

Barbara Roelofs

Birth: 1931

Death:

In February 1968, Barbara Roelofs, along with John Logie, Linda DeJong, and several other recruits, founded the Heritage Hill Association. During the early 1960s American thought for resolving urban problems was to demolish old, neglected, historic architectural homes and buildings to make way for new. At that time Grand Rapids was in a legal process that would eventually demolish its first City Hall that was designed by the distinctive architect Elijah E. Myers and built in 1888. In addition, there were plans for the College Park Urban Renewal and the Washington Square Urban Renewal projects, which would have leveled much of the character of the city. In 1966 the U.S. Congress passed the National Preservation Act that gave the public and homeowner its first legal foundation toward preserving historic houses, buildings, and national landmarks. When the neighborhood Barbara lived in was threatened by urban renewal, her mission became making it a national historic district, free from encroachment.

Barbara Roelofs grew up in San Francisco, California. There, for four generations, her family owned a beautiful old Victorian home by the East Bay. Barbara loved these old buildings. Inspired by her artistic family and her grandfather's love of history, historic landmarks, and architecture, at the age of 18, she began school at the University of California. Barbara's dream was to enter the school of architecture at the University of California, but World War II had just ended and university courses in professional careers such as medicine, law, architecture, and dentistry were reserved for returning servicemen. Women entering these disciplines were socially frowned upon.

Women generally were accepted in careers of nursing, teaching, art, and secretarial work. Because there were several doctors and nurses already in the family, her parents carefully studied schools for nursing programs. Barbara transferred directly to the highly rated Calvin College School of Nursing (in conjunction with Blodgett Hospital) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. After her graduation, while working in Grand Rapids, she met and married her husband, Dr. Charles Roelofs. Needing more room for their growing family of three children, when the "Old Keeler House" on College SE came up for sale and the price was affordable, it became their new home. This home is part of the Heritage Hill Historic District.

The Heritage Hill Historic District is one of our nation's largest historic districts, containing more than 50 different styles of architecture. Barbara's leadership, passion, and dedication to preserving old buildings endured. For 47 years she remained vital and active and was the chairperson of the Heritage Hill Foundation Board of Trustees.

Oral Interview: Jean Hainer – September 6, 1989

Transcribed by: Judy Lloyd – February 1998

Summary: C. Ingham – December 2015

Other Resources

Early (1986) honoree of the Grand Rapids Historical Society's annual Baxter Award:

<http://www.grhistory.org/baxter-award>