25 RUSKIN ROW

NIXON JOHN BREEN HOUSE

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – DECEMBER 2009

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Date of Construction: 1928

Building Permit: 890/1928

Architect: Unknown

Contractor: Unknown

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

Although built more two decades after many of its neighbours, this large, finely-crafted home fits well into the neighbourhood.

The building includes the main, two-storey portion, a two-storey section attached to the northwest corner with a one-storey garage attached to its north side, all clad in smooth stucco. The front (east) façade of the main building features a centrally-located arched entrance with an ornate stone surround with metal grating on the second floor and metal accenting on the ground floor. Wide stone framing and metal grating also embellishes the two square headed windows on the lower level. Window openings on the second floor are a mixture with oval, arched and square headed designs. The low-pitched hip roof features overhanging eaves with exposed rafters.

Rear (west) and south façades, 2009

The remainder of the elevations continue the basic design and materials of the front.

The house stands on its original location, appears to be in good structural condition and does not appear to have suffered major exterior alterations.

This house is one of Winnipeg's finest examples of a Georgian Revival style residential design. The style has been described as the most popular revival style of the 20th century in Canada, used mainly in residential architecture and still popular today.[1] Influential New York City architects McKim, Mead and White, who utilized elements of the style to design residences for their most affluent clients, promoted the style in the early 1900s.[2] The style is based on English and Dutch colonial architecture from the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Distinguishing characteristics of the style include a symmetrical façade with a centrally located entrance as its focal point. Classical elements and detailing such as pediments, cornice-like eaves, Palladian windows, columns and porticos are common. Roofs could be hipped or gambrel-shaped and exterior cladding ranged from wood to brick and stone to stucco.[3]

Front (east) and north façades, 2009

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

The area known as Crescentwood in Fort Rouge developed slowly in the late 1900s because of poor connections, namely bridges to Winnipeg. The construction of the Maryland Street Bridge in 1895 assured this connection and triggered the area's modern development beginning with the construction of St. Mary's Academy shortly after the turn of the century. The earliest fine home of the area was barrister John H. Munson's house, 475 Wellington Crescent, built in 1888 and named Crescentwood. It was, for many years, the showpiece of the suburb, being enlarged on several occasions before and after occupation by the James A. Richardson family after Munson's death in 1918.[4] The home's name was used for the northwest corner of Fort Rouge and Crescentwood (named after a public contest) began its modern organization under the watchful eye of developer Charles Enderton (1864-1920). By 1902, he had accumulated a large amount of land in the western portion of Fort Rouge, subdividing it into large lots, formally establishing Wellington Crescent as a "grand drive". In September 1902, Enderton took an entire page of the Manitoba Free Press to promote his new subdivision and to outline the building restrictions therein. These caveats (attached to each registered lot) included: minimum setbacks from the street (18.3 metres, 60 feet); minimum completed values for homes ($6,000 on Wellington Crescent, $3,500 and $4,000 elsewhere); restrictions on non-residential structures; and number of homes per lot (one).

Land sales were slow in the early years, but the suburb eventually grew and flourished, and the Enderton caveats ensured the district remained a haven for Winnipeg's affluent. When economic growth slowed and then stopped after 1914, Enderton (and others) could not sell their extensive holdings (Enderton alone owned 133 vacant lots in 1917).[5]

Front (east) and south façades, 2009

Nixon John Breen (1872-1954) and his family were the original owners of this house. Breen was born in Ireland and came to Canada in 1882, settling in Winnipeg. He worked for the Lake of the Woods Milling Company in the early 1900s, became its Western General Manager in 1922 and its General Manager in 1931, retiring the following year. He had many other business interests but was best known as one of the founders (with his brothers W.W. and T.G. Breen) of Breen Motor Sales, one of the oldest sales agencies in Canada and well-known throughout Western Canada. The business was sold in 1954, the same year he died at his home on Ruskin Row.[6] The next owners were Dr. Kenneth C. McGibbon and his wife, who owned the property into the 1960s.[7]

Rear (west) façade, 2009

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

Under the Historical Buildings By-law, this building meets a number of important criteria:

- its historical importance- one of Crescentwood's and Winnipeg's well-appointed late 1920s single-family dwellings;
- its associations- its long-term connections to early and influential businessman N.J. Breen;
- its design- an excellent example of the Georgian Revival style;
- its architect- N/A;
- its location- contributes greatly to its historic streetscape and the neighbourhood; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display many of their original elements and design.

Front (east) façade, 1978

ENDNOTES:

1 L. Maitland et al, A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1992), pp. 152-153.

2 Identifying Architectural Styles in Manitoba (Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, 1991), pp. 26-27.

3 Ibid., p. 26.

4 R.R. Rostecki, Crescentwood: A History (Winnipeg, MB: Crescentwood Home Owners Association, 1993), pp. 44-46. Upon the death of Mrs. James A. Richardson in 1973, the family donated the house and the land to the City of Winnipeg. The buildings were demolished in 1976, the land became Munson Park.

5 Ibid., p. 36.

6 Winnipeg Free Press, December 27, 1954.

7 City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 12040056000, 1930-1975; and Henderson's Directories, 1930-1975.