

## OTHER OPINION

## A BOLD MOVE FOR PRESERVATION

By all accounts, Mary J. Ryan was a lady ahead of her time. In an era when women did not even have the right to vote, she owned a notions shop on Hartford's bustling Park Street. The business apparently prospered so that by 1891 Mary J. Ryan could purchase her first home: a recently constructed brick Victorian on Asylum Hill near the famous Nook

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Farm subdivision.

The home at 47 Sigourney St. was designed in the latest fashion, the Queen Anne style, and its brick corbelling, gingerbread trim and abundant living space surely drew the attention and admiration of its neighbors, among them Mark Twain.

Fast forward 113 years, and this striking brick home will once again draw attention: On Sunday, it will be moved through Hartford's streets to a new location on Asylum Hill, representing a triumph for historic preservation.

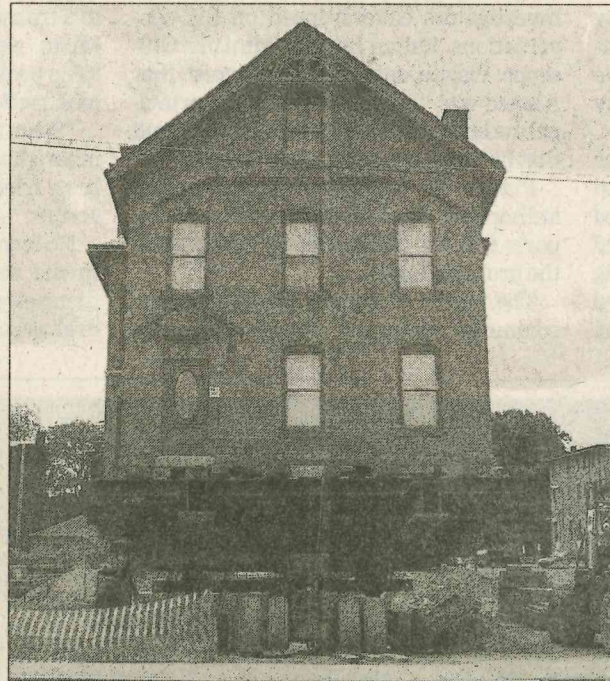
The building had been threatened with demolition because its owner, Aetna Inc., needed the site for additional parking next to its headquarters. Representatives from the Hartford Preservation Alliance and the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Revitalization Zone Committee prevailed upon Aetna to save the building. Aetna agreed to donate the structure to Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (NINA), a community development corporation created by The Hartford, Aetna, ING, Mass Mutual, Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center and Webster Bank to work with residents to foster the revitalization of the

Asylum Hill neighborhood.

NINA's plan for the structure is simple and would be well understood by Mary J. Ryan. NINA intends to restore the structure to its original use as a gracious single-family home.

In a story repeated many times across Hartford, Mrs. Ryan's home underwent severe physical changes over the years since she was the owner, which dramatically altered its original character. In response to an acute housing shortage in Hartford (the city's population would triple between 1890 and 1940), the building was subdivided first into two and then four rental units.

When Aetna acquired the structure in the 1980s, it was converted into a conference and office facility. NINA plans to restore the structure to its original design and thereby recapture the attributes that undoubtedly attracted Mary J. Ryan — its abundant living space



COURTESY OF NINA

**THE UPROOTED HOUSE** at 47 Sigourney St. awaits its journey to a new location on Asylum Hill.

and distinctive Queen Anne architecture. These attributes can be the building blocks that transform not only this structure but all of Asylum Hill as well.

NINA, together with its partners, Broad-Park Development Corp. and Mercy Housing, are working to implement this vision on Ashley Street, where Mrs. Ryan's home will be relocated. Ashley Street is a residential block that was built up around 1890 and is a treasure trove of single- and two-family homes constructed predominantly of brick in the Queen

Anne style.

The block is nearly intact from this period and is one of the best Victorian-era streets remaining in Hartford. It was selected for inclusion in the Mayor's Rising Star/Pride Block program.

But the street is not without problems. Several

buildings suffered a similar fate as Mrs. Ryan's home: They were subdivided into multiple units and were eventually abandoned when their original charm was no longer apparent. NINA and its partners propose to restore these homes to their original appearance and use in much the same manner as Mrs. Ryan's home. In all, seven homes will be restored in the Ashley Street area, which should dramatically improve this corner of Asylum Hill.

Who will buy these homes? The answer lies 1 mile to the south on Mortson Street and Putnam Heights, where developers utilized the same formula — provide ample living space and a unique sense of place — to transform abandoned perfect six apartment buildings into elegant side-by-side townhouses.

These restored townhouses attracted buyers from all over the region and from a wide range of incomes and backgrounds. NINA and its partners anticipate a similar success for Ashley Street.

Prospective buyers expressing interest include people with the financial ability to live in many places, but who are choosing to focus instead on Asylum Hill's Victorian housing stock.

They, like Mary J. Ryan, a woman ahead of her time, recognize the allure of a home with generous living space, distinctive architectural features that is located in a historic setting near the center of the region's major employment, cultural and entertainment attractions.

*Kenneth D. Johnson is executive director of Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance in Hartford.*