



THE CARON HOUSE
50 CASS STREET
(FORMERLY 71 XAVIER DRIVE)

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

February 25, 1980

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The Caron farmhouse was erected by one of the founding families of the present suburb of Charleswood and represents to that neighbourhood the early days of buffalo hunts and ox carts.

Displaced by a government decision to exclude Pembina from within the Canadian boundary, many Métis moved north after 1823 to settle along the banks of the Assiniboine;¹ St. Charles was one of these settlements. A Catholic mission was established in c.1859, which became a nucleus for further development. A permanent church and a parish priest gave a stability and strength to St. Charles. The province of Manitoba entered Confederation in 1870 under the premise of equal rights to the French and English languages, but immigration from Ontario and elsewhere quickly diluted the French fact and eroded the dual rights of law. In an effort to counter the English and Protestant tide, Bishop Taché of St. Boniface launched plans to bring in settlers from Québec and from France. Many towns in southern Manitoba stand as a statement of his success and that of his various agents in the field of immigration.

The first families which migrated from Québec arrived to homestead at St. Charles in 1876.² They must have written back to friends and relatives in the town of Yamachiche, as they were soon joined by others from that area. In 1880, two groups of Carons moved to St. Charles and began to farm. These were George Caron and his wife Virginie, and Virginie's brother Charles Caron (a distant cousin of George) and his wife Amadine Lafleche. Jointly, they purchased 2,400 acres of land in river lots south of the Assiniboine and built a house for the two families.³ The purchase of such a large parcel of land probably indicates that the Carons had a workable amount of capital from the start, as they were all from established farms in Québec.⁴ Sawn and dressed lumber was easily available from Winnipeg so it may be that this first house was of frame construction rather than of sod or Red River style. A poll of pioneers who built homestead dwellings before 1900 indicates that sod and logs in some combination were more frequently used, and a frame house would follow in the future.⁵ However, George Caron and his family continued to live in this original house until they built one of their own in 1901, which indicates that this early house was of solid construction.

The Caron farmhouse under consideration is the second house built by the Carons. It is large, two and one-half storeys, and made of brick veneer. To a rural, pioneer society, houses of these dimensions were a statement of wealth and success, symbolic to class-conscious Victorians.⁶ It was rare for a family to move from a log house to a stone or brick house without occupying a frame house as an intermediate step. For George Caron and his family, their new farm house was a status well-earned.

The Carons were solid farmers, with generations of knowledge, and proved to adapt well to dry-land farming in the prairie west. They worked lots 71 and 72, which formed the easternmost portion of the original purchase. Other families from the Yamachiche area also settled in St. Charles, including the prominent Lafleche family.⁷ On both sides of the river, they joined the Métis farmers and carried on the Red River tradition of river lot farms. The proximity of the district to Winnipeg caused it to be developed much faster than most rural areas, and the French population was soon integrated with settlers of diverse background. As the waterways diminished in importance as a communications network, the groups to the north and south of the Assiniboine took on separate identities and both were eventually given municipal status. Still, the Carons and other Catholic settlers on the Charleswood side of the river continued to be members of the old St. Charles mission parish on the north bank, even after all-weather roads connected their community eastward to the city.

Russenholt's history of the district of Assiniboia describes George Caron and his cousin Alfred as dairy farmers,⁸ but they were also involved in mixed farming at one stage. George Caron, as well as operating a successful farm and raising his four daughters, was appointed assessor for the Assiniboia Council, at a time when the district covered land north and south of the river from Maryland Street in Winnipeg out to Headingley. In 1901, George was elected Reeve of Assiniboia and served three consecutive one-year terms.⁹ It was during this period that he moved his family from the original homestead house and built the present brick house.

In June 1907, at the age of fifty-six, George Caron was appointed as Provincial Inspector of Public Institutes of Manitoba. His papers for the period of his appointment survive in the archives. They

show a public-spirited man whose time was pulled in many directions, and there is a massive amount of correspondence. Although there were only three institutions under his care, the asylums in Brandon and Selkirk and the Portage home for incurables, Caron's scope took in far more than inspection alone. He saw to it that the three were running smoothly and receiving monies according to administration by Bob Rogers' Ministry of Public Works. The provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta as well as the North-West Territories paid joint maintenance costs to place their patients in Manitoba institutions. Caron administered the estates of the incapacitated patients until an Estates General was created. Indian patients in the institutions were arranged through the Indian Commissioners of the federal government and besides all this, Caron also had to supervise labour disputes with the staff, and major acquisitions to the institutions.¹⁰ Each area received his attention.

Caron died while still Inspector in August, 1912. He was then 61 years old and had been operated on to remove some gallstones.¹¹ His wife, Virginie, and two daughters were still on the farm. Emma Caron continued to live at the farm until the 1940s, but then sold the farmhouse and what remained of the river lots. The house and a piece of land were owned by Norman and Wilma Fraser who sold it to the city in c.1978. The house is now isolated from the housing development around it by Caron Park. It is in its original location on the south bank of the Assiniboine, directly opposite St. Charles church and the old novitiate.

The exterior of the house is prairie vernacular in its style and bears no hints of the Québec origins of its builders. The design for the farmhouse was likely chosen from a pattern book, with adaptations made for the Carons' particular requirements. There are photographs of several other farmhouses from the early 1900 period in the Manitoba Archives which bear a fundamental resemblance to the Caron house in the use of style, materials, and layout.¹² Most of these farmhouses show a predilection to Victorian detail and architectural ornamentation that is absent in the Caron house and it is here that the Francophone influence may be seen. The house is not without individuality however. The front door is recessed to allow for a two-storey porch which shows some handsome woodwork in the balustrade and frame which is supported on classic pillars. There is a door leading onto the second storey balcony (screened in later years) which was designed for airing bedding and

clothes, and was considered a very progressive feature.¹³ All four sides of the hipped roof have large triangular gables which are detailing so as to resemble pediments and have been stuccoed to imitate stack-wall construction. There is a rear porch which may have been a woodshed. It is reported that there is still some fine woodwork in the interior.¹⁴

The choice of a brick veneer over solid brick had the advantage of economy, but it was also seen as an effective and modern method of construction. According to the Nor'West Farmer's article on farmhouses in 1900:

A solid brick wall is sure to be damp on the inside if not properly constructed, but with a brick veneer it is quite the reverse, owing to the fact that there are two air spaces in the walls, one between the brick and sheathing and another between the sheathing and plaster, which effectually shuts out all dampness and renders the house both warm in winter and cool in summer.¹⁵

It would seem that at the time, George Caron could afford whatever he wanted in the construction of his farmhouse.

The Caron name was integral to the pioneer development of Charleswood. A model farmer, George Caron was also closely involved with the government of the district and later held an important and responsible position with the province. The Caron extended family is still influential and there are ten families related to the early Caron pioneers who presently live in the Charleswood area. The farmhouse is the last identifiable element of the early settlement which remains in the boundaries south of the Assiniboine.

FOOTNOTES:

1. W.L. Morton Manitoba: A History, University of Toronto Press, 1975, p. 62.
2. Abbé Pierre Picton "La Paroisse de Saint-Charles Sur L'Assiniboine", unpublished paper in the files of the St. Boniface Archives, n.d.
3. Lori Douglas "The Caron and Lafleche Families of St. Charles Parish", unpublished paper for the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba, May, 1977.
4. Loc. cit.
5. Kathleen M. Taggart, "The First Shelter of Early Pioneers", Saskatchewan History, Vol. XI, No. 3 (Autumn, 1958), p. 81.
6. Lyle Dick W.R. Motherwell's Stone House: A Structural History, Manuscript Report No. 267, Parks Canada, 1978, p. 5.
7. Douglas, op. cit.
8. E.S. Russenholt, The Heart of the Continent, MacFarlane Communication Services, Winnipeg, 1968, p. 212.
9. Douglas, op. cit. Charles Caron, a cousin, had served a term on the council in 1883.
10. Inspector of Public Institutions, Letterbooks 1907, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, passim.
11. Obituary, Winnipeg Tribune, August 8, 1912.
12. Boisevain Community Archives Collection, no. 251; the Archibald McLaren Farm, 1907, in the district of Carberry; and the J. Ferris House, 1899, near the town of Macdonald. Provincial Archives of Manitoba Photograph Collection. Copies on file.
13. The Farmer's Advocate, Vol. 33, May 5, 1898, p. 198.
14. Verna Van Roon, Charleswood Historical Society, in a brief on the historic resources of Charleswood, n.d.
15. The Nor'West Farmer, September 5, 1900.

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Plate 1 – The Caron farmhouse, 1976. (Courtesy of Verna Van Roon, Charleswood Historical Society.)



Plate 2 – Front (north) façade, which faces the Assiniboine River, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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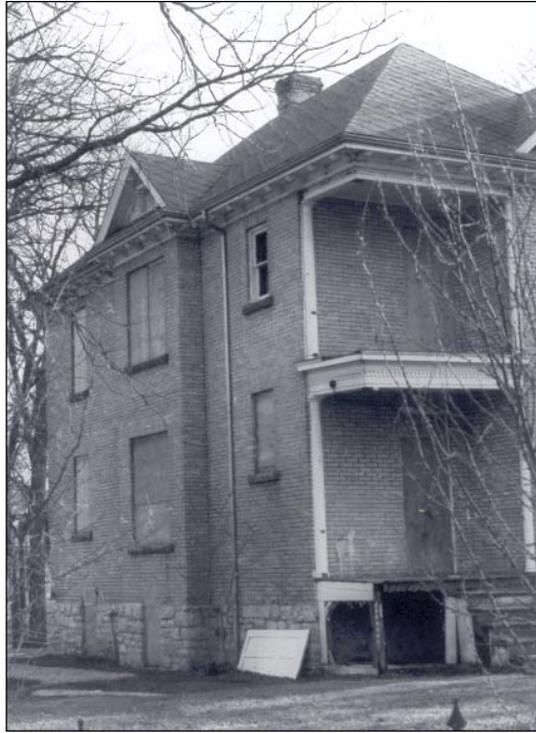


Plate 3 – Front (north) façade, with missing porch elements, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)



Plate 4 – Rear (south) and east façades, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 5 – Rear (south) façade, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)



Plate 6 – Rear (south) and west façades, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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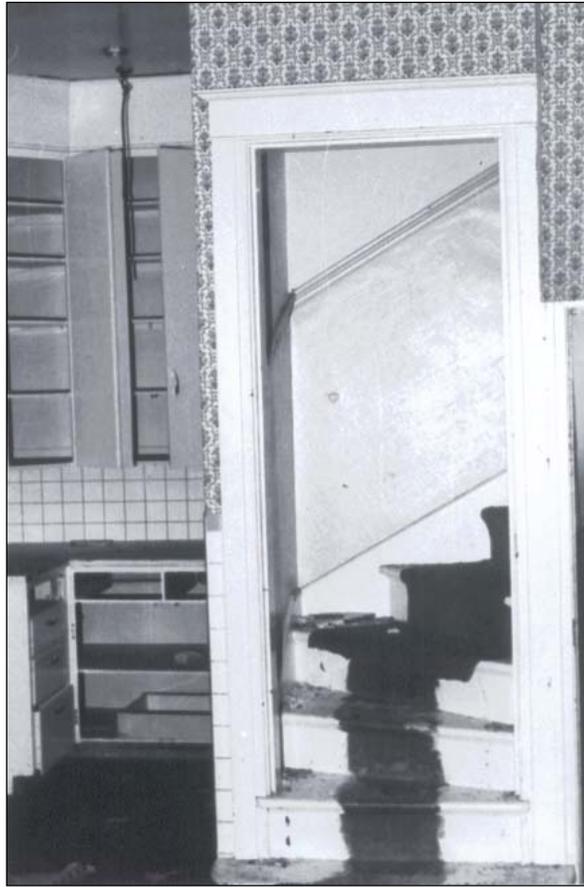


Plate 7 – Interior, kitchen and staircase, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)