



**351 ASSINIBOINE AVENUE
(Formerly 453 Qu'Appelle Avenue)**

THE KERR HOUSE

Historical Buildings Committee
City of Winnipeg

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351 ASSINIBOINE AVENUE THE KERR HOUSE

Commercial Winnipeg, in the year 1869, consisted of a few small buildings, the Hudson's Bay Company and precious little else. Within the span of four years however, downtown Winnipeg (and it could truly be called this) boasted 3,000 souls and some 900 buildings. December 1873 saw Winnipeg, originally a trading post at the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, become an incorporated city.¹ There were a number of reasons for this phenomenal growth: Federal subsidies to the new Provincial Government, Federal spending on Federal troops stationed at Fort Garry, the growth of the agricultural sector to the west, new Federal Government departments in the city, Indian treaty payments to local bands and the growth of quality residential sections in the city.² Growth was also aided by Winnipeg's virtual monopoly on warehousing/wholesaling of eastern Canadian manufactured goods travelling west through Winnipeg to the new markets.

Residential construction patterns originally followed little organization or reason. Houses or groups of houses were built throughout the vicinity of Fort Garry and the growing Main Street district. Men like John Christian Schultz however, began speculating their holdings (many had been given grants by the Hudson's Bay Company). Schultz went as far as to construct a number of inexpensive, relatively indistinguishable houses along Notre Dame Avenue east of Main Street (now Pioneer Avenue). These dwellings were then rented to railway men, labourers and warehousemen who began to stream into the city as its economic growth increased. Very few of these early structures remain due to their construction. As time went on, civic authorities began organizing residential areas of the city and one of the more important areas was north of Portage Avenue and west of the important warehouse district. In time this area, so close to all of Winnipeg's business and governmental offices, would also see one of Winnipeg's first parks, Central Park.

With the growth of a true community of people in Winnipeg came the need, the call and the construction of many social entities: hospitals, the aforementioned park and other recreational

facilities and schools. An early principal of one of Winnipeg's first schools, Carlton or South Central, was Francis Ferguson Kerr. In 1887 he, as an important member of society and one who would have to present himself as such, built a beautiful home on the outskirts of the fashionable Central Park district. This two storey brick dwelling, appraised at \$1,500 at the time of construction,³ suited one of Winnipeg's only principals well, for he chose the Second Empire style which was an extremely popular architectural form used by many of eastern Canada's prominent citizens.

STYLE:

The Kerr House at 351 Assiniboine Avenue is a fine example of a Second Empire style building that became popular in Canada by 1870. This school had its beginnings in France in the early 1850s in that country's "Second Empire" (that of Napoleon III). Paris exhibitions in the 1860s popularized it in England from where it moved to the United States and Canada. It has been described as a more modernistic approach to design than Gothic or Italianate, although architects often utilized elements of the latter in Second Empire works.⁴

In eastern Canada, especially southern Ontario, this style first came to prominence in public buildings (for example Government House in Toronto 1868). From government buildings the style was applied to commercial structures and finally into house designs. Here owners wanted to show their relative affluence and the style quickly became a statement of this status and power. As one study put it,

The intangible qualities embodied by these large structures, such as stability, wealth, progress, power and so forth, were desirable associations for aspiring gentlemen.⁵

This style, however, failed to become as prominent in Winnipeg and further west because of the short duration of the period's popularity. After 1880 Second Empire architecture became much rarer and only a few of this type of design were built after this date. For most of the west this date preceded serious housing construction by several years, if not a decade or more. Therefore there are only a few western examples remaining. While the Parks Canada study on Second

Empire buildings in Canada (1980) cannot be taken as a complete list, it is interesting to note that of 119 structures studied, only 7 are from Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. In Winnipeg there were several examples of this style due to the early date of some Winnipeg construction, but it never became a commercial or public building phenomenon. Winnipeg was too busy mimicking Chicago's commercial district which was concentrating on the Richardsonian Romanesque style. In residential areas Winnipeg had only a handful of these buildings, as witnessed by the fact that only nine are listed on the Building Inventory and of those, only six remain, one having been severely altered.⁶

The most prominent detail of a Second Empire building is the mansard or double roof. While visually appealing, this roof-type also was more practical than traditional patterns because it allowed more living space on the upper level. Other features usually found on such structures are dormer windows on the step slope, moulded cornices with decorative brackets below and a generous use of Italianate details. One or two storey bay windows were also often added and iron cresting was another ornamental feature. Porches were usually added, making the residence asymmetrical. Rusticated stone often completed this type of home at grade.

CONSTRUCTION:

This two storey building is found on the northeast corner of Balmoral Street and Qu'Appelle Avenue. The brick structure originally boasted an enclosed front porch entrance which has been demolished in favour of an open deck of approximately equal proportions. There was also a porch on the building's northwest corner along with a one storey frame enclosure at the rear, both of which have been removed. The foundation is of unfinished rubblestone and the building is approximately 40' long and 24' wide.⁷

DESIGN:

The design of this tidy little home in one of Winnipeg's earlier residential areas boasts many of the elements that identify Second Empire structures. The most recognizable feature evident is the straight mansard roof. On the face of this unique element are several dormer windows

completed with Doric columns. A pair of small round-headed windows sit within a dormer window above the bay window. Single windows complete the second storey. A small simple cornice separating the two storeys does not include brackets usually found on buildings of this type.

More elaborately ornamented is the first floor. The one storey bay window, a familiar design feature, is completed with projecting brick sills and segmented arches of radiating brick. Below each of the three windows in the bay is a modest, though pleasing, ornamental detail, three panels of angled corner projecting bricks. Also on the ground floor are raised brick quoins and the presence of two unmatched windows, one square and the other round-headed with brick drip moulding. Both windows on this west elevation have brick sills. On the east wall the two windows have seen alteration, reflected by the present position of the windows not directly underneath their drip mouldings. At grade the Kerr house utilizes unfinished rubblestone to provide rustication.

INTERIOR:

Approximately \$100,000 was spent in 1979⁸ to make the Kerr House into office space. In so doing, some of the interior elements were altered, but no significant structural changes were made. It remains, minus the cosmetic alterations, relatively true to its original design.

INTEGRITY:

The exterior is remarkably well preserved and gives an excellent account of the building's 1887 form. Structurally the house shows little sign of its one hundred year age.

STREETSCAPE:

Due to inevitable changes, 453 Qu'Appelle Avenue is now somewhat removed from like structures in the area. This said, it is still an important link between the prominent Central Park community of the 1880s and the present. It is also one of Winnipeg's least altered and oldest Second Empire houses.

ARCHITECT:

At this time, the architect of the Kerr House is unknown.

PERSON:

Francis Ferguson Kerr came to the city in 1887 as principal of Carlton School in Winnipeg School Division No. 1.⁹ This division had grown from 423 pupils, one school and four teachers, who were paid "as soon as collected"¹⁰ in 1876 to a division of enormous size, thus mirroring the city's growth. Carlton School was a three-and-a-half storey brick public school built in 1883 on Carlton Street between Graham Avenue and Hargrave Street. This school was demolished at the turn-of-the-century and replaced by a new Carlton School (also called South Central School) which was also built of brick.¹¹ This second school was destroyed in 1918 to make room for Winnipeg's former bus depot.¹²

Kerr remained as Principal of the school until 1893 when he apparently left the city. In 1891, prior to his departure, Kerr left his brick home and rented it out to several individuals: J.M. Clarke (license inspector) in 1891, Sylvester Godfrey in 1893 and W.S. Greenwood in 1894. The house stood empty in 1892.¹³ In 1895 Kerr, who owned the property until 1896, rented 453 Qu'Appelle to a salesman, Robert Farquhar who bought the home in 1896.¹⁴ He and his family lived here for three years and a Robert Magnus then took up residence at the address. Magnus was an inspector of weights and measures. In the post 1900 era there have also been numerous tenants of the Kerr House and a look at the building's occupants gives an excellent indication of the shift in the area's make-up from the more socially elite residents to a more heterogeneous

mix and finally the area bore little resemblance to its original composition. Painters, real estate agents, government employees, clerks and carpenters have all called 351 Assiniboine Avenue home.¹⁵

EVENT:

There is no known significant event connected with this structure.

CONTEXT:

Central Park, an irregularly shaped parcel of land north of Qu'Appelle Avenue between Edmonton and Carlton Streets, was acquired by the City of Winnipeg's Public Parks Board in 1893 for \$20,000. The 3.5 acre plot of land, in what would become the heart of Winnipeg, was, as one paper on urban green space put it, "recreation...initially provided for the upper classes".¹⁶ But one must also remember that this park and other urban parks in North America were "perceived as a means of increasing land values and the quality of city life".¹⁷ It is not surprising then that the area in the vicinity of Central Park, including the Kerr House, became one of the earliest centres of elite residential construction in the city. The area, as happened with many other areas of the city, slowly took on a different look, as suburban areas drew Winnipeg's elite outwards. The Kerr House is one of Winnipeg's few remaining Second Empire houses and also one of the area's last existing 'originals'. As such, it is an important building in the context of the area.

LANDMARK:

Architecturally unique, visually attractive and beautifully preserved, the Kerr House sits on an extremely busy corner and is a conspicuous structure to many.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ R. Bellan Winnipeg First Century. (Winnipeg 1978), p. 9.
- ² *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- ³ Assessment Rolls 2655/1887 (Ward 2).
- ⁴ V. and L. McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses. (New York 1984), p. 242.
- ⁵ C. Cameron and J. Wright, Second Empire Style in Canadian Architecture (Ottawa 1980).
- ⁶ The inventory houses still standing are: 158 Evanson Street (frame with stone foundation and bay window — good condition), 524 Balmoral Street (brick with bay window — poor condition), 60-62 Ellen Street (originally brick but severely altered— good condition), 123 Euclid Avenue (frame with stone foundation and bay window — fair condition), and 125 Euclid Avenue (brick veneer with bay window and stone foundation — fair condition).
- ⁷ Winnipeg Fire Atlas 1917 Vol. I, p. 114.
- ⁸ Building Permit 644/1979.
- ⁹ Henderson's Directory.
- ¹⁰ J.W. Chafe, An Apple for the Teacher (Winnipeg 1967), p. 15.
- ¹¹ Winnipeg Fire Plan 1917 Vol. I, p. 107.
- ¹² Winnipeg Free Press, 05 December 1964.
- ¹³ Henderson's Directory.
- ¹⁴ Assessment Rolls 2547/1896.
- ¹⁵ Henderson's Directory.
- ¹⁶ M.E. Cavett, et al, "Social Philosophy and the Early Development of Winnipeg's Parks" in Urban History Review, Vol. XI, No. 1, June 1982, P. 27.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

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Plate 1 – 453 Qu’Appelle Avenue, Kerr House, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 2 – 453 Qu’Appelle Avenue, Kerr House, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)