteer help. We have set Aug. 16 as our paint date and will start at 7:30 a.m. You may also join us later in the day. Coffee will be provided by Ground Up with food and cold drinks provided by PAL.

The rain date has not been set but up to date changes will be on our website. If you would like to help save the Cobbler Shop and Greek Revival House but will be unavailable to paint, please contact us. We would also appreciate help cleaning the interiors.

[www.preservation-alliance.org](http://www.preservation-alliance.org)

[preservationalliance@gmail.com](mailto:preservationalliance@gmail.com)

608-784-1976

***Antique 'n' Flea Market***  
***Oct. 25 at the La Crosse Center***

Remember, PAL members get in free!



## Otto A. Merman, Architect

This article is the first installment regarding my grandfather, Otto A. Merman, the La Crosse architect. His buildings may be seen from Beloit to Alma in Wisconsin, and a cluster of homes in the Winona and Twin Bluffs areas in Minnesota. His primary focus was the emerging Prairie Style of architecture, but he designed an eclectic variety of residential houses in La Crosse and Winona which reflected Spanish, Moroccan, Tudor, and Colonial Revival Styles.

Otto was born in La Crosse on April 19, 1890. He married Josephine Thomason on Dec. 19, 1909, and their daughter, my mother Margaret (Petie) Merman Holley was born on June 9, 1913.

Otto began his career as a draftsman for the Parkinson and Dockendorf Architectural firm. In 1918, Otto was about to be inducted into the army when the Armistice was declared. At that point, he formed a partnership with Percy Dwight Bentley and established offices in the Linker Building at the Southwest corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Main Streets. Both Bentley and Merman were intrigued by the new genre of architecture introduced by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. My mother recalled all day motor trips to Spring Green and Taliesin to view the projects of "The Master" and his associates.

The partnership was a successful one and the firm's projects expanded throughout the region. In 1920, Bentley moved to Minneapolis to pursue his love of music but still remained a consulting member of the firm until 1922 when he moved to the west coast and dissolved his share of the partnership. From that point, Otto worked alone and with assorted draftsmen except for a brief partnership with Edward Widman.

Buildings designed and built by Otto A. Merman and Bentley/Merman are numerous and include retail buildings,

the Pure Oil station on the southeast corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Cass Streets, the original Vocational School building at 6<sup>th</sup> and Vine, Roosevelt, Lincoln, and Hogan Schools and many residences. Other public buildings include the Pettibone Bathhouse, the Anderson Memorial Bandstand in Riverside Park, Fire Station #4 on Gillette St, the North Branch Library on Kane St., the original Gundersen clinic, and the Nurse's Residence at the east end of the Medical Complex. PAL has awarded Heritage Preservation Awards to twelve properties designed by Merman, either for restoring or for maintaining their original, distinctive designs.

The Great Depression slowed the pace of new construction and limited the firm's output of new designs though significant homes were still a mainstay of the business. As the economy worsened, Otto became more depressed until it was discovered that he was suffering from a brain tumor rather than being depressed about the economy or the curtailing of new work. Otto Merman died prematurely, in the prime of his life, on June 2, 1935 at the age of 44.

—King Holley

For the complete article, building addresses, and photos, check our website. [www.preservation-alliance.org](http://www.preservation-alliance.org)

# 2015 Heritage Award Winners

Chris Kahlow

The Cameron House 435 7th St. S La Crescent  
Tom and Cindy Wright

The Board Store 524 Copeland Ave.  
Miles Wilkins

St. James the Less 1102 Caledonia St.



Cameron House



Board Store



St. James



## Winners announced for the PAL Architectural Treasure Hunt

This year, the Preservation Alliance of La Crosse's Architectural Treasure hunt focused on the Classical Revival details on various types of buildings in La Crosse. Though I thought this hunt would be a little more difficult than previous years, we still had many dedicated people who found all eight.

Thanks to all of the participants who found all eight, who found only some of them and just enjoyed the sights, or those who just enjoyed the hunt from your favorite chair.

Congratulations to our first place winner, Marcus Zettler of La Crosse who submitted all eight correct answers the fastest. Other winners include Lynette Storlie of La Crosse, Connie Erickson of La Crosse, David Buroker & Sandy Keller of La Crosse, Margo Baumgartner of La Crescent, and Jennifer Roets of La Crosse.

-Tim Acklin

# Wanted: Old House Caretaker!

A Letter from "The Caretaker":

That's what we are. We don't necessarily own these places, we temporarily reside here and we maintain them until it's time to pass on the responsibility to someone else. In return, we have the opportunity to live in history, an environment that astounds nearly every visitor. The Vincent House offers exactly that, a glimpse into the past. It has been preserved and cared for from the beginning. For 123, years James Vincent then his descendants occupied the house. Somehow they knew that the house created back in 1885 had such significance that they decided not to change a thing.

When I first stepped into the house in October of 2007, I overheard a man who had happened upon the house say, "it's like a museum". I couldn't have agreed with him more. I knew that taking on this house was to be a huge responsibility. It had knob and tube wiring, a 1960 boiler, and no insulation. The kitchen had no cabinetry, a single center fixture for light and a 1920's farm sink. Plants were overtaking the front porch and yard. Floors needed resurfacing, plaster needed repairs, and the roof was due to be replaced. Despite all this, we could clearly see the opportunity and potential.

In January of 2008, we closed on the property and the work of restoration began. Nearly every day there has been some project, most small, some large, but caring for the house is a pleasure and a lifestyle. Many people ask "are you done yet?" and the answer remains the same with every old house owner, "it's never done". For now, the most critical work is complete. As much as I love being here the time always comes when we must make that difficult decision and

hand the caretaker's keys over to another. I have recently had some health concerns so for me that time has come. The weight of responsibility of caring for the house is only overshadowed by the difficult task of finding the next person to receive the privilege of living in this truly amazing place. My biggest fear is that they will begin to look at what they can change. So I need your help. I want all of you to think of all the people you know and please help us find the next caretaker, maybe it's you!



Before I close here, I want to say you need not be interested in owning it or even be a "qualified buyer" to come see the house. I welcome all calls to schedule a tour. Along with maintaining the house, I believe that sharing what is here and educating others is an important part of being a preservationist. Your feedback will serve as your tour fee. So if you want to see a house that has been truly loved for many years give me a call and schedule a time to come see the Vincent House, just ask for Dan, The Caretaker.

The Vincent House, located at 1024 Cass St in La Crosse, WI, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

- Dan Estep





The James Vincent House is for sale.

Please direct inquiries to Dan Estep,  
608-519-0463 or [cassart.de@gmail.com](mailto:cassart.de@gmail.com)

Priced at \$509,000. There is a 1930's guest house also available (sold separately) on an adjacent lot.

[www.zillow.com](http://www.zillow.com) (for current photos)  
<http://webpages.charter.net/picturegallery> (for historic photos).

## ***PAL Welcomes a new Board Member, Rick Niemeier***

Rick Niemeier lives in Barre Mills with his wife, Michelle. They have three children, Lauren, Taylor and Brady, a son-in-law, Jesse, and one grandchild, Casen. Rick is a partner at Niemeier & Sullivan-Flock, S.C., a general law practice in Sparta. Rick is licensed in the States of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa as well as the Ho-Chunk Nation. Rick is a member of the Board at the Mayo Health System in La Crosse and Sparta. He sits on the Court Security and Facility Committee in Monroe County assisting in assessing the needs for the Monroe County Justice facilities. Rick has also been actively involved in assisting to establish and assist with a Family Treatment Court with the Ho-Chunk Nation. Rick and his family enjoy outdoor activities including camping, hiking, and many sporting events and activities.



## **Joan Rausch Award Winner**

The District National History Day competition was held at UW-L in March. For the third year, PAL awarded a prize in the name of Joan Rausch to the entry that best fit our criteria of local history or preservation. The winner of the \$125 Joan Rausch Award, from Bangor High School, was Bryn Langrehr in the category of Senior Individual Website. Her website, *Better Than Home?*, presented research on the Sparta Children's Home and featured interviews with former residents.



## **LCHS Summer Info**

La Crosse County Historical Society would like to invite you to check out our website, participate in our events, tour our museums, and consider becoming a member. History in a Bag continues its summer lecture series at Riverside Museum every Tuesday in July at 12:15. The Annual Ice Cream Social is at the Hixon House on July 11 and the house is open for tours Tuesday through Saturday 10-2. Keep track of LCCHS happenings at [www.lchshistory.org](http://www.lchshistory.org).



Preservation Alliance of La Crosse  
119 King St.  
La Crosse , WI 54601

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## Join PAL!

Yes! I will support historic preservation through membership in the  
Preservation Alliance of La Crosse.

*Please check your mailing label for current membership status.*

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Name

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Phone Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Email

Our membership period has changed  
calendar year to a twelve month mem  
ber dating from your last registration.

- \$250 (Business/Supporting)
- \$100 (Patron)
- \$30 (Household)
- \$20 (Individual)
- \$15 (Senior/Student)

Please return to:

Preservation Alliance of La Crosse  
119 King Street La Crosse, WI  
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