

Making a national mark

Heart of KU campus added to National Register of Historic Places

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Ed Martinko says being overly familiar with the Kansas University campus is a little like being a child growing up at the foot of Pikes Peak.

While the tourists are getting out of their cars to gawk and take pictures, the towering mountain is part of the residents' everyday, ho-hum background.

"When you live around it, you just take it for granted," said Martinko, president of the Historic Mount Oread Friends advisory board.

At least in the case of the KU campus, a massive undertaking has succeeded in fending off some of that complacency — and, supporters say, the pitfalls that can come with it.

KU's historic district, the oldest portion of campus, was added to the National Register of Historic Places this year. While a handful of buildings within were already on the register, getting an entire district on the list takes things to the next level.

The National Register is the official list of places throughout the U.S. that are worthy of historic preservation. The designation doesn't necessarily guarantee protection of the area, but the status can help protect the campus' architectural integrity.

"This national designation reflects the historic importance of Mount Oread as a center for teaching and scholarship," KU Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little said in a news release. "It will also help preserve the campus for future generations of Jayhawks who will call KU home."

In addition to KU's old and architecturally significant buildings, the historic district also is about their stories, the little things in between them — such as benches, bulletin boards and sculptures dating to the early 1900s — and the landscapes and views that tie everything together.

After all, the "far above the Golden Valley, glorious to view" line in KU's alma mater didn't come out of thin air.

"To be able to stand on Mount Oread and be able to look out across a large landscape to the south or a large landscape to the north is really quite fascinating," Martinko said.

The historic district primarily lies along Jayhawk Boulevard, plus Memorial Drive and the green space it overlooks.

The district includes five buildings and one statue that already were listed individually on the national register. There are more than two dozen other "contributing" elements contained in the historic district designation, ranging from the Class of 1915 Bulletin Board to the imposing campus centerpiece, Strong Hall. All are dated between 1863 and 1951.

One Lawrence resident who's seen as much of campus as anyone but remains far from complacent about the surroundings is Barbara Watkins.

She walked down "The Hill" when she got a doctorate degree from KU in 1981, took her kids sledding on the same hill, takes

her grandkids to museums, lives near campus and has co-authored four books on campus history with Lawrence resident and friend Carol Shankel.

"It's just a beautiful, beautiful campus," Watkins said. "There are great stories of the buildings themselves, the architects, the visionary chancellors, the support of the community and the state and the people who have worked in these buildings."

Vance Kelley of Treanor Preservation was one of the consultants who worked with the Mount Oread Friends and other boards to research the district and prepare the proposal.

He said a spot on the national register ensures that as the campus evolves — which it will — leaders are having the right discussions and making the right decisions to protect the area's heritage.

Fun facts about buildings, other things in the KU Historic District

Did you know this stuff? Check out these fun facts about some of the contributing buildings and other elements in the KU Historic District.

Dean James Woods Green memorial statue

This statue, in front of Lippincott Hall, was sculpted by Daniel Chester French — who also created the massive seated statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The high-profile French declined at least one request to commission the statue but was inspired by the campus' love for Green, who was the first head of the KU Department of Law and the first dean when it became the School of Law in 1889.

Dyche Hall

Originally, 12 cottonwood limestone creatures, or grotesques, adorned the top of Dyche Hall.

Four were removed to make way for a 1962 building addition, and one was lost. The other three, restored decades later, are in Dyche's administrative offices. Some of the outdoor grotesques bear words from KU's chant — Rock Chalk, Jayhawk and KU.

There's also a grotesque featuring a question mark, which remains unexplained.

Lilac Lane

The existing lilac shrubs behind Fraser Hall are not original, but their planting in the location dates to the 1870s. Local nurseryman Joseph Savage donated the shrubs and helped plant a row to frame the east lawn of Old Fraser Hall (demolished in the 1960s).

Lindley Hall

During World War II, a federal ban on construction materials for nonessential projects meant the state Legislature couldn't appropriate money for buildings at KU. However, the Board of Regents devised projects that qualified as exceptions because they provided direct support for the war effort. That's how we got Lindley Hall, which was constructed in 1941 and immediately used as an Army barracks and mess hall.

Memorial Drive

As World War II ended, the sentiment grew for an enduring memorial. Chancellor Deane Malott wrote this in support of creating Memorial Drive: "The stadium was built as a World War I memorial. No one thinks, as he sits in it, about the sacrifices

of several score of young men of this institution who lost their lives in that struggle. We have been determined this time that we would have a memorial, and not merely use that as an excuse to fill a need at the university.”

Pi Beta Phi Bench

This bench, located between Blake Hall and Twente Hall, provides a perch for gazing over Prairie Acre, another contributing element to the historic district. Pi Beta Phi sorority donated the bench in 1923.

The Pioneer

This was the first sculpture on campus. Simeon B. Bell, a physician and real estate speculator, purchased the bronze at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair.

Power Plant

This building, constructed in 1922, is home to KU's iconic steam whistle. The whistle (first located on the university's original power plant and later moved) was initially blown to wake students at 7:45 a.m. and blown again to announce night curfews, but it's now sounded to signal the end of class.

Rock Chalk Cairn

This grouping of rocks, predominantly limestone, has accumulated over the years since 1926. The Cairn originally stood farther up the hill but was moved during construction of the Campanile. The Cairn stands on the slope of the hill midway between the Campanile and Memorial Stadium.

Spooner Hall

This building served as KU's art museum before the Spencer Museum of Art was constructed. There's an owl sculpture in the sandstone on the gable, a symbol of the inscription on the hall's portico: "Whoso findeth wisdom findeth life."

Strong Hall

The architect's original plans for Strong Hall called for a grandiose \$500,000 (a lot of money in 1909) Classical Renaissance design with pillars, a rotunda, an art gallery and a classical museum. The Legislature balked and plans were scaled back, but the building's Classical Revival style hints at the initial vision.

Twente Hall

Twente Hall was formerly Watkins Memorial Hospital, and a large limestone relief above the main entry depicts St. George slaying the dragon, representing disease.

(Sources: buildings.ku.edu, National Register of Historic Places nomination, kuhistory.com)

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