

106 SUCCESS STORY

Moving Flood-Prone Houses Saves History, Engages Community

Mason City, Iowa



“It’s important to preserve our architectural history, but it can’t be done with passion alone. Mason City was able to successfully navigate the Section 106 process and implement a variety of mitigation treatments that built value for the community. We focused on projects that complimented existing community planning goals and preservation projects. One of our top priorities was to preserve our tax base and preserve the historic homes that were acquired in our buyouts. Relocating homes to preserve them can seem daunting. The cost will be higher than you anticipate. But, with a solid plan for reuse, the move can be successful.”

—TRICIA SANDAHL

City of Mason City Planning and Zoning
Manager



THE STORY

Founded in 1854 at the confluence of the Winnebago River and five creeks, Mason City was nicknamed “River City” and became the commercial and industrial center for north central Iowa. The Mason City Downtown Historic District comprises 93 historic structures and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 2005. The region has endured significant flooding throughout its history, but in June 2008 the community experienced its worst disaster in 100 years. The flood caused catastrophic damage throughout the city, affecting more than 1,200 structures, including those in the Mason City Historic District and four potential historic districts. Many of the historic properties suffered from water damage, and as a result, the City was left to deal with a recovery plan in addition to other disaster relief measures.

THE PROJECT

The City needed a plan that would not only mitigate the 2008 flood damage but also address the effects of potential future flooding. To accomplish this, leaders decided to participate in a voluntary acquisition program to purchase houses and move residents to new housing outside the floodplain. This type of program usually results in demolition of the acquired properties, but in this case, consulting parties were concerned that demolition would result in a significant loss of historically valuable properties.

The City proposed relocation and salvage as options to preserve flood-impacted historic structures and minimize waste produced by demolition. Mason City pursued federal funds through a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Grant and a Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant to assist with property buyouts.

THE 106 PROCESS

FEMA, the federal agency funding this project, was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires federal agencies to identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required to

Photos: Above, houses on the move; Right, the flood in 2008, view from Cedar Rapids (photo by Matt Herzberger Wikimedia Commons); Egloff House before the move (house photos courtesy City of Mason City)



Photos: From left, houses moving to new location; Right, houses located in their new neighborhood (photos courtesy City of Mason City)

consult with parties that have an interest in the historic property when adverse effects may occur. The City purchased 167 properties, and through reconnaissance surveys, FEMA and the Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management Division (IHSEMD) identified 22 properties in the buyout that were individually eligible for listing in the NRHP. The majority of these properties were located in the East Park Place neighborhood, which was one of the four potential historic districts identified.

The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, FEMA, Iowa State Historic Preservation Officer, IHSEMD, and the City of Mason City entered into consultation, resulting in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to address the adverse effects to the historic properties. The MOA stipulated that the City consider the feasibility of relocating historic properties, develop a relocation and salvage plan for them, and write a report detailing the relocation; complete a survey for early- to mid-20th century public works properties and prepare an NRHP nomination for those eligible; and complete a survey and NRHP nomination for the Forest Park Historic District. The MOA has been amended four times to provide extra time to carry out the project.

THE SUCCESS

The Section 106 process resulted in the successful relocation of five properties, including the Egloff House, a property of national significance that was built in 1938 and includes elements of Moderne, Art Deco, and International styles. Unfortunately, the City was engaged in disaster recovery projects outside of historic preservation, and there were not enough City-owned vacant lots to accommodate all 22 properties. Because of the flood's devastating effects, it was impossible to find parties who could responsibly relocate and rehabilitate the remaining 17 houses. Valuable architectural features and building materials were salvaged before eventual demolition. East Park and Forest Park Historic Districts were added to the NRHP in 2014 and 2015, respectively. Additionally, in 2015 the City conducted an oral history project in East Park Historic District.

Following the relocation, the City wrote the report, "Moving Houses to Save History" [<https://www.masoncity.net/files/documents/MovingHousesToSaveHistory1199111235021616AM.pdf>] which illustrates the challenges in using the voluntary acquisition program and moving five historic structures. It can provide valuable guidance to other communities taking on this process. After relocation, four of the properties were sold to owner occupants, and the Egloff House was converted into an extended-stay facility for a local college. While moving historic properties is not always feasible or the best option, when it works, it allows a community to preserve its history in a new and meaningful way.

ADVISORY COUNCIL ON HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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Section 106 and
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