

Historical value of underground key to area work

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The Ohio Historic Preservation Office (OHPO) recently halted the filling of underground spaces, the remnants of abandoned storefronts and walkways projecting beneath the sidewalk, at two downtown Cambridge buildings due to their reputed historic value.

The state-issued stop order created a snag in the ongoing downtown enhancement project. As part of the work, all such underground voids were to be filled with a concrete-based material and new sidewalk poured over the filled voids.

All property owners affected agreed to the filling of the voids. However, Frank Leyshon, manager for Swan Estate Inc., owner of 653 and 649 Wheeling Avenue, inquired of the OHPO if a "106 study" had been performed as the project work commended. The study would assess the historic value of, in this case, the underground spaces in the downtown and how the project would affect the historically significant portions of the downtown possibly affected by the project.

An OHPO archaeologist examined the former underground storefronts and walkways at Leyshon's two properties and ruled to halt the work to fill the voids.

Construction of the National Road through Cambridge began in 1823, Leyshon said. At that time a ravine crossed present day Wheeling Avenue near the intersection of the roadway with North Seventh Street.

In order to level the roadway workers filled the ravine, as well as others elsewhere along the planned course of the National Road through the city including near North Ninth Street, and built a wall along the north side of the roadway and the west side of North Seventh Street to retain the fill material. Leyshon believes a portion of that wall is visible in the spaces beneath the sidewalk.

"The historical architect that was here seems to think the same thing," Leyshon said. "They're researching that now."

Leyshon said OHPO staff reported they encountered underground storefronts like those in Cambridge nowhere else in Ohio.

The level of the present-day road would have been much lower than at the start of the National Road work. Fill raised the road level between 14 and 19 feet, Leyshon said, and North Seventh Street would have sloped at a much higher angle away from Wheeling Avenue.

When the underground storefronts were in use folks would descend from the street-level sidewalks via stairs to walkways below.

A few examples of the underground storefronts still exist and remain in use, including that of the Club Billiards Pool Room on the south side of Wheeling Avenue in the 800 block.

Leyshon is unsure when the underground storefronts last operated in that capacity. During World War II and the Cold War officials equipped them with rations and other emergency equipment for use as bomb shelters.

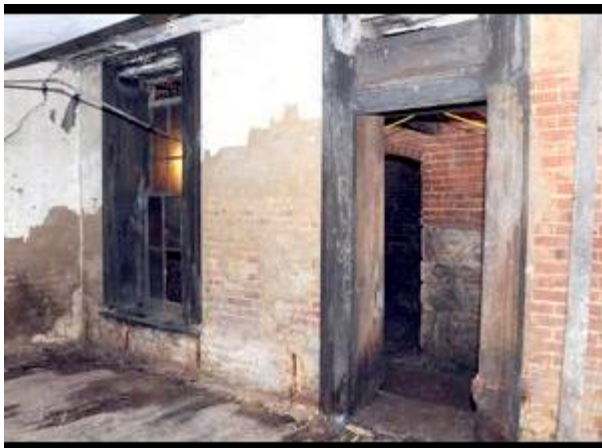
Establishing the date of construction of the buildings proved a challenge.

"I thought it was 1902," Leyshon said of 653, home of N Design tuxedo rentals. "But we had since found out after (OHPO archaeologists) were here, we looked at some old pictures and maps ... above here was the Princess Theater, which they originally thought was over where Country Bits and Pieces sits. But there is an old photograph that shows a portion of the adjacent building, 649, that you can see the windows, the canopy, the trim and everything else."

Leyshon said he now believes the building at 653 dates to the 1880's or even earlier.

The state's work stop order will not halt the project, just the filling of the spaces at Leyshon's properties, City Engineer Paul Sherry said previously. Workers will partially replace the sidewalk fronting the two buildings, applying the red concrete decorative edge strip near the curb and an adjacent portion of the sidewalk. However, the portion of sidewalk nearest the buildings will not be replaced under the Ohio Department of Transportation project.

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This is the view from inside the basement of 653 Wheeling Ave., looking through the doorway into a walkway and small storage room that was, at one time, open to the air.