

# SEASONED OBSERVER

## Saving Yesterday

### A Roof

#### From Above

A storm last July left the first Galena home owned by Ulysses S. Grant desperately in need of a new roof.

On Feb. 26, the seven-room home's new cedar shingle roof was blessed by Father Christopher Kuhn at owner James Wirth's request.

Donations from four Canadian companies and four Illinois businesses made the roof possible — including the Catholic family-owned Waukegan Roofing Company, one of only six roofers in Illinois qualified to do the historical work.

Vito Mares and his four-man crew began the work on Dec. 8, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and finished on Dec. 12, Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, says Wirth.

"All the men thanked me" for the privilege of working on the home, he says. "This has been an enormous boost to my morale. I asked them for a bid, explained the background of the property, (and when the owner's son) came, I asked what it would cost. He said, 'This is going to be zero.' ... I think I could have fainted."

For more information about Grant's original home and ways you can help preserve it, call Wirth at 815/777-8429 or email: jameswirth1861@gmail.com. Reproductions of five U.S. Grant / Civil War Medallions will soon be available for donors to benefit the Foundation for U.S. Grant's Legacy.

BY AMANDA HUDSON  
News editor

**W**ithin these walls came a turning point" for Ulysses S. Grant, says James Wirth, owner of the 18th president's first home in Galena.

Most people are familiar with Grant's second home, which is an Illinois historic site. On Aug. 18, 1865, Galena celebrated the return of its Civil War hero with a jubilant procession, much flag-waving and many speeches. That day, a group of Galena citizens presented the general with a handsome, furnished house on Bouthillier Street.

Wirth's more modest home was the one Grant left to return to military service. Wirth has given tours of the home to visitors, including troops of Boy Scouts, as he works to keep the home authentic and make more tours possible.

"I (told the Scouts), 'If Grant had decided to stay in this home, only his descendants would have known his name,'" Wirth says. "Without his leadership, would there (now) be a United States? Under Grant's leadership, we ended up with peace, unity and a country no longer with slavery."

In 1861, after a month of volunteer service as a civilian to prepare Illinois troops for Civil War battle, Grant returned to his Galena home. "But during six days in these walls, it comes to him that that is not what he is (called) to do," Wirth says.

Quoting from a letter Grant wrote to his father, Wirth says he believes that Grant was inspired "from up above" to rejoin the U.S. Army when the Civil War began. In 1854, Grant had left his army career to return to his beloved wife and children.

But in 1861, he put service to our nation ahead of everything, Wirth says, including ahead of a partnership in the family business.

"Grant is a hero," because, Wirth says, "he gave up



The cedar shingles smelled like a pine forest as Father Christopher Kuhn, two other priests, friends and historians gathered with owner James Wirth (gesturing, center) on the lawn behind the Grant home to admire the new roof.



(Observer photos by Amanda Hudson)

this home and happy family life to go off to the battlefield. He placed himself to be of service. Think of how much good can come if we (also offer ourselves) to be of service. We need to take time to discern what (our) service is, and what would be best, and what God wants."

Wirth also has lived those same convictions. His love for history and ability to make historic stories come alive stem from his childhood years in a California neighborhood filled with elderly neighbors who told him numerous stories of what life was like when they were young. "In grade school," he says, "I'd read the history textbook like (it was) a novel — What happens next?"

After years of work in business and volunteer service with preservation projects out West, Wirth came to the Chicago area in service to his extended family, to settle his aunt's estate. Unanticipated complications turned his planned few months of service into years of all-consuming work that eventually brought him to Galena to clear out her second home. While showing an out-of-town helper around town, Wirth noticed a "For Sale" sign at the Grant home.

He recalls that he felt "compelled" to act immediately. "I implored the Blessed Mother," he says,

telling her that he would do his best "to try to (do) something good for families and young people" with the Grant home.

"I was the person who got the chance to buy this," Wirth says, explaining that he later learned that offers had come in from near and far. "It seemed someone was helping me," he adds, because he paid the "reasonable" asking price and "never could have outbid anyone."

Since then, establishing the non-profit

Foundation for U.S. Grant's Legacy has been a "long, uphill process," he says, with each step bringing unanticipated challenges. The Internal Revenue Service, for example, balked at providing a Federal Tax ID number, one of the requirements to establish 501(c)(3) status.

"Ultimately there was a whole series of questions from the IRS — it seemed to them (that) what was here couldn't be the reality," Wirth says, naming other people who have had trouble believing that the home wasn't made a National Landmark long ago. "Some have said to me that it would not only qualify as a National Landmark, but if the Park Service had resources, they thought it would be made one of America's National Park (sites). No place seems to have any means to assist that.

"It is rather strange. This is the counterpart to Robert E. Lee's Arlington, Va., home. Each made a monumental decision (in their respective homes) — (Lee) to leave the U.S. Army and (Grant) to join it ... It would seem there would be at least a similar designation" for Grant's home.

"The IRS finally gave approval on Sept. 15, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows," Wirth, a lifelong Catholic, says. "I've put this in her hands."

He credits the Blessed Mother with inspiring other assistance that has come, including a new roof (see box, left) and other funds and volunteers along the way.

"(It is) out of the generosity of their hearts that I've been able to maintain things as long as I have," he says, admitting he is now at a crisis point, having exhausted his personal funds and working without an income for the six years he has owned the home. He still faces fees for required profes-

sional services from architects and engineers, as well as numerous other expenses — for things such as a special use permit and a traffic study — necessary to get the home ready and open for tourists. Other expenses can't be avoided, he says regretfully. "I have to keep the heat on or the plaster would crack."

"I don't think anybody will be disappointed with Grant's home," Wirth says. First Lady Julia Grant's memoirs "are a detailed account of the family life when they were here. When you are here, you get an intimate, personal look into the life of Grant ... these are the very same rooms, same floors ... you are beholding the same settings. People have a chance to get to know a person of national significance in ways (they've) never seen him before."

"The kids applauded and applauded," Wirth says of one tour that he provided to Boy Scouts and their leaders. "I have prayed that if God wills it, that I can help bring this reality (of the personal side of President Grant) to people. All of us have some opportunity to be of service, sometimes in humble ways, but always important in God's sight."

"I hope (this house) will not only be an opportunity (for visitors) to learn about history, but also how much good that they themselves can bring about with that attitude of service."

James Wirth (center) reads a letter written on behalf of Bishop Thomas G. Doran to friends and fellow history buffs who gathered for the blessing and fellowship at the historic Grant home on Feb. 26. Listening are (clockwise, from left) Phil Hoza, Father Christopher Kuhn, Father Jack Dennerlein, Frank Nefzger, Alden and Maria Kuntz and Dominican Sister Vivian Gorman (in front, seated).



A picture of Ulysses S. Grant, his wife, Julia, their three sons and daughter hangs in the hallway at their first home in Galena. The print is from about 1868 and the large original photo hangs in the Smithsonian.

James Wirth holds the vial of holy water as Father Christopher Kuhn begins his blessing at the front door of the first home of U.S. Grant in Galena.



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### DESTINATION



(Observer photos by Amanda Hudson)

## Shrine Church of St. Anthony of Padua

New York, N.Y.

**Destination:** Religious and movie-making history meet in New York City at the Shrine Church of St. Anthony of Padua. The church is located four blocks south of Washington Square Park on the corner of Houston and Sullivan streets, in Greenwich Village one step into the SoHo neighborhood. It is close to New York University, Chinatown and Little Italy areas.

Masses are Saturday, 5 p.m. and Sunday, 9 and 11 a.m. Weekday Mass is offered at the rectory across Sullivan Street from the front doors of the church.

**Why to go:** The church is the oldest existing Italian parish in the United States and the second Italian parish ever founded here. The building is the first parish church built by Italian immigrants in the U.S. Franciscan friars staff the parish, as they have since it began.

For 142 years, it has ministered to Italians, as well as jazz musicians, beatniks, artists, actors and, now, the rich and famous living in the area. Even a saint was a member: St. Francis Xavier (Mother) Cabrini, once taught in the parish's religious education program.

The church boasts a Jardine Pipe Organ that was built around 1888, when the church was erected. It was built as *opus* 933 by George Jardine and Sons Organ Company of New York. From its beginning, it was considered to be both historic and grand. It was overhauled in the 1950s with some parts changed and some compromises made. The church has kept up with repairs and tuning, with some major work done in recent years including a rebuild of the organ console into a state-of-the-art modern organ console by the John Klaunder Organ Company.

**Special events:** On weekends from March to mid-December, you can enjoy St. Anthony's Market on the Houston Street sidewalk. The market, called a "best find" in one book and featured in an article entitled "The Best Place to Look Like A Movie Star for under \$15," also has been written up in *Vogue*, *New York Magazine* and other publications.

**Access:** Didn't look handicapped accessible, like most all of New York. Everywhere are lots of stairs.

**(Grand) Kid friendly:** Kids will like the "movie wall" inside the church. They may recognize scenes from "Godfather II," "Moonstruck," "Men in Black," and other movies shot there.



The church has been featured in several movies, most famously, "Godfather II."

**Info:** Address: Shrine Church of St. Anthony of Padua, 154 Sullivan St., New York City, NY 10012. Phone: 212/777-2755 Web: <http://stanthonynyc.org>.

— By Amanda Hudson

Send your Destination photos and ideas to [SeasonedObserver@rockforddiocese.org](mailto:SeasonedObserver@rockforddiocese.org).