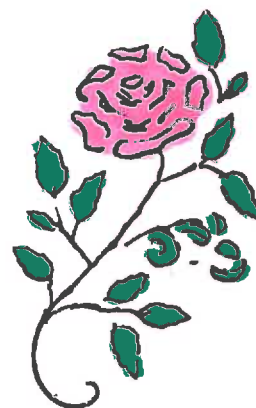


455 East Ridge Street  
Marquette Michigan, USA.  
Owner History Summary



**Colonel James and Martha Pickands, 1881-82**

James Pickands, a colonel in the Civil War was influenced to come to Marquette by Samuel Mather who was already involved in the region's developing iron industry. In 1866, Colonel Pickands, his brother Henry, sister Caroline, and Jay C. Morse, who had been in his regiment, came to Marquette.

Colonel Pickands started a hardware store in 1866 on Lake Street, at the foot of Baraga (then Superior Street). A year later he, Jay Morse, and Sam Mather Jr. formed a company and entered the mining business. Pickands married Martha, the daughter of the senior Sam Mather's partner, John Outhwaite, an Englishman from Cleveland who, with his family, spent summers in Marquette. Colonel Pickands was later to become the 4th mayor of Marquette.

In 1881-82, the Pickands built a large Victorian style home at 455 East Ridge Street, across from that of prominent citizen, Peter White. He and Martha had several small children when they moved into their new home in the spring of 1882. The house James Pickands had built was one of the finest in Marquette. It had nine fireplaces, beautiful doors with hardware of brass, and woodwork of red oak, cherry, and American walnut throughout. All of the woodwork in the home, including the main staircase, double sliding doors and carved mantles were shipped to Marquette by steamship, as were the finest material available anywhere. Craftsmen, including carpenters, painters, and plasterers were brought to Marquette to work on the building.

Within a week after moving into their beautiful new home, Martha became ill and died. The official diagnosis was spinal meningitis, but the romantic version was that the family moved in before the plaster was dry, and that the dampness had caused Martha to develop pneumonia which caused her death.

James Pickands never entered the house after his wife's death. He sold it to Henry C. Thurber, and moved his family to Cleveland where he proceeded to develop the Pickands-Mather Steamship Company. It was also rumored that he built another home in the Cleveland area similar to the one he had built in Marquette.

**Henry and Anna Thurber, 1882-1896**

Henry C. Thurber and Charles Hebard had formed the Hebard-Thurber Lumber Company in 1876. Hebard had come to Michigan's Upper Peninsula to investigate investment opportunities in the Copper Country, but was immediately impressed with the seemingly endless white pine forests in the region. He proceeded to settle in Marquette, where he met and formed a partnership with Thurber, who was already established as a dealer in timberlands. The Hebard-Thurber Company purchased land at the Pequaming Point and built a large sawmill, dock facility, and company houses there. The company solved its labor requirements by hiring Indians who were living in the area, and by importing others from a nearby reservation. Hebard-Thurbers' fair treatment of its Indian employees won the respect, cooperation and admiration of all Native Americans in the region. Henry Thurber was Marquette's mayor in 1885.

**Frank Sr. and Sarah Spear, 1896-1922**

In 1896 Anna McBride, the former Mrs. Thurber, sold the home to Frank and Sarah Spear. Frank Spear was a successful local merchant, dealing in coal, lumber and hardware from an office, dock and warehouse on the lower harbor. Frank and Sarah had two children, Frank Jr. and Phillip, both of whom worked with father in the

hardware business. Frank Sr. was Marquette's mayor from 1884-1885.

Frank Sr. preceded his wife in death, and with Sarah's death in 1922, title to the home passed on to the two sons. In the settlement of the estate, Frank Jr. and his wife Rachel, who had been living in the home with the mother, Sarah, became the new owners.

#### Frank Jr. and Rachael Spear, 1922-1967

During the early years extensive modernization and improvements were made to the home; electricity was added, plumbing and heating were improved. It is unknown exactly when and by whom all modifications were made. It is clear, however, that Frank Jr. and Rachael were responsible for many of the changes to the interior. During the 1920's and 30's, they removed the wall and sliding doors between the parlor and sitting rooms to form a single large living room which was more suitable for the entertaining style of the era. They also removed the interior wood shutters and the upper canopy from each of the fireplaces to give a brighter, open, "modern" ambiance. This was probably the time when the 9th fireplace on the southern wall of the re-modeled living room was also eliminated.

After Frank Jr. died in 1952, Rachael continued to live in their home until her death in 1965. During this period the elegant Victorian fell into a state of disrepair. Being confined to a wheelchair during her last years, tended by a nurse companion, occupation of the home was limited to the main floor. Wallpaper peeled, pipes corroded, cobwebs and dust accumulated on the unused second floor, and only the meanest upkeep was performed in the occupied area. The exterior of the building and surrounding grounds, once the showpiece of the neighborhood also fell victim to neglect. The once proud home sat awaiting a decision by heirs regarding the disposition of the property.

#### George and Betty Tomasi, 1967-1990

In the fall of 1967, the home was purchased by George and Betty Tomasi. George had attended Northern Michigan University and married Betty Beyers, a Marquette native. A job took them to the Detroit area following his graduation. With a longing to raise their family of seven children in the upper peninsula environment, George accepted a position with the University and he and Betty began by making plans for the move to Marquette. Betty's father, Richard Beyers, was asked to assist by locating a suitable, affordable home for the family. Over a card game, Richard learned from Dorothy (Spear) Fontaine that the home at 455 East Ridge was still sitting dark and empty, and that the Fontaines would indeed consider selling to a family interested in making it their home. A price was mentioned, which was relayed to the Tomasi's, who on the recommendation of the Beyers, agreed to purchase the home sight unseen.

George came to Marquette on October 1, 1967 to begin his new career at NMU, while Betty, pregnant with what would become their 8th and 9th children, stayed behind to sell their home in Royal Oak, downstate. George's first look at the home with a flashlight on a cold fall night, was extremely discouraging. The twelve foot ceilings, cavernous rooms with bare floors were echo chambers, eerie with cobwebbed chandeliers and laden with several years' dust. The rust stained porcelain sinks and toilets and the ancient curtains moving with drafts from unknown origins warned of plumbing and heating problems facing the new occupants. It was a tired and disenchanting new owner who tried to visualize his brood of small children and pregnant wife living in this ancient mausoleum.

The inspection of the home the following day, with bright sunshine coming through the large windows provided a more clear perspective of the underlying quality of the home. The condition of the hardwood floors and plastered walls and ceilings indicated the structural soundness of the building. The exquisite woodwork, intricately carved mantels and banister, stained glass windows in the library/parlor and apparently unlimited space provided by the home and double lot, promised a challenging and bright future for the growing family. The Tomasis determined to restore the home to a combination of practical use and its former elegance; a grand home for the rearing of their nine children. They christened the home "Harbor Ridge", and the family

began what was to become a 23 year project of beautification.

Shortly after moving to Marquette, George and Betty became involved in scuba diving, and proceeded to develop the interest into a small teaching/retail/travel/charter business in which they involved most of the children. This extra income, in addition to helping to finance the children's education, provided most of the resources for the improvements to the home.

When the Tomasi's "Harbor Ridge" was sold in the summer of 1990, it was considered as one of the most beautiful period homes in Marquette County and had been featured in articles in various midwest periodicals. The Tomasis liked to believe that were James Pickands to return, he would approve of their caretaker efforts.

Summary to this point generally provided by George and Betty Tomasi in May, 1990

#### William and Sally Birch, 1990 - Present

In July 1990, Bill and Sally Birch became the new owners of the home on Ridge Street. At the time of purchase, the property lot extended 300 feet, street to street, from a 125 foot frontage on Ridge Street through to a 75 foot frontage on Arch Street. Their purchase price of \$172,000 was approximately 10 times it's original building cost, and close to 6 times the amount the Tomasis paid in 1967. While the Tomasis had made many improvements over their 23 year occupancy period, many improvements remained to be done, as well as refurbishing the effects of long-standing, large family use. One of the noticeable benefits of the home, from the beginning, was that the majority of the fine woodwork in the home had not been painted, and the vast majority of hardware and fixtures were the original fine pieces.

In 1991, and if the house and associated carriage house were not enough of a challenge, the now newly elected Marquette Mayor Birch, with his wife's prompting and financial lead, agreed to purchase the "Dandelion Cottage" (a local literary celebrity) from St. Paul's Episcopal Church for \$1 and move it to face Arch Street on the back portion of their home's lot. The effects of that move cost an additional \$60,000 of personal investment to restore the cottage, as well as the division of the original lot into two 150 foot deep lots, both of which were then registered on the city tax rolls as separately developed, taxable properties. The cottage has its own history and won't be elaborated on here.

The Birches have embarked on a decade refurbishment and restoration that included such superficial improvements as wall re-painting or re-wallpapering, and re-carpeting the majority of floors except those carpeted areas where original woodflooring were refinished. Major upgrades included two upstairs bathrooms, one main floor bathroom, the entire third floor area, the kitchen, basement apartment, and the entire exterior was repaired, re-roofed and re-painted. In 1999, a home-office room for Birch Travel Services is scheduled to be built by inclosing half of the car-port, as well as the re-building of a more blended back porch and rear-entrances area. In all aspects of their restorative efforts, cosmetic changes only have been avoided. Whenever needed in both interior or exterior work, underlying structural integrity was restored before surface re-covering or improvements were made. One exterior improvement not associated with a building but of historical property significance was the restoration of the garden fountain next to the carriage house. This fountain had been disconnected from a direct city water source (not routed through a meter) and filled with stones and dirt by the previous owner. The fountain had been stonework done by the same stonemason who had created the Marquette Branch Prison fountain back in the 1800's.

The majority of refurbishing efforts are scheduled to be completed for this vintage, 19th Century home's entrance into the 21st century. As a later-in-life, second marriage couple, Dr. and Mrs. Birch have a wonderful, blended-family accommodation of 7 bedrooms and 6 bathrooms for hosting visits from their 7 children with their 5 spouses, 12 grandchildren with 1 spouse, and 2 great-grandchildren.

Summary to this point provided by Bill Birch, 5-13-99.