Ruling: KU can’t demolish Oread houses

By Lauren Beatty
Kansan staff writer

As University of Kansas students and faculty began their spring break, Ramon Powers quietly made the final decision of his career: not to allow the University to raze three houses it owns on Ohio Street to make room for scholarship halls.

The decision was due from Powers, the state historic preservation officer (SHPO), March 13, but was pushed back to March 15, the same day Powers retired from his post. Powers issued a letter late in the afternoon which explained his decision.

"The SHPO has determined that the houses at 1323, 1329 and 1333 Ohio Street are character-defining features of the environs of the John Palmer Usher House and therefore, that the proposed demolition of those houses will encroach upon, damage or destroy the environs of the historic property known as the John Palmer Usher House," Powers wrote. Powers did not think the houses contributed to the historic environment of Spooner Hall, although it was also on the National Register of Historic Places.

The decision left the University in a quandary because of Powers' retirement that day. Lynn Bretz, director of University Relations, issued a statement which said the University was disappointed with Powers’ decision and that further review was needed. She said because of Powers' retirement, she didn’t know who to go to with questions.

"There are a couple of points made by the SHPO that need clarification," Bretz said. "How it’s going to be handled now is one of our questions."

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Contact Carr at mcarr@kansan.com.
This story was edited by Kristi Henderson.

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Preservation officer tied to KU

By Lauren Beatty
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Ramon Powers had a relationship with the University of Kansas long before he decided March 15 to not let the University tear down three houses on Ohio Street to make room for scholarship halls.

That decision was the 62-year-old Powers' last act as the state historic preservation officer — before retiring that day. It concluded a spirited debate that began last year among the University, the Oread Neighborhood Association and the Lawrence Preservation Alliance over the fate of the houses.

Before Powers started working as state historic preservation officer in 1988, he worked at the University from 1963 to 1967. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in history from Fort Hays State University and was a KU Western Civilization instructor from 1963 to 1966. During the 1966-67 school year, Powers served as assistant director of the Western Civilization program.

James Seaver, professor emeritus of history, was director of the program when Powers was an instructor. Seaver said he remembered Powers well and had followed his career after he left KU.

"Ramon was very well organized, the best of all the professors," Seaver said.

Seaver described Powers as an elegant person who was always diplomatic and got along with his fellow professors.

"He has made decisions that people haven't agreed with, but you can't please everyone," Seaver said.

Powers received his doctoral degree from KU in 1971. He also taught at the University of Missouri at Kansas City and Haskell Indian Junior College.

Powers became the state historic preservation officer in 1988, appointed by then-governor Mike Hayden.

Powers made some controversial decisions during his 14-year run as preservation officer, including one involving the Allis Hotel in Wichita, which was eventually demolished. Some said he didn't try hard enough to preserve it.

As the state historic preservation officer, Powers continued to work with members of KU's faculty. Michael Shaw, associate professor of classics, worked with Powers as a member of the Kansas Preservation Alliance to preserve historic buildings in the state.

"He's done well," Shaw said.

"He is known for his calmness, even in our being impatient with him," Shaw said.

Shaw said he had personal respect for Powers, but didn't always agree with him.

"We need to have preservation ordinances and someone must make a decision," Shaw said. "Should it be him? I don't want to comment on that."

Powers declined to be interviewed for this story.