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Cardinal Ritter's birthplace resumes its importance in New Albany
By Dale Moss

This group talked, that group talked. It seems David Hock and everybody else in New Albany had something to say about saving Joseph Ritter's birthplace.

Some said they might be too late.

Others said let's keep talking. Ritter was Indiana's only Roman Catholic Cardinal.

The building where the talk resumed was one on which Hock, a roofer, was working. He came down, jumped right in the middle. "I thought 'OK, I've been getting a feeling I ought to do something,'" Hock said. "I'd been avoiding it the best I can."

Hock since has shepherded restoration the best he can. It has taken eight years and has cost \$800,000 in donated money, labor and materials, but the end is finally in sight. "It's exciting — and exciting is more fun than trudging on," Hock said.

Only a small midsection — to be a Ritter museum — awaits restoration. Hock said the late Ritter would have preferred the focus on him to be modest and secondary. That is precisely why that talk needed to start, needed to continue and needed to result in the landmark at 1218 E. Oak Street.

Ritter's history is not only about being a first. It is about being just and caring. Ritter's legendary stature emerged elsewhere, but his heart developed in New Albany. "What he did was so far ahead of his time," said Letty Walter, another key project leader.

"To think he came from right here."

Ritter's old home was saved to serve, not simply to stand. It is anchored by satellites for two Louisville-based charities, Home of the Innocents and the Housing Partnership Inc. A just-finished community room, at the rear, offers many more possibilities. Walter imagines health fairs and programs of all sorts.

Ritter's birthplace can become a catalyst for the S. Ellen Jones neighborhood, being revived itself. "It's already starting to pay dividends," said state Rep. Ed Clere, who has long been active in the project.

The building's value to others is reminiscent of Ritter. "I have faith it really will turn into something none of us considered — something fundamental," said Larry Timperman, an architect also faithfully involved.

Ritter died in 1967, seven years after being elevated to Cardinal. He championed school desegregation and led church reform. His glory days were in St. Louis and before that in Indianapolis. He last resided locally perhaps in the 1930s. Little wonder few still in New Albany knew Ritter and fairly few knew fully his ties or his impact.

Clere, for instance, was drawn to the effort by a devotion to preservation. "As I learned about Cardinal Ritter, I became equally interested in promoting that legacy," he said.

Hock said a priest researching Ritter identified the house that also was the Ritter family's bakery. It likely would be gone, if not for its distinction. Indiana Landmarks bought it and mustered public interest. Hock learned of the project through involvement in the Knights of Columbus.

Progress depended on donations and volunteers, and the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation was set up. Timperman calls Hock the project's quarterback; Hock returns immense appreciation. "I couldn't give it up, but a whole lot of people couldn't give it up," he said. "We all wanted it.

We would have worked forever if we had to. "We worked half of forever."