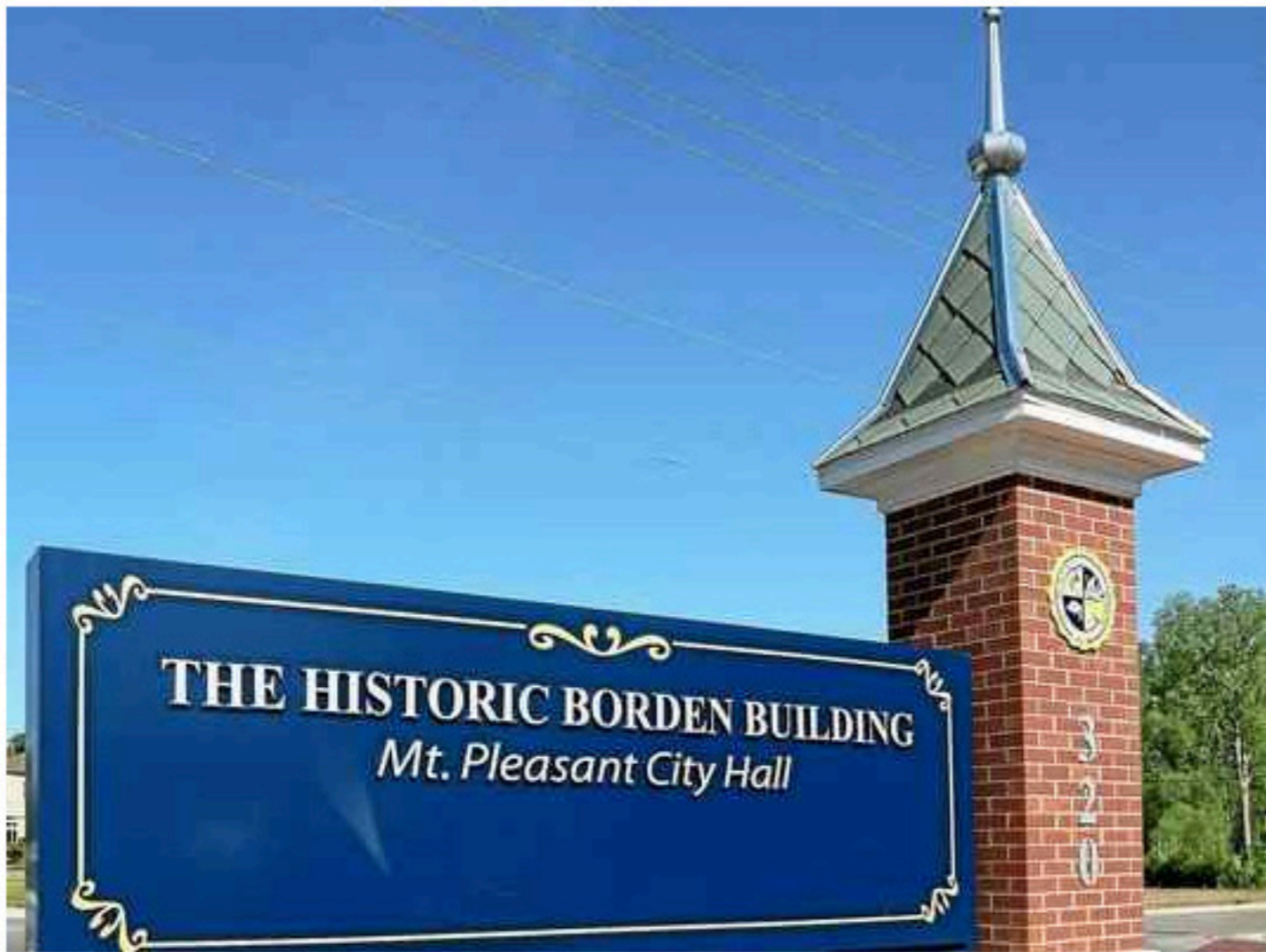




Living in a piece of city history — why it's important for journalists to embrace their community



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I've always loved local history.

When I was an undergraduate at Central Michigan University, I lived in a century-old house on South Franklin Street. I loved imagining what the house was used for, who used to live in it and why it was built, even if the plaster walls were cracking and the outdoor siding (and rain gutters) routinely fell off.

It was demolished as of a few weeks ago, and I can't help but get a little nostalgic.

My old six-bedroom duplex-to-house convert will be bulldozed into a brand-new state-of-the-art 10-bedroom typical college party house.

Most students will probably appreciate the modernity (and firmly secured siding), but I was more than happy in that decrepit historic house.

After graduating CMU more than a year ago, I moved to a smaller two-bedroom cookie-cutter student apartment on the southeast side of town.

While I appreciated clean carpeting and a critter-free closet, it was too cardboard box for me.

When the opportunity arose for me to move back into a historic location in downtown Mt. Pleasant, I jumped.

Now, this journalist is living in the old Mt. Pleasant City Hall. How fitting, right?

I didn't even know the building was the former city hall until I mentioned living at the corner of South University Avenue and East Michigan Street in a conversation with a former journalism professor.

"You know that's the old city hall, right?" he questioned. "You can tell. That's why Dog Central is built inward like that. It used to be the old fire station."

That piqued my natural curiosity. I met with Jack Westbrook, president of the area's historical society, to learn a little more about my new home's past life.

The site itself started as a Methodist church, before it was cleared to create the Mt. Pleasant Fire Department's headquarters in 1887.

Shortly afterward, the department moved onto South Main Street, across from the Ward Theatre, while the corner of East Michigan Street and South University Avenue, then Michigan and Church streets, remained vacant.

"I think that was an empty lot for a long time," Westbrook recalled.

In 1949, footings for a new building were dug out at the intersection, and in 1950, the city hall, fire department and police station moved into a brand new building, the one still standing today.

The west side of the building, now home to Dog Central, housed the fire department.

The fire chief and his son occupied a single-family apartment unit directly above the fire station.

The police occupied the north part of the building, with their entire vehicle fleet stationed in my current apartment parking lot.

The rest of the building was used for general city functions, much like a smaller version of today's Borden Building.

In 1986, the city moved to a new location on North Main Street, while the police and fire units moved to their current locations at about the same time.

In 2008, the city moved into the Borden Building, which it still occupies.

The building at the corner of East Michigan Street and South University Avenue was left vacant, and then transformed into the Basin Building, offering office space and rental apartments.

Some ghosts of the building's past still remain.

A list of former city commissioners sits just inside the building's main entrance.

There are even remnants of the building's former use in my own dwelling.

You cannot imagine my excitement when I noticed two faded wooden markers, labeled "COURT CLERK" and "CITY ASSESSOR" over my dining room and bedroom while I was putting away groceries one day.

For me, it's important to be a part of the community I work in. It's vital for me to live right in the middle of the area I cover.

Now, I hear the sirens downtown. I walk through community events to get to my front door, and I'm right in the middle of a place I love learning about and reporting on.

It's obvious that my apartment used to be a string of offices. Rooms are uneven, heating equipment is bulky and awkward, and my apartment has plenty of unnecessary doorways, not to mention the always-locked door that leads to nowhere.

A lot of potential tenants would look at the space and think, "tacky and ghetto."

But I open my apartment door every day and think, "history and community."

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