



**454 EDMONTON STREET**

**BENARD HOUSE**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

10 January 1986

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Straddling the corner of Cumberland Avenue and Edmonton Street is a large brick house whose design exploits the unusual acute angle of this intersection. This house at 454 Edmonton Street, and the one directly beside it to the south, were both erected in 1903. Elegant and costly homes, they reflect the sort of neighbourhood that bordered Central Park early in this century.

The site is located on the northwestern tip of the old Hudson's Bay Reserve. As part of their settlement in relinquishing control over their massive fur empire lands to the Crown, the Hudson's Bay Company negotiated to retain blocks of land for future sale. In the community of Red River, the company retained the lands around the once-important junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, including the site of Upper Fort Garry, and 450 acres of land north of the Assiniboine River. The western border of the Reserve was Colony Creek (close to Osborne Street), Balmoral Street to Notre Dame and returning to the banks of the Red River at the foot of Water Street. To ensure that the property would fetch a profitable price, the company sub-divided their lands into large lots (50 feet by 120 feet) and retained ownership until demand assured a good return.<sup>1</sup> The Reserve developed slowly, but as predicted, with large lots and gracious homes within its residential areas. For a number of years, the Reserve had no substantial rivals to its claim as the choicest residential district in the city. By the 1890s, the historic company had sold most of its interest in the land to smaller developers who strove successfully to maintain the prestige of the district.

Forming the western boundary of Central Park, Edmonton Street developed as a showpiece of beautiful homes, rather like the area south of Broadway. Large brick or frame houses predominated, mixed with the occasional duplex or small apartment block, with the soaring tower of Knox Church as the neighbourhood landmark. Wealthy local businessmen and their families populated the district, content with the proximity to downtown and with the range of services and institutions nearby.

The house at 454 Edmonton was erected in 1903 as a speculative venture for Walter R. and Edith Fish of Winnipeg. He was a travelling salesman for Gault Brothers and lived in the area. Upon its

completion, the house was promptly sold to Hermisdas and Louisa Benard, with Mrs. Fish holding the mortgage until it was paid off in 1906.<sup>2</sup> Hermisdas Benard, sometimes known as Henri, and "Ben" to his English-speaking friends, was a pioneer citizen of Winnipeg. He left the mixed farming district of St. Jean, Quebec, as a youth to move to Winnipeg in c.1872. For the next twenty years, he worked as a butcher before entering the hotel business in 1892. Benard purchased the Hotel du Canada on Lombard Avenue east of Main in 1895. The hotel, not especially large or opulent, was said to be a centre and refuge for French-speaking travellers on business in Winnipeg.<sup>3</sup> An amiable fellow, Benard was popular and successful as proprietor, and as a watering hole, the Hotel du Canada was a money-maker.<sup>4</sup>

Poor health forced Benard to sell the hotel in 1903 for a price of \$80,000. With this money, he was able to purchase the big house on Edmonton Street and settle into a brief retirement prior to death in 1906.<sup>5</sup> His wife, Louisa Benard, who had worked by his side at the hotel, continued to dwell in the house for many years. While there were no children, Hermisdas Benard had a nephew named Aime Benard who lived with his uncle at the hotel for many years. Having learned English, Aime carried on to become a real estate dealer, a hotelman and finally a large-scale farmer. He entered provincial politics as a member of the Legislative Assembly in 1907 for the rural riding of Iberville and was appointed to the Senate in 1917. Aime Benard died in 1938;<sup>6</sup> his son Leon is a retired Winnipeg judge.

Madame Benard lived out her days in the big house on Edmonton, and it remained in the Benard estate until it was sold in 1936.<sup>7</sup> Hard times during the Depression precluded a high resale price, leaving the house in the hands of a trust company and rented out, presumably still as a single family dwelling. In 1938 it was purchased by Watson Lytle, a contractor, who made some major alterations. The back kitchen was rebuilt and bathroom plumbing installed. A fire escape and fire doors from the third floor was added, implying the division of the house into apartments, or a rooming house.<sup>8</sup>

In 1944, Gregory Voth, an employee of Eaton's, purchased the house, which changed hands again in 1951 and 1959. From 1959 to 1975, it was owned and occupied by Frank Wenzel, a plumber, and

his wife Fanny. The house stood vacant for two years before being sub-divided into smaller rental units. It was purchased by its present owners in 1982 and has recently been stripped back to the brick walls to prepare for a complete renovation.

Erected during the 1903 building season, this house was designed by Joseph Greenfield. Like most architects who practised their profession in the nineteenth century in Winnipeg, Greenfield and his buildings are somewhat obscure. He did design the small warehouse block at 120 King Street (now Sparling Sales) in 1896. Greenfield was born in England in 1845, training and working there and in Toronto before relocating to Winnipeg in 1885.<sup>9</sup> He was associated with the firm of McCoskrie and Company, architects that worked in Winnipeg, Brandon and points between. Shortly after the construction of this house in 1903, Joseph Greenfield left private practise to become the Manitoba superintendent for Public Works for the Dominion government. He lived very near to this project in a home on Notre Dame Avenue and died in his retirement year in 1910.<sup>10</sup>

Greenfield employed contractors by the name of Malcom Brothers in partnership with S.B. Ritchie, both prominent building firms in the city. Built of solid brick on a limestone rubble foundation, the house measured 26 by 49 feet and was considered to be two and one half storeys high. Costing \$5,600 to build in 1903 dollars, this was an expensive and prestigious home.<sup>11</sup>

The house is Queen Anne in its design, a term loosely given to the cheerful chaos of Victorian domestic architecture. Its essential elements included an asymmetrical composition employing a variety of shapes, materials and colours. In this case, a polygonal turret with a tent roof provides variety to the roofline and calls attention to the corner location. Its impact on the facade is balance and countered by the oversized dormered gable on the south side. Together with a steeply pitched hip roof, these elements, each capped with either a finial or iron cresting, vie for the observer's eye. A two-storey porch, now greatly reduced, was highlighted by ornamental woodwork painted at least three contrasting colours. Lattice-work provided a circular frame for the second storey porch, approached from a small door at the top of the main stairway. Besides giving its residents an open spot to sit out, this second storey porch was also used to shake out mops and bedding at a time when sheets were changed far less frequently. The lower porch continues into a veranda which ran along

the main floor around the turret and across the north side. Paired wooden columns supported its broad roof and a balustrade of turned wood completed the design. Although such an extensive veranda as this darkened the ground floor interior, it was a room in itself in the summer months, providing a play area for children and a comfortable spot for reading or socializing.

Because of its location, the house faced in two directions. Besides its obvious front entrance, the Cumberland Avenue facade had an upper and lower set of bay windows and the veranda continued across this side. Surface decoration of the walls was slight, consisting mainly of an ornamental belt course below the eaves that acted as a frame for the small windows in the third storey of the turret. The windows form an important part of the design of the house, and were placed with due consideration. An oval window of leaded glass is found beside the front entrance, while similar glass forms the transom over a flat-headed window on the other side of the door as well as in the top of the bay windows. Small windows piercing the ground floor of the turret change to long windows on the second floor and were again diminished for the third floor. With the exception of the oval windows, the others have limestone sills. When the house was new, the brick was very pale and contrasted with the dark shingles of the various roofs and with the detailing in the woodwork of the porch.

Within the single-panelled front door, one enters a small hallway. To the left is the stairway, to the right a large parlour that opens onto the dining room. In the dining room is a fireplace with a large wooden mantle and bay windows opening on the north side. At the rear of the house is a large kitchen that juts beyond the rectangular plan and may have contained either a separate pantry or a woodshed. By 1918, there was also an attached garage of wood.<sup>12</sup> A second smaller staircase at the rear of the house gave access to the bedrooms and bathroom of the second floor while a single stairway led to the third floor. This may have been planned as the servants' quarters. As the underside of a busy roofline, the third floor offers interesting angles and variable ceiling heights.

While the house was fully wired for electric lights when it was built in 1903, its owners took no chances. Electrical power was very subject to blackouts in the early years. Thus, the fixtures were also hooked up to gaslines and each fixture would have been designed to use one source or the other. Incandescent light did not fully win the competition for domestic lighting until about 1910, and for

about twenty years before, gas and electric lights were both common and occasionally even co-existed, as in this case.<sup>13</sup> The original fixtures have not survived at 454 Edmonton.

Large and heavily ornamented, this house complemented its neighbours along Edmonton Street. We are fortunate that a photographer compiling a book of the city's features was particularly impressed with this neighbourhood and photographed it thoroughly in c.1904. This fine house and a delightful frame house next door are among the few fragments that remain from this age of elegance. Mirroring the shifting fortunes of the district, this house had been allowed to deteriorate substantially before its recent rehabilitation. While the applied decoration of the large veranda has not survived, all the structural features of the facade of the old house are intact. Pocket doors, the mantle and a portion of the main stairway are all that remain of the interior.

This house represents the boom-time growth and speculation that typified the earliest years of this century. "Ben" Benard was a young man whose romantic dreams of making a new life in the western frontier became a reality in his contribution to the building of a new society. In its original form with its highly ornamented porch and veranda, this house was an excellent example of the Queen Anne style of residential architecture prevalent in North America from 1880 to 1900. Even in its present form, it is a good illustration of an architectural style of which Winnipeg has few remaining examples. Lastly, this house on Edmonton Street is a witness to an era when families and a city downtown co-existed comfortably and its restoration may signal the rebirth of this era.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Alan F.J. Artibise and Edward H. Dalh, Winnipeg in Maps 1816-1972 (Ottawa: National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada, 1975), p. 24-25.
2. Land titles search for 454 Edmonton Street, Lot 160, Block 4, Plan 129.
3. "Deces", Le Manitoba, 10 October 1906, p. 3.
4. Day Blotter, Hotel du Canada, 14 October 1895 to 28 February 1899. Courtesy of Mr. Bill Lobchuk. A journal entry of accounts in 1898 show profits of \$2,646 from the bar, more than twice to \$1,252 return from the hotel room, p. 64.
5. "Obituary", Manitoba Free Press, 4 October 1906, p. 5.
6. "Senator Benard Dies Suddenly in his 64th Year", Winnipeg Tribune, 10 January 1938 and "Notable Career Ends", Winnipeg Free Press, 10 January 1938. Also, The Canadian Parliamentary Guide 1936, Ottawa, 1936, p. 81.
7. Land titles, op. cit.
8. City of Winnipeg Building Permits No. 2972, 20 October 1938. The permit does not state that the house is being sub-divided.
9. "Dominion Official Dies in Winnipeg", Manitoba Free Press, 4 November 1910.
10. Brandon, Manitoba and Her Industries (Winnipeg: Steen and Boyce Publishers), 1882.
11. Permits, op. cit., No. 24, 2 March 1903. The permit is missing but a description appears in the 1903 abstracts.
12. Fire Insurance Plans, The Western Canada Fire Underwriters' Association, 191, map 115, (dated February 1918).
13. Melissa L. Cook and Maximilian L. Ferro, "Electric Lighting and Wiring in Historic American Buildings". Technology and Conservation, Spring, 1983, p. 29.

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Plate 1 – 454 Edmonton Street, the residence of Hermisdas and Louisa Benard, and its neighbour on the left, cA.1904. A front walk has not yet been added to the Benard house, nor has the lawn been seeded. (Courtesy of the Povincial Archives of Manitoba, N9027.)



Plate 2 – 454 Edmonton Street without most of its elaborate porch, ca.1978. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 3 – Edmonton Street, ca.1905. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N9028.)



Plate 4 – Edmonton Street, ca.1903. The closest building is a duplex, 368-370 Edmonton Street. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N7147.)