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Plaque marks Cardinal Ritter's birthplace in New Albany House still in need of funds

By CHRIS MORRIS

The Rev. Troy Overton had heard of Cardinal Joseph Ritter and even taught in the high school named after Ritter in Indianapolis.

But he knew little about the man, so he decided to do some research.

That is what brought Overton and several of his students to New Albany to film a one-hour documentary about Cardinal Ritter at his birthplace — 1218 E. Oak St. in New Albany.

“He was such a great civil rights leader and was such a great man,” Overton said.

He went on to say that Ritter had been a positive influence on his life, even though he never got to meet the man who died in 1967.

Overton, the program director at Mount Saint Francis Center for Spirituality, hopes the only Catholic Cardinal to date from Indiana has the same effect on others.

On Sunday afternoon, Ritter's birthplace turned into a festive scene as residents were allowed to tour the home prior to the unveiling of a State Historic Plaque on the property's front lawn.

Several Catholic leaders including the Rev. Monsignor Joseph F. Schaedel, Victor General of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, and Auxiliary Bishop Robert Hermann of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, spoke at the ceremony.

Greg Sekula, director of the Southern Regional Office of the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, and also a board member of the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation, said the house was nearly torn down in 2001 due to being in disrepair. He said Paul Graf approached the Historic Landmarks Foundation about saving the home and “at the 11th hour, we purchased the property and stabilized the structure.”

Currently, the Cardinal Birthplace Foundation has raised \$350,000 to restore the home. Sekula said the Foundation hopes to raise \$1.5 million to complete the interior restoration and create an endowment.

The home will be used as a neighborhood gathering place and to provide programs to help the less fortunate — something Cardinal Ritter made a habit of doing.

July 20 marked Ritter's 115th birthday. He lived at the house on Oak Street until he left for the seminary. He became Bishop of Indianapolis in 1934 and integrated Catholic high schools in the city 17 years before the landmark Supreme Court desegregation case of Brown v. the Board of Education. Ritter also integrated the Catholic schools as Archbishop of St. Louis. He became a Cardinal in 1961.

"We want the living legacy of Cardinal Ritter to continue in this neighborhood for decades to come," Monsignor Schaedel said.

David Hock, chair of the Cardinal Birthplace Foundation, said restoring the home has become a "community project." He said supplies and labor have been donated to get the house in the shape it is in today.

The Ritter historical marker is New Albany's 18th, and third to be dedicated this year. Floyd County Historian David Barksdale — who has been instrumental in preserving and marking history — said in 1991 there was only one state historic marker in Floyd County.

"They just don't hand these markers out. It takes a lot of research and work," he said.

The process usually takes up to a year, according to Barksdale.

The plaque cost \$1,700 and was paid for by the Knights of Columbus Cardinal Ritter Council 1221.

There is no timetable when renovation work to the home will be completed.