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Saved: Louisville's Whiskey Row

By Margaret Foster | *Online Only* | June 16, 2011

Thanks to a last-minute deal, five historic buildings associated with Louisville's bourbon industry will be renovated instead of demolished.

Philanthropists Steve Wilson and his wife, Laura Lee Brown, along with several other investors, will purchase four of seven threatened buildings from developer Todd Blue for \$4.85 million. Blue will contribute a fifth building to the Louisville Downtown Development Corporation, which in turn will give it to the group. The city will permit Blue to raze all but the facades of remaining two the buildings.



Whiskey Row, once the center of Louisville's bourbon industry

Credit: Preservation Kentucky

"It was really a win-win situation for everyone involved," says Craig Greenberg, a developer on the project. "We're very excited. It's a new opportunity to redevelop an important part of our downtown."

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer announced the deal on May 9; the sale is scheduled to be finalized in July. "This was just a tremendous example of the community coming together to save some historic buildings. It's been a difficult issue in Louisville for quite some time, [but now] we've got some great preservation-minded folks who have a good track record in Louisville."

Wilson and Brown, who live on a 1790s farm outside Louisville, transformed several abandoned 19th-century warehouses into the [21c Museum Hotel](#), which opened in downtown Louisville in 2006.

"[Wilson and Brown] have been very active in the preservation movement in Kentucky," says Rachel Kennedy, executive director of [Preservation Kentucky](#), which fought to preserve the Whiskey Row buildings. "We're just thrilled to see that five of the buildings," all of which are city landmarks, "are in the hands of someone who wants to take care of them."

Work could begin on Whiskey Row in two to three months, Greenberg says. "Our immediate goal is to stabilize and preserve... So we hope to do that as soon as possible after we close on the purchase of the property [next month]."

Because the cast-iron and brick buildings have been abandoned for decades, the developers have years of work ahead of them: "It'll be a significant project," Greenberg says. "All of the buildings are challenging."