

# Whatever Happened to... Franklin Castle

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Plain Dealer staff

The Franklin Castle in Cleveland's Ohio City neighborhood has long been the stuff of local legend. It was recently condemned and is up for sale again.

"Whatever happened to . . .?" is a weekly series updating some of the most newsworthy and interesting local stories covered in The Plain Dealer. Have a suggestion on a story we should update?

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Today, we answer these questions:

Whatever happened to . . .

. . . . . the Franklin Castle, a landmark in Cleveland's Ohio City neighborhood?

Whatever happened to the Franklin Castle, a landmark in Cleveland's Ohio City neighborhood?

It could soon be on the open market again.

Separately the city recently condemned the boarded-up mansion and said it is unsafe to live there until proper repairs are done.

For years the Franklin Boulevard property has been the stuff of ghostly lore, mystery, and unrealized ambitions.

Owner Michelle Heimburger bought the castle and carriage house in 1999. But a fire intentionally set months later incinerated her dreams of restoring the house to its former grandeur.

The city's condemnation notice gives a 30-day window for repairs to be done or a request made for more time. It also signals the city's expectations.

"We're trying to force the marketplace and legitimate buyers to recognize that there's a level of investment that's going to have to be made in that property to bring it up to a condition that's habitable for people," said Ed Rybka, director of the city's Department of Building and Housing.

Heimburger never expected that she'd still own the property. Seven years ago she agreed to sell it to Charles Milsaps, a man with grand visions to turn the castle into a private club. But Milsaps hasn't done the deal or the snazzy renovation.

Meanwhile he's leased the property and given Heimburger — who lives in Toronto — enthusiastic updates.

Heimburger is now determined to move on. She's giving Milsaps one last chance to buy the property. Otherwise she'll put it on the open market.

"I would like to find someone who is passionate about restoring it to its former glory," she said.

Milsaps did not return several calls seeking comment.

It's all one more chapter for a storied castle built in the late 1800s. Shrouded in macabre stories involving murders, hidden bones, and lingering ghosts, it gained fame as one of Ohio's most haunted houses.

The history and lore — combined with the impressive architecture — adds to the mystique. Through the years scores of children surely dreamed of living there.

Warren native Heimburger was one of them. The Yahoo employee was living in California when she cashed in company stock and bought the property for \$350,000 with plans to renovate and move closer to family.

The rehab was well underway when an arson fire in November 1999 severely damaged the castle, leaving a devastated Heimburger stuck with extensive repairs that ate up both the insurance money and

her savings.

“The stock market crashed, I ran out of money and I couldn’t do anymore,” she said.

Milsaps arrived in 2003 with a proposal that dovetailed with Heimburger’s passion and aims. She said he too wanted to do a historically accurate restoration and periodically open it up to an intrigued public. Milsaps told people he was going to buy the property for \$650,000 and talked up plans to create the Franklin Castle Club, a private venue offering members fine dining, guest suites, limousine service and more.

Heimburger said she wasn’t involved in the venture. The purchase agreement said the sale would happen after certain events occurred — such as a rezoning.

But by 2006 The Plain Dealer reported that Milsaps — then living in the carriage house behind the castle — was marketing an exclusive members-only club that still didn’t exist.

And based on the city’s recent inspection there’s still no signs of reconstruction.

Meanwhile Heimburger paid back taxes to resolve a tax foreclosure filing and also settled with construction and lumber companies who filed liens for bills Milsaps hadn’t paid. The work involved only about 5 percent of the remodeling needed, a lawyer for both companies said.

“Neither the community nor I believed this was ever a reality, said Councilman Joe Cimperman whose ward includes the castle.

It wasn’t just a lack of faith in Milsaps’ ability to pull off the development.

Cimperman said because of opposition, Milsaps likely would never have gotten a zoning change to bring his venture to the residential and historic neighborhood.

Over the years Heimburger periodically asked Milsaps whether the project was going to happen. “We were willing to be a bit patient since he did seem to be very enthusiastic about the project,” Heimburger said.

But when she learned a few years ago that Milsaps had opened the castle for Halloween tours, her lawyer told him to stop. Heimburger worried about safety since the house is unfinished. Moreover, Milsaps didn’t have permission to use the castle.

“As far as we knew he had stopped, and then very recently I heard he had given another tour,” Heimburger said.

During their recent visit, city inspectors found deteriorated conditions. The fourth floor — damaged by both the 1999 fire and water — was unfinished and missing walls. Paint was peeling off ceilings and walls and plaster work was needed. There was a large amount of pigeon droppings. And the electrical, plumbing, and heating systems were in disrepair.

Rybka said that by issuing a condemnation notice — instead of a general violation notice — the city is barring occupancy under current unsafe conditions. And it is requiring that certain permits be pulled, which Rybka said triggers a higher level of rehabilitation.

Heimburger’s husband, Huw Evans, said they have not yet seen the notice and couldn’t comment on the details. “We’re taking this very seriously,” Evans said. “We want to work with the city and we want to work for a positive resolution for the community and the castle.”

Evans said without seeing the details of the violations it was impossible to say whether Heimburger would repair the violations or try to sell to a buyer who would take on the work.

“It’s a shame to see it go unused because it’s such a beautiful place, and so many people ask about it,” Cimperman said.. “It’s time for us to figure out what we’re going to do with it.”

— Sandra Livingston