

# PEOPLE

Places, Profiles, Family News

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The Missourian  
Weekend,  
June 27-28, 2009

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## Saving Historic St. Charles, One Building at a Time

By Karen Cernich,  
Missourian Features Editor

If you've ever strolled along St. Charles' historic Main Street and admired the beauty of the buildings, there's a good chance you're noticing the vision of Marthasville resident Penny Pitman.

Over the last 30-plus years, she has been a prime mover and/or partner in the restoration and preservation of more than a dozen commercial buildings from one end of Main Street in St. Charles to the other.

Her work can be seen in 104 S. Main, 116 S. Main, 117 S. Main, 136 S. Main, 416 S. Main, 105 and 107 N. Main, 123 N. Main, 201 N. Main, 208 N. Main, 213 N. Main, 215 N. Main and 319 N. Main.

Most of Pitman's work on these buildings included full-façade reconstruction that returned the buildings to their original late 1800s-early 1900s designs.

Along with the Main Street projects, Pitman has completed two projects in St. Charles residential neighborhoods and other projects in St. Charles County, as well as several projects in downtown St. Louis.

This spring Pitman was honored by her alma mater, Columbia College, with the 2009 Community Service Award for outstanding leadership and service to community for her work in historic preservation. The award was presented April 25 at the college's alumni reunion weekend.

### Began With a House

Thinking back to her college days, Pitman said she never intended to develop a career in preservation. After growing up in Wentzville, she went to Columbia College, then a two-year private, nonprofit institution founded in 1851, where she studied art and French.

From Columbia she transferred to Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and earned a bachelor's degree in advertising/journalism.

Her first job after college was with Children's Press in Chicago. Later she worked at University Press and then for a furniture manufacturer using her art background to do graphic design.

In 1970, Pitman bought an 1895 foursquare Victorian home in St. Charles four blocks up the hill from Main Street and began the process of restoring it, learning the business of it along the way and unwittingly laying the ground-work for a future career.

"I thought the historic buildings were wonderful," said Pitman. "I thought we were fortunate that the people who built this area did it out of brick at a time when the architectural style was nice."

"I felt more comfortable in (older buildings and homes) because of the room size and the ceiling height — they were larger — and because they had so much character," she noted.

Pitman lived in the home while it was being restored and rehabbed. She went on to live there for 34 years before she moved to a 220-acre property near Femme Osage in 2005.

"The first house took about a year," said Pitman. "It wasn't in horrible shape. I fixed the interior, rewired stuff ... over the time I lived there, though, I redid the kitchen



Marthasville area resident Penny Pitman stands on one of the many porches of her new construction Federal-style home that connects with an 1857 log cabin she relocated to her property from Josephville.



three times."

In 1975 Pitman joined a small group of other passionate individuals in beginning the restoration of St. Charles historic Main Street district. Her first project was 416 S. Main, previously home to a Salvation Army store. The building was run-down, said Pitman, noting back then this area of St. Charles was "skid row."

Using as her guide old photographs and source books for turn-of-the-century architectural woodwork like Roberts Illustrated



Pitman's first commercial preservation project was the building at 416 S. Main St. in St. Charles. Above shows the building before her restoration work and at left is the finished project.

Millwork Catalog, Pitman lets the buildings speak for themselves as she had the layers of changes and additions made to them over the decades peeled away. On all of her projects, Pitman serves as the general contractor, handling design work and deciding on details, but hiring professionals to do the physical labor.

She designed the space at 416 S. Main for a retail business on the first floor with an apartment above. She owned the building for 20 years before she traded it to someone in 1995 for two buildings on North Main in need of preservation.

After completing the project at 416 S. Main and finding tenants, Pitman moved on to 117 S. Main, a circa 1878 building known as "The Queen of Main Street" because it is the tallest building there.

From there Pitman continued her pattern of buying historic buildings, restoring and rehabbing the space and then either finding tenants or a new buyer.

"It worked out well over the years," she said. "South Main was restored first, and you can see it has a different character than North Main. At the south end the buildings are smaller, but they were built earlier. At the north end, they are a little larger."

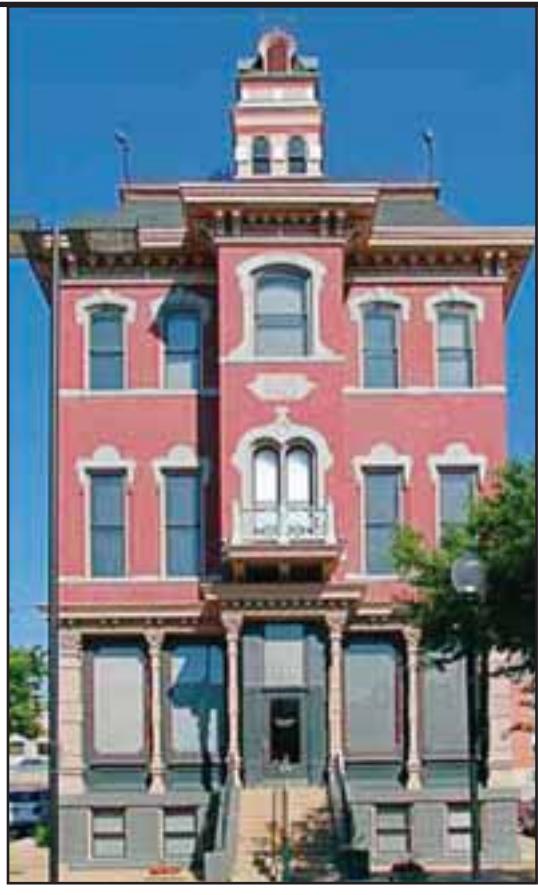
Pitman's preservation projects today house such varied businesses as a hair salon, antique shop, clothing retailer and a high-tech firm that offers computer training.

### Why St. Charles?

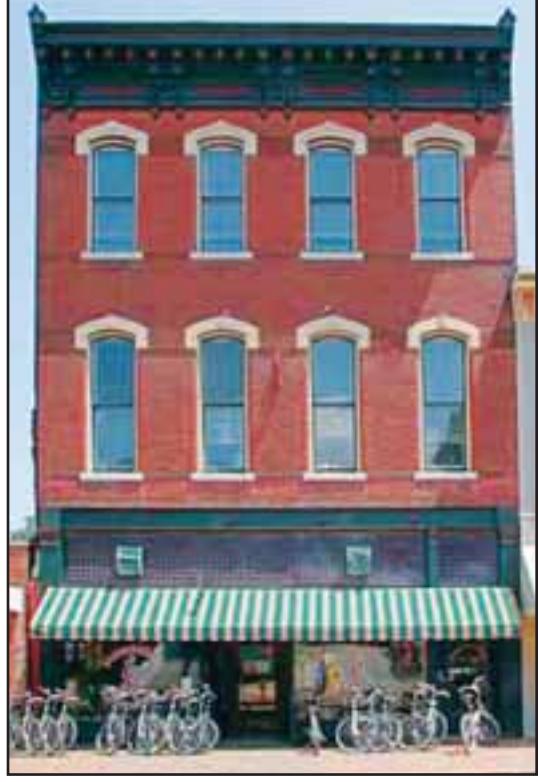
Pitman said she was drawn to the preservation work in St. Charles because by the 1970s urban renewal was already under way there under the guidance of "pioneers" like Archie Scott.

"In the 1960s, the first state Capitol building (in St. Charles) was restored," she said, "and I felt the truth in that Margaret Mead quote, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'"

Pitman continued to work a full-time job as a graphic designer for many years as she completed preservation projects on the



Pitman's preservation projects in St. Charles have included 117 S. Main Street, "The Queen of Main" ...



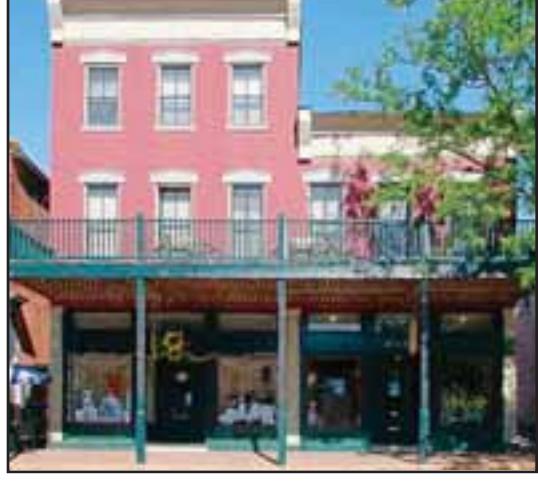
104 S. Main ...



136 S. Main ...

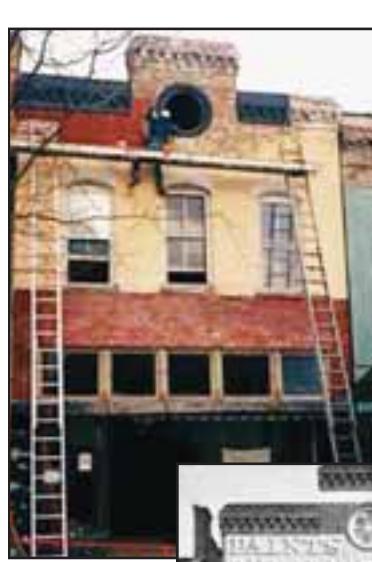


201 N. Main ...



and 105 and 107 N. Main.

Submitted Photos.



To restore the building at 319 N. Main, Pitman removed boards that had been placed over the round window at top and the small square windows just over the awning. At left are an old photo of the building and a photo of the restoration work.

• See Saving St. Charles 4B