

240 PROSPECT S.E.

Hosts: Chris & Tom Truesdale

This home was built in 1882 for Jacob Geelhoed on what was then called Terrace Avenue, later renamed Prospect Avenue. It was constructed in what is called the Vernacular Style, which is a broad category that refers to homes that reflect the common style of a particular time or place. The emphasis is on functionality rather than size or grandeur and thus would be more financially accessible to the average working class family like Jacob's. He started as a finisher at Nelson, Matter & Co. and later at the Bissel Carpet Sweeper Company. This home would have been in stark contrast to the grand Bissel family mansion that used to be just a few blocks away.

The home was later purchased by the longest tenured residents, a city fireman named Robert Shears and his family. His greatest improvement to the home was the excavation of its shallow "Michigan cellar", creating a fully functional basement with 8' high ceilings.

In the years that followed, the history of this house is intrinsically connected to the story of the whole block. During the period of the 1960's through the 1980's, the condition of this home and most of the houses on this block spiraled downward and nearly reached a point of "demolition by neglect". Though protected by Heritage Hill's listing on the National Registry of Historical Places, it was the request by Mary Free Bed to build a four story parking ramp on the corner of Prospect and Wealthy instead of the two story version that was approved by the City Commission, that actually saved the block. A condition of gaining permission for the new plan was the donation of \$50,000 to the neighborhood to mitigate the ramp's effect on the block.

In 1993, a committee including The Heritage Hill Association, Mary Free Bed, St. Mary's Hospital and the City of Grand Rapids met to plan a more neighborhood-friendly way for the hospital's presence to work with the adjoining block. This group grew into the Prospect Avenue Plan Implementation Committee who decided that ownership by local neighbors rather than by absentee landlords was the key to giving the block a chance for revival. Drawing from the funds provided by Mary Free Bed, several stakeholders (many from Madison, the next block over), began purchasing and rehabilitating the homes with the advice of a local architect.

Some houses were beyond saving and had to be torn down. The resulting empty lots were either used for new homes, like 222 and 260 Prospect, or divided between the houses on either side, as is the case with this house whose lot now includes part of the lot to the north.

Another problem presented itself in 1997 when St Mary's Hospital wanted to build yet another parking ramp and the new Wege Center on Lafayette. Placing much of the parking lot underground and planning a structure that provided a gentle step-up to the hospital beyond was agreed upon. An historic brick carriage house, all that remained of the razed Little Sisters of the Poor convent, was located on the planned building site. All parties involved decided that moving it would be the best solution. It can now be found on the southeast corner of State Street and Lafayette Avenue. After extensive renovation, it has been used by Kraayeveld, a local law firm, since 2005.

Judy Jorgensen was one of those pioneering neighbors who bought this and two other houses on the block in the 1990's with hopes to save them from the wrecking ball. This home was gutted down to the studs and all the walls were replaced with plaster, not drywall. The wood trim, lighting fixtures and the wood floors, except in the entry and living and dining rooms, have all been replaced. All of the mechanicals were updated as well. When completed, Judy rented out the home.

The current owners, who had a large home on College, wanted to downsize but also wanted to stay in Heritage Hill. In this simple, sturdy, well-made home their dream was realized. They added the garage and have created a wonderland of a garden since they purchased the home in 2019.

MAIN FLOOR

From the welcoming porch, the entry door leads to an open space shared by an office area and a dining room, with a cozy living room to the right and a cedar closet near the stairs. Lifetime collections of antiques and artwork are found throughout the home.

The kitchen is at the back of the house with a newly tiled utility room and a half-bath conveniently located on the main floor.

SECOND FLOOR

Because of the multifaceted roof lines, the upstairs rooms have interesting ceiling angles that make each room unique. The large bath was designed by the owners and includes an antique vanity for the sink.