

Inside ...

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at when his team  
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## Sterling Rock Falls

# LIVING

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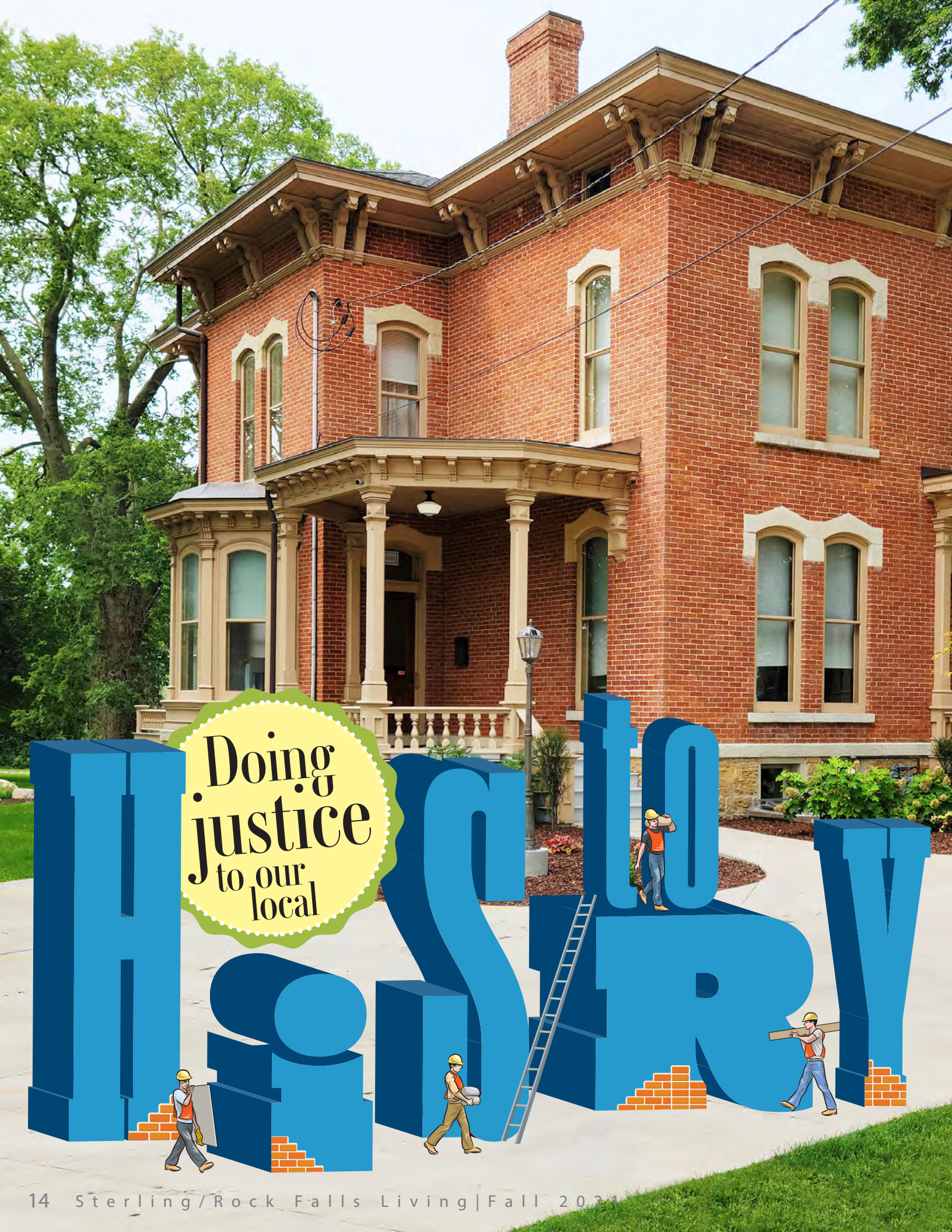


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OUR LOCAL history

Local residents make a winning  
case for historic preservation  
by giving a former judge's  
home a new lease on life

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His Story

# Local residents make a winning case for historic preservation by giving a former judge's home a new lease on life

**Sterling-Rock Falls**  
**LIVING**  
**Cover story**



West Third Street in Sterling, circa 1900, as seen in a vintage postcard.

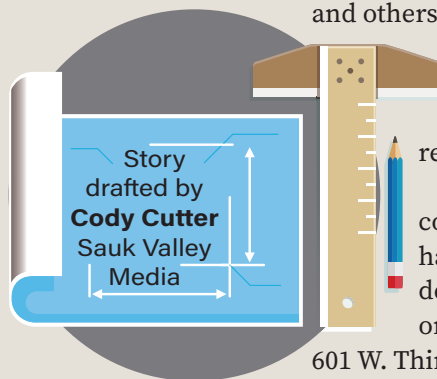
**N**early 150 years ago, the westernmost stretch of West Third Street in Sterling had the look and feel of today's ritzy subdivisions: large and stately houses owned by prominent people, canopies of trees lining the road, and if some-

one wasn't meant to be on that street, they weren't.

Today, that's all changed: West Third Street is a busy road through town. Some of the trees remain and others have sprouted up, but many are gone, felled by disease and chainsaws. As for the houses, some have been razed through the years and the ones that remain are showing their age.

Judge James Emmett McPherran's house could have been one of those casualties, had it not been for a team of local residents determined not to let time pass judgement on the two-story Italianate brick home at 601 W. Third St.

For more than 30 years, the Dillon Foundation, Richard Dombroski and Scott Hibbard have worked to save this piece of local history.



The McPherran House in Sterling, as it looks today, after extensive renovation and restoration work.

PHOTO COURTESY SCOTT HIBBARD

**MCPHERRAN** cont'd to page 16



CODY CUTTER/CCUTTER@SAUKVALLEY.COM

Richard Dombroski, retired owner of Dombroski Builders in Morrison, and Scott Hibbard, owner of Hibbard Builders, have spent a combined 30 years restoring the McPherran House on West Third Street in Sterling.

MCPHERRAN cont'd from page 15

The restoration has taken awhile but, the results are worth the wait. Looking at the McPherran home now is like looking back in time. It's as close to its 1878 appearance as possible, and now does double-duty as residential rental property and office space.

"With Richard and I, we're restoring it, and we're keeping it in the history of the town," Hibbard said. "It's not getting bulldozed or destroyed, so you become a caretaker of the history of this area and the people who live here."

After the home's last occupant died in 1990, the Dillon Foundation and its president, Pete Dillon, bought the house and property. Nearly 10 years later, Dillon contracted Dombroski, owner of Dombroski Builders of Morrison, to perform exterior work on the home. Once that was done, the Dillon Foundation put it on the market and sold it to Thomas Loos in 2018. Loos hired Hibbard to perform interior and remaining outdoor work that would take another 2 years.

MCPHERRAN cont'd to page 17

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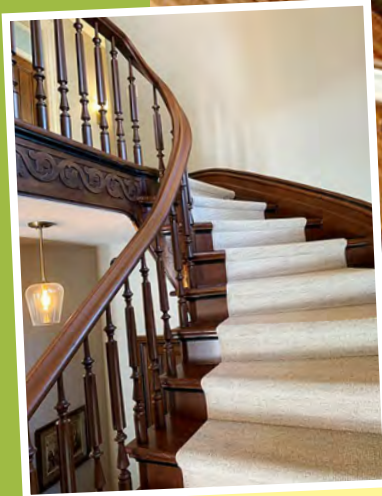
MCPHERRAN cont'd from page 16

"I'm glad to see that they continued it on," Dombroski said.

The home sat empty during most of the 1990s, and nature took its course — and toll: the roof leaked, a corner of the foundation was unstable, and parts of the floor were rotted out. While someone with a trigger-finger on a bulldozer could have had it knocked down, the Dillon Foundation kept its story alive with a new chapter.

"It is important to me to have the community see the evolution of the restoration," Hibbard said. "Meaning, Pete Dillon and the Dillon Foundation saved the house from being remuddled (when a house's original character and integrity are lost in the renovation process) or abandoned by purchasing the property and restoring the exterior, and Tom Loos took it through the finish line."

MCPHERRAN cont'd to pages 18-19



The deep, rich tones of millwork throughout, a winding staircase, and ornate woodwork hearken back to the McPherran House's early days, when a craftsman's skills could transform a home into a work of architectural art. The stairwell was reconstructed piece by piece. Portraits of two of the former homeowners, Marcus and Clara Thackaberry, adorn the first-floor hallway and stairwell area.

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# Before & After



Restoration projects can be a time-consuming, labor-intensive, and exacting process. People who undertake the work have to be part craftsman, part detective as they peel back the layers and figure out how the home's original builders did their job — "It's interesting to see other people's work as you go in to try to modernize and repair something," Scott Hibbard said. "You can't rush into it ... You've got to take your time and figure it out." Added Richard Dombroski: "Obviously it was challenging, but it gave us a chance to do stuff you hadn't done before. You can't just go to the store and get similar porch railings or spindles like this, so there was a lot of custom shop work." That custom work paid off, though. When the dust settled and the paint dried a house that has called Sterling home for nearly 150 years was looking as good as new.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SCOTT HIBBARD



## Original owners

The first claim to the property was granted to original settler James C. Woodburn, who then sold it to Hugh Wallace by 1842. Wallace, who was Sterling's only lawyer at that time, developed the neighborhoods around the area. The Chicago and North Western Railroad came through Sterling in 1855, and ran behind where the McPherran House would be built more than 20 years later. Jacob A. Mead bought the lot in 1858 that would later belong to Judge McPherran by 1867.

McPherran, a 33-year-old Pennsylvania native and newly married, had lived in Sterling for 5 years before buying the property. Like Wallace, McPherran was a lawyer, and after a brief stint with a firm in town, began his own practice. He also served in the Illinois General Assembly as a Democrat from 1873-74, and was the first president of the Sterling Public Library board.

The McPherrans previously lived at the northeast corner of West Third Street and Avenue F before moving across the street in 1878 into the new and much larger brick home they would enjoy their remaining years.

At the time they moved into their new home, the family consisted of James, Sarah, their children — Mabel, Edgar, Ralph and Charles — and a servant, Lizzie Dargus, who was a 19-year-old immigrant from Prussia.

When James died on Dec. 11, 1903, he also had been director of the Wallace School board, alderman, a Knight Templar, and master of chancery (someone appointed by the court to assist in its work) of the Whiteside County Circuit Court — earning him the “judge” title in his name.

MCPHERRAN cont'd to page 20



The difference is in the details — and doorknobs. Little touches, such as this ornate knob, help give the McPherran House the vintage look of a home built during the 19th century.

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COURTESY  
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The funeral was at the home, and he was buried at Riverside Cemetery. Sarah, who died in 1931, sold the property in 1910 to Marcus and Clara Thackaberry, retired farmers from south of Tampico.

The Thackaberrys brought along their two youngest children, Lucille and Margaret, to Sterling. Even though they were retired from farming, they still had a collection of crops and animals in their large back yard, Hibbard said. Clara died in 1937 and Marcus in 1956. Margaret continued to live in the home, and was rejoined by Lucille in 1958. Margaret was a school teacher for many years, retiring in 1964. Lucille died in 1983, and Margaret a year later. Lucille's husband, Roscoe Theibert, was the home's last resident for many years before dying on Feb. 28, 1990.

## A new lease on life

As Northwestern Steel and Wire expanded across Avenue G by the 1950s, some of the more prominent residents along West Third Street decided they didn't want to live in the shadow of a steel mill. As soot settled in, they moved out.

Dillon, who at one time was president of the steel mill that his family started in 1879, realized the historical importance of these homes and wanted to try and save them, Hibbard said, and the Dillon Foundation bought the McPherran house to save it from becoming another rental property.

"There was so much intact inside the house that hadn't been

destroyed or wrecked," Hibbard said. "Typically, with rental property investors, they take a big building like this and turn it into three or four apartments."

"They'll tear it all out and want it cheapened," Dombroski added.

Restoration work began in 2001, with Dombroski in charge. The biggest outside project involved tuckpointing the bricks, where old mortar between the bricks is removed and replaced. The bricks were also given a good cleaning, removing years of soot — and those weren't just any bricks; they came directly from Sterling's founder, Hezekiah Brink, who owned a brick yard where Platt Park is today.

The tuckpointing took a lot of work with mortar mixed by hand, Dombroski said, but he was fascinated with learning about how the original bricklayers did their work. He could see where it was originally done in two different ways.

"From its history, you kind of got to know the people who worked on it originally," Dombroski said. "You could see where somebody worked here, and somebody worked there, and when they did the brick work, they started out on the ground level and tried to make it look pretty good. Well, when they got up high where people couldn't see, they kind of got a little sloppy with some pieces.

"There were a couple of guys doing it, one guy was on one end and another guy was on the other end. The guy on one end was a conscientious guy, he did good down below but was just couldn't quite get it when he was up high."

MCPHERRAN cont'd to page 21

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MCPHERRAN cont'd from page 20

Another big project was work on the roof, siding, windows and decks. With Italianate architecture, many pieces were designed as one-of-a-kind; you just don't go down to a home improvement store and buy replacement pieces off the shelf. They had to be restored with precision or custom made.

"Obviously it was challenging, but it gave us a chance to do stuff you hadn't done before," Dombroski said. "You can't just go to the store and get similar porch railings or spindles like this, so there was a lot of custom shop work."

One of the house's interesting features was a speaking pipe between the dining room and the master bedroom; an easier method of summoning someone upstairs than yelling through the house.

MCPHERRAN cont'd to page 22



Restoring a parquetry floor can be a painstaking process, but the results are worth it. The work in progress (top), under the home's bay window, shows how hundreds of pieces of hardwood have to come together to shape up into a floor that makes a statement. The work was done by Alex Frey and Scott Hibbard.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SCOTT HIBBARD



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Once ownership passed to Loos, Hibbard was hired to complete the remaining restoration. He worked with Dombroski to go over what was done and what was left to do.

As they were talking about the history behind the place, Dombroski mentioned something profound to Hibbard that he took to heart: "Every building needs a purpose."

"You can spend a lot of money remodeling a business building, or an old home like this, or a commercial building," Hibbard said, "but if you don't have somebody using it, it's pointless."

### The finish line

The Dillon Foundation sold the property for \$69,000 in August of 2018 to Hibbard and Loos, owner and president of Action Plumbing Co. in West Chicago. Hibbard's business and that of McCloud & Associates Architects moved their offices into the main floor of the house later that year, and Loos soon bought Hibbard's share. The second and lower levels are rented residential space.

Loos is a sixth-generation plumber with a local connection; in 1890, his great-great-great-grandfather founded John G. Loos & Sons plumbing in town. He and Hibbard worked on many proj-

ects together, and decided to take a stab at the McPherran home when the time was right.

"I fell in love right when I walked in the door, even though the inside had construction, trim, paint cans," Hibbard said. "You love it as soon as you walk in. You see the trim, you see the door knobs. People walk through this door, and I don't think they look at the door knobs, or how the stone is cut on the marble fireplace, (all seven of them) or how the floor is laid out. That's the stuff I instantly go to. You see that, and you see how it's laid out."

Floors, walls, doors and the inner workings now were Hibbard's responsibility, and he set forth to make the interior look like it did when the McPherrans and Thackaberrys roamed the home. The project isn't just a home improvement project, it's a historical renovation, so getting as close to the original as possible has been a must.

Hibbard enjoys reading about the history of the projects he works on, and the McPherran home's story intrigued him. He enjoyed digging through the McPherran home's history and spent hours looking at photos to try and recreate the look and feel of the home's history.

MCPHERRAN cont'd to page 23

You can spend a lot of money remodeling a business building, or an old home like this, or a commercial building, but if you don't have somebody using it, it's pointless."

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"It's interesting to see other people's work as you go in to try to modernize and repair something," Hibbard said. "You can't rush into it like you're putting on vinyl siding. You've got to take your time and figure it out."

The doors and stairwell wound up being among the most notable projects. The exterior doors were re-cut and fitted with beveled glass, the doorknobs were redone and the stairwell was taken apart piece by piece and redone; each piece was labeled, numbered, and sent off to get chemically stripped and stained.

Portraits of Marcus and Clara Thackaberry hang in the hall, and a family photo of them with their children hangs at the base of the stairwell near the front door.

But the project wasn't done yet.

A big addition was made to the property: A carriage house was built just off the driveway leading to the back of the house, where the Thackaberrys had a small rental house.

While most of the work on the McPherran home is done, there still are a few minor repairs on Hibbard's to-do list, and he hopes to have them done soon.

"One of the things that made this project successful is that Tom was totally committed to doing it right," Hibbard said. "You have to have someone that's committed that way. You had Pete committed to it. You had Tom committed to it. That's why you have this finished product."

Their commitments have led to the McPherran home's continued survival. Not all homes on the south side of West Third Street from Avenue G to downtown Sterling have survived. Along with the Thackaberry's rental home, the Wheeler Mansion at 505 W. Third has been gone for a few decades, and most recently, storm damage in July caused the two-story house at 507 W. Third (formerly home to the PADS homeless shelter) to be razed.

With the careful and professional work done by Hibbard and Dombroski, the McPherran home has many more years left in it.

"You hope it lives longer than you do, if you do good work," Hibbard said. ■



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