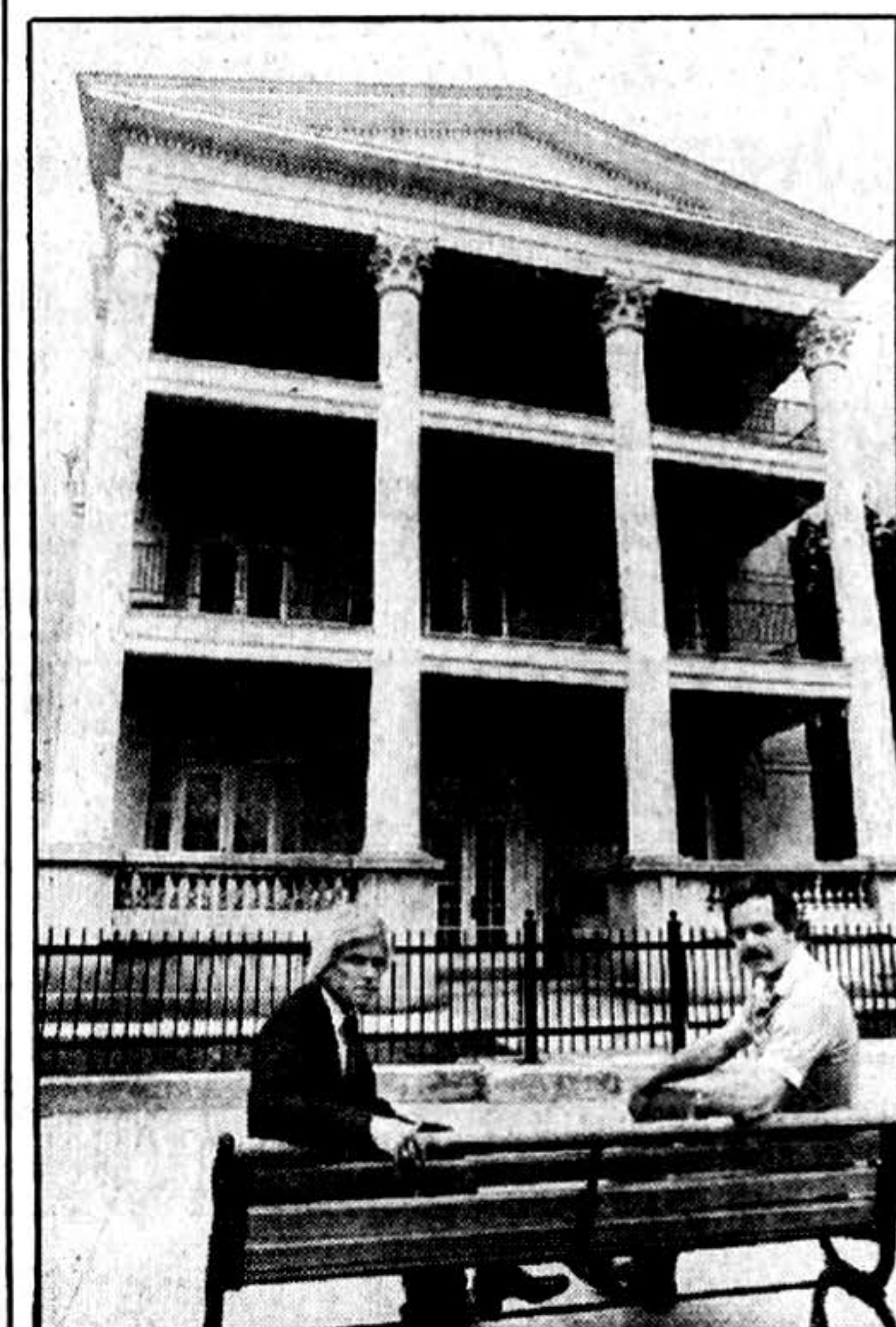


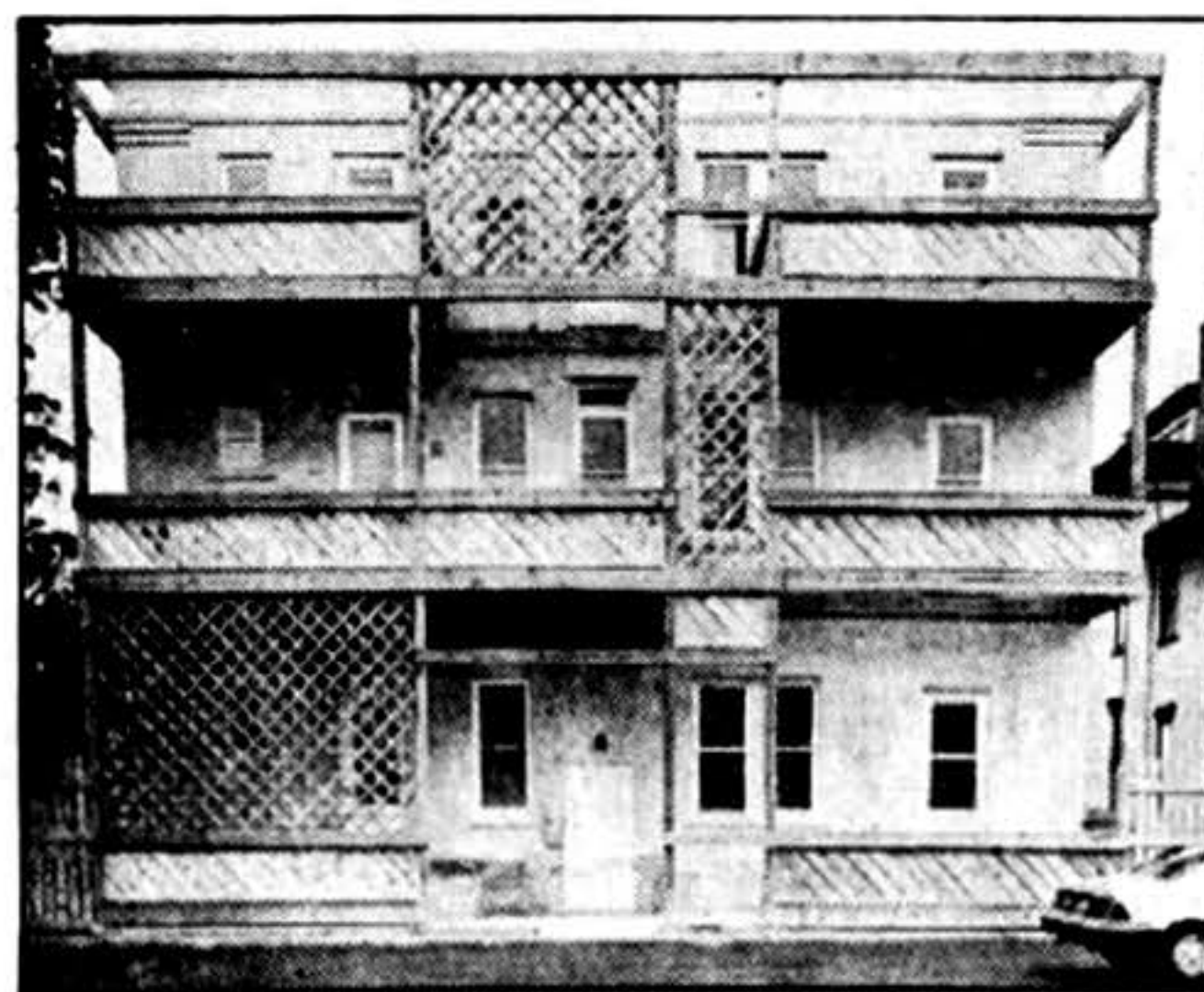
A new Wilmot rises from rubble



Carved capital on tall pillar is at eye level, with downtown skyline providing the view from third-floor balcony.



Alan Saiger, left, Benton Kendig, in front of the Wilmot.



Individual balconies for residents of apartments in the Wilmot, above, replace the crumbling rear facade of the building, left.

Half-million-dollar rehabilitation restores century-old landmark in the heart of the 3rd Ward

By Judy Bennett

Democrat and Chronicle

In the old Ruffled Shirt Ward the critics who tsk-tsked for years about the neglect of the Wilmot are suddenly taking a new look at that tall-pillared apartment house at 275 S. Plymouth Ave.

During the last year and a half and in a project that now exceeds \$500,000, the formerly vacant and decaying Wilmot has been gutted, restored, repainted and given a new scheme in contemporary apartment layouts for the tenants who have been moving in since the end of the year.

Seven of 11 new apartments are now occupied, and the remaining four are ready for prospective tenants.

Engineered by two local businessmen, the work represents a comeback for the nearly 100-year-old brick building in the city's 3rd Ward.

While some work is still going on, several new looks have surfaced. In one change, all the second-floor apartments (renting for up to \$700) now rise to the third floor, each with its own living room-to-bedroom area spiral staircase. In addition, some apartment dwellers are getting their sunbaths on new private decks, and others, their views of the surrounding landscape from new back-of-building balconies.

SUCH BUILDING FEATURES will be for visitors to see when they take the Corn Hill Historic House Tour on two days, July 9 and 10. The Wilmot and 10 other 3rd Ward buildings will be included on the tour, part of the annual Corn Hill Arts Festival.

It would not have made the tour list two or three years ago. In fact, until the new owners and renovators Alan R. Saiger and Benton B. Kendig 3rd stepped into the picture, along with architect John F. Bero, just the sight of the Wilmot upset people.

For 11 years the old apartment house stood vacant, while vandals methodically broke every pane of glass and looters carted out even the nailed-down woodwork.

But even before the vacancy and vandals, it had become tenement-like. A neighbor in the '40s remembers clotheslines across the front balconies. Later on, it was a men's student house for the then-downtown Rochester Institute of Technology. "Once in 1967," recalls a former student, "we were without a kitchen sink for three weeks."

"Closed by an order of the city, and vacant for years, the Wilmot sits slowly crumbling," wrote Kitty Galbraith in a history of the building she prepared during the 1970s.

Galbraith, a student of old buildings who lived here at the time (she is now in Starkville, Miss.), wrote that "because the Wilmot is located in what had been one of the city's finest residential neighborhoods, the plight seems especially poignant."

BY THE TIME SAIGER AND KENDIG closed on their purchase in January 1982, the Wilmot, according to Saiger, "was what we call a 'gut rehab,' meaning most of the interior would not be worth saving."

Yet here was a Victorian landmark, dating back to the days of wealthy homes and people in finery that prompted the area to be called the Ruffled Shirt Ward. The Wilmot was one of those wealthy homes: The main part of its structure was a private home built in 1886, and enlarged and remodeled into apartments in 1913. But by the 1970s it had declined to the point that it was cited for no less than 278 housing code violations.

Kendig and Saiger, who paid \$55,000 for the house, have spent, Saiger says, "in excess of \$500,000" in the rehabilitation. As a result, today the Wilmot has regained its status as one of the lovely old buildings of the 3rd Ward Preservation District. It's been certified as a historical restoration by the New York State Historical Preservation Office, and nationally by the Department of the Interior.

The fact is that it was still distinguished looking even in poverty. It drew attention as the building with the towering three-story Corinthian-style white columns and as a structure taller than most of its neighbors.

Yet while the 3rd Ward homeowners were busy restoring and bringing new charm to many other old houses, no one was doing anything for the Wilmot. Until the day that Alan

TURN TO PAGE 2C

New Wilmot rises from rubble

FROM PAGE 1C

Saiger stood on his porch and said: "I'm tired of looking at that eyesore."

With that, Saiger and Benton Kendig, who had also been his partner in the restoration of Saiger's home around the corner, at 15 Atkinson St., set out to buy and restore the neglected Wilmot.

Kendig, owner of Kend Enterprises, 33 Cornfort St., was the general contractor. He and Saiger, a certified public accountant, bought the building from George Zimmerman (now living in Virginia), who had owned the building for a few years.

The three-story house, an overall 13,900 square feet, could have had a more conventional apartment arrangement in the recent remodeling.

"My thought," Saiger says, "was to have nine units, three on each floor."

But architect Bero, according to Saiger, had a more interesting concept: Build four apartments on the main floor, and six on the second floor, but have all the second-floor apartments extend to the third floor. Thus, they are two-story apartments, the two floors in each one connected by spiral staircases. There also is a single new apartment in a large section of the basement. There are 11 in all.

THE MAIN-FLOOR APARTMENTS. Kendig says, range from about 500 to 900 square feet in size, and the two-story apartments are about 1,200 square feet.

While rents go to \$700, they start at \$325, and average out at \$475.

The first-floor apartments have one or two bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens and tiled baths. In one visited recently, the living room opens out onto a two-level wooden deck in a quiet corner near the rear of the building.

The two-story apartments have two bedrooms, two baths, and formal dining rooms in addition to living rooms and kitchens. Each apartment on this level has its own designated balcony, either one of the new rear balconies or the historic-looking front balconies where, from the third floor, the carved Ionic capitals at the tops of the Corinthian columns are almost at eye level.

In all the apartments, there are fully equipped contemporary kitchens, closets including linen closets behind louvered doors.

Saiger points out that selections were varied when it came to choosing carpeting, tile patterns and styles of cabinets, to give each apartment a distinctive look.

Every unit has its own furnace (on the upper floors, concealed in closets) along with water heater and central air conditioning unit, offering individual tenants the chance to handle their own energy conservation.

There is tight security. Tenants unlock three doors to get into their apartments, including the main inside-front door and farther into the building an interior hallway door.

The rooms appear light and airy; the views are good, the one from the third floor front is of downtown. And, of course, they're clean and new. The building was gutted completely, and new walls built, new doors and windows added. Ceilings were dropped.

"They were 16 feet," Saiger says, "and we brought them down to either 12 or 14."

WITH ALL THE NEW, Saiger and Kendig managed to retain a lot of the early-day charm. There is an old-mansion feeling in the wide granite balusters and tall pillars, and in the entranceway, including a foyer with marble stairs, and past that, the main hallway and impressive staircase.

When it came to painting the building's exterior, the men sought the advice of architectural historian Elizabeth G. Holahan, and with her help, a historically correct color was chosen, rather sand-like in tone.

They also applied for historic certification on both state and national levels, and in that effort had advisers who came to inspect the building and issue directives on the remodeling. Keeping the authentic look was stressed in many details, from windows and staircases to old moldings.

It cost more to restore the building to meet the certification requirements, but they will have a tax credit for these efforts. And they've been able to keep many interesting old details of the house true to the past.

"We used a lot of new woodworking," Kendig says, "but matched it all to the old, and we remade the granite balusters (along the lower front of the building) also making them like the original."

Kendig, whose firm was the contractor for the reconstruction, says that "some of the most difficult things about the restoration were structural. The house had been vacant for so many years, and there was damage from the weather through broken windows and doors, and the woodwork had deteriorated as a result."

He says they couldn't believe it when they saw that every window — in the French doors, for example — had been broken as if methodically, one by one.

"There was serious vandalism," Kendig says.

"We lost a lot of interior finishes, sections of woodwork."

They used all new framing in redesigning the individual apartments, and there's a great deal of "hidden value," Kendig says, in soundproofing and full insulation.

"We put in a lot of steel I-beams," he says. "This place is now built like a fortress."

A couple of more notes from Mrs. Galbraith's history review:

In 1857, when the Wilmot site was still a vacant lot, the street changed names, becoming Plymouth. It had been Sophia Street, Galbraith says, "named for Colonel Rochester's lady." Then nine years later, in 1886, lawyer Byron McAlpine built his imposing brick home on the site.

As for the name Wilmot, Galbraith quotes Raymond Tierney, one of the partners in 1913 who changed the private Victorian-style home into an apartment house.

The apartment was not named the Wilmot after any one person, Tierney told her, "but simply because we were looking for a good name, and Wilmot-Castle (now Sybron) was a respected firm in the community. So we borrowed the dignity of the name."

Corn Hill tour of 11 buildings

The Wilmot apartment building at 275 S. Plymouth Ave. will be one of 11 stops on the Corn Hill House Tour this year. Tour-goers will see a cross-section of the 3rd Ward neighborhood, visiting private homes, churches and historic landmarks. The tour, with tickets at \$6, will be from noon to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, July 9 and 10.

As a feature of the annual Corn Hill Arts Festival, the tour is sponsored by the Corn Hill Neighborhood Association and the Landmark Society. The Landmark Society headquarters, the Brewster-Burke House at 130 Spring St., will be one of the tour stops. Another will be the society-owned Campbell-Whittlessey House at 123 S. Fitzhugh St. Also on tour: the Bevier Building, 42 S. Washington St.; Central Church of Christ, 101 S. Plymouth Ave.; Immaculate Conception Church, Frederick Douglass Street; Hayden House, 144 S. Fitzhugh St., and the Gazebo, Plymouth Circle Park.

Homes will include one at 102 Troup St., owned by Dr. and Mrs. William Hood; the home of Chuck Gearhart, 48 Atkinson St., and the home of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Sarubbi, 227 S. Fitzhugh St.

Tickets will go on sale Monday, June 27, at the Landmark Society properties. (For information, call 546-7029). During the Arts Festival, tickets will be available at the information booth near School No. 3, 85 Adams St.