



**31 McBETH STREET
(FORMERLY LOT 33 RED RIVER BOULEVARD)**

ROBERT McBETH, JR. HOUSE

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

15 November 1984
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For nearly 170 years, the name McBeth has been associated with the community of Kildonan. In fact, the McBeth family descendent has continuously occupied this property on Red River Boulevard since it was first deeded from the crown in 1815.¹ Alexander McBeath, born ca.1740 and died ca.1847², the great grandfather of the contemporary family, came to Red River under the auspices of Lord Selkirk's settlement. He and his wife Christiana³ and young family left a life of feudal poverty in Scotland for a new life in the wilds of Rupertsland. Selkirk had acquired land for his settlement from a reluctant Hudson's Bay Company. The story of the many tribulations of these early Selkirk Settlers has been well told. Suffice to say that those who stayed and formed the nucleus of Red River as a community were a tenacious and tough-minded lot.

The McBeath (later McBeth) property, surveyed by Peter Fidler, was well down the river from Fort Douglas, the defensive and trading nucleus of the settlement. Settlers' lots were strung north along the Red River, and characterized by narrow river frontage that ran back to the hay lands on the open prairies.⁴ The lots were further divided for later generations of children, but the pattern of long, narrow river lots remained the dominant feature. The river provided transportation and communication, while a trail gave settlers easy access on foot. Subsistence farming, the purchase of buffalo meat from Métis hunters and fish from the rivers, provided a livelihood for the settlers.

Typical of the first generation of Kildonan settlers, Alexander McBeath farmed his property, raised his family and contributed to the stability of the community which eventually thrived. His son, Robert Senior, born in Scotland in ca.1800, carried on with the farming tradition but also operated a small store from his home.⁵ Robert McBeth Junior, born on the Kildonan property in 1848, was the grandson of the original Selkirk settler and the builder of the present house.

This Robert, one of several surviving children to carry on the name, was heir to the family property. He was raised on the homestead, later assisting with the store, but eventually turning all his attention to farming the rich alluvial soil. The family lived in a large two-storey Red River log house that was flooded before it was even completed in 1852. These were especially gratifying

years in the settlement, despite the flood, because the settlers' first church of their own faith, still in existence just a few chains upriver from the McBeth property, was the fulfilment of a dream for the Kildonan Scots and immediately became the religious, cultural, educational and social centre of the community. The McBeth family was heavily involved in the church.

During the upheaval of Red River society in 1869-1870, Riel imprisoned several of his more vocal and influential opposition. One of these men, John Christian Schultz, was leader of the faction who advocated full union with English Canada. A powerful man of strong constitution, Schultz managed to escape incarceration in Upper Fort Garry and secretly made out for eastern Canada, on foot, to tell the government there of the situation. Upon escape, Schultz hurt his ankle and managed to hobble as far as Kildonan. He stayed overnight in the McBeth House, resting up and assembling supplies to prepare him for the long journey ahead. It is said that rebel patrols traced him to the house, but out of respect for the McBeths, no attack was made and Schultz was able to slip away the next day. This story has been relayed by the sons of Robert McBeth Senior, as well as by other narrators, so there is basis in fact to this event. As for Schultz, he made it safely to Ottawa and in 1889 was made Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba in recognition of his years of work in support of Canada.

Robert McBeth Jr., together with his bride Helen Anderson, inherited the original Selkirk grant. He also purchased 236 acres nearby for a total of 400 acres on Lot 33.⁶ Some of the other McBeth sons farmed parts of Lots 34 and 35 and Lots 189 to 191.⁷ Robert and Helen McBeth had five children, one of whom died in 1909 at the age of 22. As well as farming, Robert cut, hauled and sold the timber on his new land. He served as a member of the Council of the R.M. of Kildonan for twelve years and as a school trustee for 21 years. As a farmer who practised "scientific methods" (a popular phrase at the time), McBeth was also president of the Kildonan and St. Paul's Agricultural Society and a notary public.⁸

In 1912, Robert McBeth Jr. built a splendid new home for his family, a stone's throw from the 1852 log house, but was only to enjoy it for a short period before his sudden death in 1914.⁹

McBeth commissioned Winnipeg contractor William W. Cross to design and construct the new home. Little is known about Cross except that he clearly made a healthy income from his contracting business. If his address on Yale Avenue is a clue,¹⁰ Cross may have been responsible for constructing homes in the burgeoning Crescentwood district. This home would fit in nicely with that neighbourhood at the time. It is obvious that Cross and other builders made extensive use of pattern books, readily available for building plans and specifications.

Built of solid brick on a rubble stone foundation, the exterior walls are red pressed brick. The average exterior measurements of the house are 45 feet by 33 feet. Despite the fact that the property was then two miles north of the City limits, arrangements were made for a sewer outlet and full plumbing. The water was supplied by a well, pumped into the basement by an electric motor and stored in three tanks that maintained a steady pressure of 50 pounds. There was also a hot water heating system. Water was pumped to the kitchen and bathroom on the upper floors by means of two small hand pumps which are still in operation.

The basement also contains a cold storage room and a room for storing vegetables. Laundry tubs and an electric washing machine were installed as well as a separate stove to heat the water in the summer months, to avoid using the furnace. The ground floor layout includes an entrance foyer, a front hall with a fireplace, a small den with built-in bookshelves, a large rectangular living room and a dining room lined with quarter-cut oak panelling, both with live fireplaces, a pantry and a kitchen. A large screened veranda runs from the front entrance across two sides of the house, looking toward the river. There is also a summer dining room opening off the main dining room for warm weather meals. The rich warm glow of blond oak is seen everywhere in the ground floor, especially in the front hall and the dining room. The leaded glass of an inside door in the hall features a graceful tulip motif that is repeated in the bookcase doors of the den as well as in a recessed hutch in the dining room. The three fireplaces are all different, with a formal Adams style used in the living room and more casual tiled fireplaces with handsome oak mantels in the hall and dining room. These two fireplaces share a single flue.

The dining area is large and irregularly shaped. One wall is taken up with the fireplace and

recessed hutch, with a large bay on the west wall that looks over the fields to the setting sun. The other two walls continue the oak wainscoting. An elegant chandelier of 1912 vintage is suspended in the centre of the room.

The dining room also features large bay windows that open onto the river and the forest between. With its built-in shelves and hand pump, the pantry is a perfectly preserved and functioning museum of early country life. The kitchen to the rear of the house is suitably large and inviting for informal family meals. There is a second staircase up from the kitchen and down to the basement.

Four bedrooms and a bathroom occupy the second floor. Each bedroom has a large clothes closet with built-in shelves and the door fitted with a full-length mirror. The hardware, light fixtures and beds were all of brass while the woodwork was finished in white enamel. The bathroom has a tiled floor with walls of white enamelled brick. A sleeping porch extends over the summer dining veranda on the north side of the house. In the attic floor was a sewing room and two bedrooms, lit by the large curved dormer windows. A laundry chute from the third floor and the second floor bathroom fired dirty clothing down to the basement. The McBeths installed a telephone in their house.¹¹

All the furniture for the house was supplied by the City's biggest furniture dealer, John Leslie. Leslie was born in Scotland, partially raised in Ontario and came to Winnipeg in 1880. By 1885 he was able to open his own retail furniture store, which he built up into one of the biggest furniture operations of western Canada.¹² If Leslie supplied the McBeth furniture, it would be one of top quality and durable design.

The McBeth house is large and spacious. Although built as a farmhouse, it would be equally compatible on a City street. With its many porches and verandas, bracketed eaves, bay windows, chimneys and dormers, the big brick house presents an informal air of great comfort. Both inside and out, a startling degree of integrity has been maintained. The layout, hardware, surface finishing, fixtures and function are all original to its completion in 1913.

The grounds around the McBeth house have changed over the years, however. A small garage is all that remains of the cluster of farm out-buildings including barns, coops and a stable.

Evidence of the 1852 log structure is near to the surface beside the house. A grass tennis court was to be found south of the house. The lot itself continues in a flood plain that slopes down in a forest to the river.

Although Robert McBeth died in 1915, his widow and children continued living in the new house. The four McBeth offspring grew up and lived all their lives in this house, continuing the McBeth occupation of the property to the present. The eldest child, Robert J., was born on the old homestead in 1880. Following his education, he was employed with the Canadian Northern Railway in 1901, stayed with the company through its reorganization as the CNR and became the district freight agent in 1929. He retired from this position in 1945 and died in 1959 at the age of 78 years.¹³

The next eldest child was Margaret Elliott McBeth, born in c.1881. She was well-known both in the Old Kildonan Community and in Winnipeg. Following her education at the church school in Kildonan, she received a Master of Arts degree from the University of Manitoba. For 34 years she gave creative and distinguished service as an English teacher at Kelvin High School. As well, Margaret McBeth was president of the Manitoba Education Association and of the Winnipeg Teachers Association. She was on the executive board of the Lord Selkirk Association and of the Manitoba Historical Society. Devoted and active to the church, Miss McBeth was on the Kildonan Board of Management, 36 years as superintendent of the Sunday School and 40 years as clerk of the congregation. Like the rest of her family, she was buried in Kildonan cemetery in 1960.¹⁴

Mary Janett (Jenny) taught at Norquay School and then for many years at Luxton School. The youngest child, Helen Isabel, graduated from Manitoba College in 1915 and enjoyed a long and distinguished career teaching at Isaac Newton School. It is this youngest daughter, Isabel McBeth, who carries on the direct lineage on the family property.

Because this latest generation were all professional people, they did not continue with the farm that their parents and grandparents had worked. The land was gradually sold off in parcels. Because daily trips into town were sometimes onerous, two of the siblings lived in town during the week and returned to the home only on weekends and holidays for a number of years.

During these years, the district around the McBeth property remained rural. The Rural Municipality of Old Kildonan, which includes this lot, separated from West Kildonan in 1921 in order to maintain its rural identity. As recently as 1970, there were only 350 homes on its 5,000 acres. While it had two police cars, a volunteer fire department and some snow clearing equipment, nonessential services and long-range planning did not exist.¹⁵ Old Kildonan joined the rest of Winnipeg in the Unicity arrangement of 1974 and has experienced considerable residential development since then.

As the sole remaining owner of the house, Miss Isabel McBeth found it increasingly difficult to maintain the building, especially in winter. For approximately the last ten years, Miss McBeth, who is now 90, has only lived in the family home in the summer. Because it was unoccupied in the cold months, the heat was turned off which caused heaving and disintegration of the concrete floor in the basement. In turn, this has caused some problems in the foundation and the brick walls above ground. The building is now vacant, and the furniture has been moved out. Now owned by the City of Winnipeg, the McBeth house has not been boarded up, but is under constant surveillance of the nearby neighbours. There has been no vandalism to date, in part, because of its remote and secluded location.

The significance of this building goes beyond its four walls to the very roots of the early European settlement of Manitoba. The link with the Selkirk settlers is not romantic nostalgia, but a direct and pervasive tradition which has influenced the lives of several generations of McBeths as well as being a contributing factor to the present urban community. Despite the structural deterioration in the basement, the house is a remarkably well-preserved example of typical residential design of the early 1900s.

FOOTNOTES:

1. William Grove Speechly Papers, P.A.M. MG14 C121. Copies of 1818 census from the Selkirk Papers.
2. There are numerous discrepancies with the names and dates of birth and death of many of the McBeath or McBeth family within the published biographies and articles.
3. Alexander's wife is listed as both Christie Gordon and Christiana Gunn, who was born ca.1762 and, according to one account, died at the age of 106. Although both Alexander and his wife are reportedly buried at St. John's Anglican Church cemetery, there is no record of either headstone.
4. W.J. Healy Women of Red River - The Women's Canadian Club Winnipeg 1923, p. 55.
5. "Another Old Settler Gone," Robert McBeth Senior obituary, Manitoba Free Press, 21 August 1886, p. 4.
6. "Robert McBeth" in Frank Schofield The Story of Manitoba Vol. II The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company Winnipeg 1913, p. 349.
7. Speechly Papers, op. cit., genealogy.
8. Schofield op. cit., p. 349-50.
9. Manitoba Free Press, 31 January 1914, p. 13.
10. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg - W.W. Cross, contractor, resides at 54 Yale Avenue.
11. This description was from "Fine Brick Residence Replaces Frame House" Manitoba Free Press 1 March 1913 p. 11.
12. "Prominent Man of Business Dead" Manitoba Free Press 15 February 1915.
13. "Robert J. McBeth" obituary Winnipeg Tribune 3 October 1960.
14. "Margaret McBeth, Retired Teacher" Winnipeg Tribune 3 October 1960.
15. Bill Burdeyny "Old Kildonan is Booming" Winnipeg Tribune 14 February 1970.

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Plate 1 – 31 McBeth Street, McBeth House, 1984. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

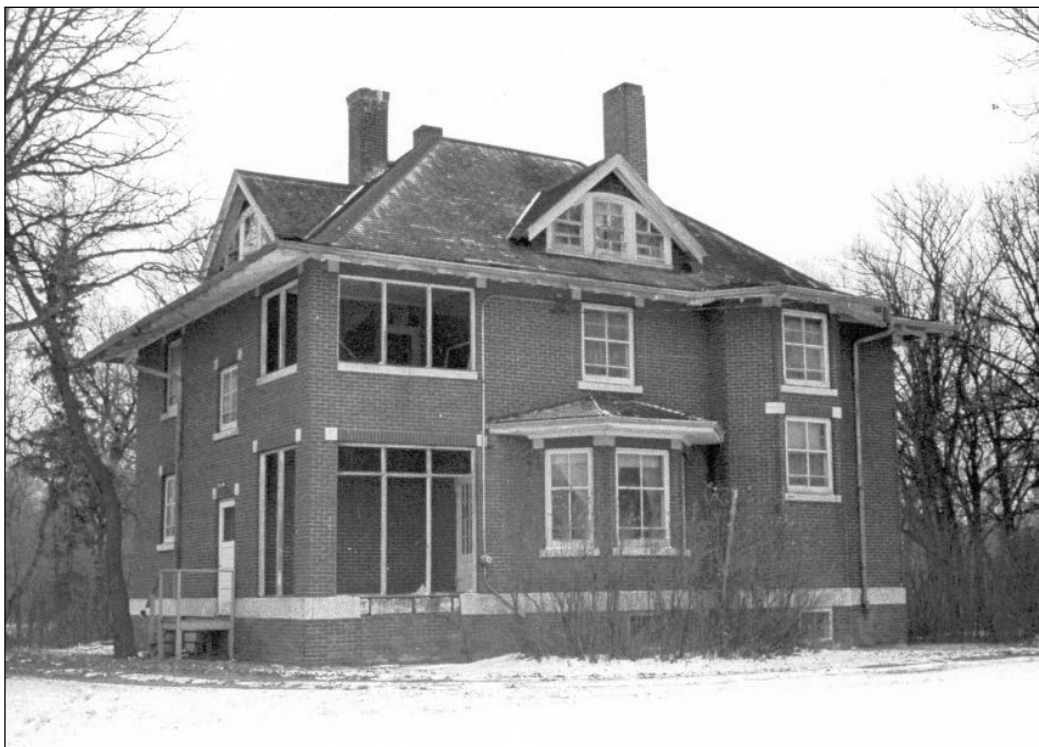


Plate 2 – McBeth House, north elevation, 1984. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 3 – Dining room, 1984. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)



Plate 4 – Detail of the fireplace in the living room, 1984. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 5 – Glass panel in a foyer door, 1984. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

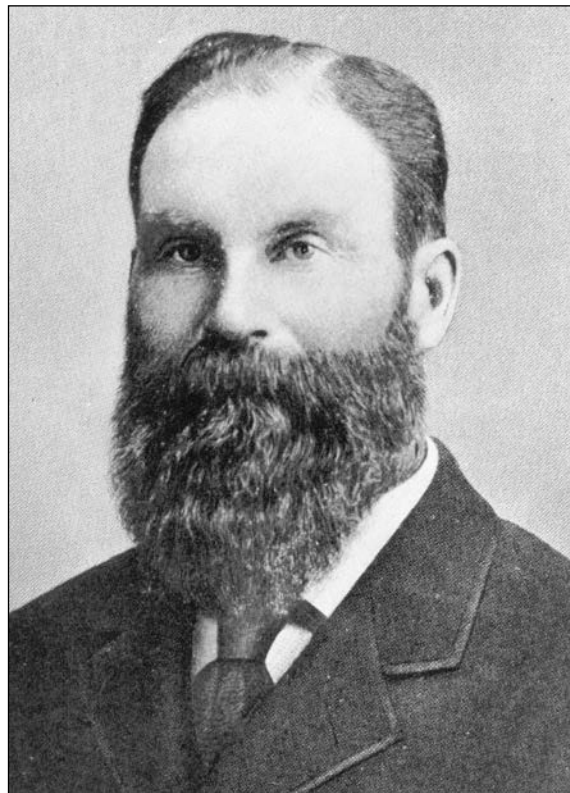


Plate 6 – Robert McBeth, the builder of the house, ca.1913. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 7 – Robert McBeth Sr. and family in front of the 1850s McBeth House, Lot 33, Parish of Kildonan, ca.1885. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 8 – The McBeth farm, Lot 33, in the 1880s. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)