



165 RUE LAVERENDRYE

MAISON KITTON

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

25 August 1982

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North St. Boniface, the area sandwiched between Provencher and the east bank of the Red River, is the oldest residential district of the original French community. Since its construction in 1878, this house remained in that historical neighbourhood, but it is presently on its second site.

Originally, the house of the Alexander Kittson family was on the north side of Provencher at the corner of Rue du Collège.¹ The house can be found in a map of St. Boniface drawn in 1880. Across the wide boulevard, set behind landscaped gardens, was the Collège de Saint Boniface, the institution that still lends its name to the cross street. Down Provencher ran the tracks of the west's first rail link to the outside world, with the terminal closer to the river and Taché. Within walking distance of the cathedral, this site was central to the development of this district. After 1905, it looked across Collège onto the grounds of the new City Hall, the view never blocked by another dwelling.

In 1878, Alexander Kittson² was the father of a young family. Born to a famous Red River family in 1853, Kittson's family had settled south of the American-Canadian border. Alexander Kittson, however, spoke fluent French and took his education at the Collège in St. Boniface. His wife, Elise Gingras, was also French and following their marriage in 1875, it was logical for the young couple to settle in St. Boniface.³ At the age of twenty-six, Kittson was elected in 1879 to the provincial legislature to represent the Métis community of Ste. Agathe. Here he gained the reputation of solidly representing the interests of the French and Métis population — (Kittson himself was of mixed Scottish and Métis descent); he was re-elected by acclamation.⁴ Kittson also owned a real estate company jointly with M. LaRivière, situated at the corner of Provencher and Taché.⁵ As well, he was treasurer of the newly-formed Municipality of St. Boniface, treasurer of a colonization company, and on the executive of local cultural organizations.⁶ When he died suddenly of smallpox in 1883, the funeral was a major event, with the English papers describing Kittson as "an exemplary young man of steady habits, obliging and very much esteemed".⁷

Alexander Kittson's prominence was due in part to his father, Norman Kittson. The elder Kittson

played a formative role in the Red River colony in the field of transportation and development. Evolving from a fur trader in the American Fur Company, the Québec-born Kittson branched into free trade and supplying between Red River and his post near Pembina.⁸ This was in direct competition to the legal monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company. During the 1840's, Kittson and a handful of other traders ran a network of ox-carts, bringing furs south to markets and supplies north from St. Paul.⁹ These traders broke the HBC's monopoly by a court decision in 1849. In the 1850s, Norman Kittson turned his hand to politics, first as a senator for Minnesota and later as the mayor of the booming city of St. Paul. This relatively sedate life must not have pleased him for in the 1860s he again launched a pioneer business by introducing the first regular steamboat service between St. Paul and Winnipeg. This was at a time when the American Railways had pushed as far west as Minnesota, making this north-south link both economically and politically very important to Winnipeg. His steamer "International" is celebrated in Manitoba's history. The axis pull to the United States became an important factor in the events leading to the formation of Manitoba in 1869-70, because the west had little real communication with anyone but the Yankees.

Norman Kittson also terminated the steamboat era through a partnership with James Hill in the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad.¹⁰ This gave Winnipeg its first rail link, following the old ox-cart routes up from St. Paul. The line, brought through in 1878, did not cross the Red River, but ran through St. Boniface down Provencher and past the newly-constructed house of his son Alexander. The elder Kittson died a millionaire in 1888; some say that he built the house for his son.

The year that the rails came through was the year of the Kittson house construction, 1878. The contractor's name was George Couture,¹¹ a local builder who erected several homes in the district. The house is wood frame, two storeys high, and covered in a narrow wood siding. With the front door centred down one side, the gabled ends ran across the lot, so that the front faced Collège and the parlour side faced Provencher.

The boxy appearance of the house was countered by several features. A bay window, evident on the 1880 map sketch, creates interest on the façade as well as a pleasant nook inside. The windows were given a manoured pediment of wood painted in contrast, a style that was tremendously popular in

north St. Boniface. Over the front door was a large gable, integrated into the veranda. In the upper floor under the gable was a doorway leading onto the two-storey veranda. It is this feature, with the symmetrical flanking bays, which harkens to the style brought from Ontario and Quebec farmhouses and recreated hundreds of times in the west by new settlers.¹²

It is almost certain that the Kittson house had a veranda from the start, but the one in the photograph probably dates from the 1890s. A later owner of the house recalls a carpenter by the name of Gédéon Cing-Mars¹³ adding the veranda before the turn of the century.¹⁴ Supported by slender wooden columns, this veranda extended across the front and wrapped partially around the sides, while the porch floor continued to the rear. Beneath was lattice work and on the roof was a balustrade to contain the second floor. By the 1940s, only a small enclosed porch remained, which was removed in 1947.

There was a chimney at either gable end, indicating two stoves for a warm interior. Off the centre hall was a double parlour to the right and some combination of dining-room and kitchen to the left. The fire atlas of 1919 shows a rear addition which served as a kitchen. Up a handsome staircase were found four bedrooms, with the door to the balcony at the end of the hall.

Kittson enjoyed fast horses and he raced them on the river in the winter.¹⁵ A stable on the rear of the property survived until at least 1919, and quite possibly until the 1940s.

Alexander and Elise Kittson had four children when he died in 1883. Elise remarried with Alfred Léveque, who in later years was the caretaker of the new City Hall. At least one of the children kept the Kittson name, which was given to a street in St. Boniface. Norman Kittson had several children by two or three wives, leaving a genealogy both long and complicated.

In 1914, the house was sold to a lumber dealer, while son William Kittson secured a house for himself on the same block. During the 1920s a medical doctor by the name of Mastay Gervais owned the house. From 1930 until 1946, the Marcus Benoist family, resided at 670 Rue Collège.

Benoist is somewhat a legend in St. Boniface today. Born in Ste. Anne-des-Chênes, Man., in 1896, he spent most of his life in the cathedral city, where he is best known for his leisure activities, music and history. A gifted musician himself, Benoist composed and conducted some fifty scores for radio. He formed a local symphony orchestra that played in concerts and for CKSB radio. For a couple of decades, he led the choir at the Cathédral and founded a choir to accompany the symphony.¹⁶

Since his retirement, Benoist has been curator of the St. Boniface Museum in the Grey Nuns' House on Taché, where he has done countless hours of research, particularly on the genealogies of long-time St. Boniface residents. Now at the age of eighty-six, he has recently retired from the museum because of poor eyesight.

In a taped interview made in 1979, Benoist recalled the gentler lifestyle of St. Boniface in the 1930s. The large open parlours in his home were weekly the scene of practices by the orchestra and the choirs, with the host playing piano in the corner. There were concerts too, with audiences of sixty people. As the Benoists raised their family, socializing and playing chess were other diversions.¹⁷

In 1946, the Oblate Fathers who owned the property, wanted the property for a little park for their retreat house. The house was sold to the Héberts, who moved the frame building to its present site in 1947.¹⁸ In 1980, Claude Hébert sold the home to its present owners.

Sometime before 1946, stucco was applied over the wood siding. The present porch was built after the move, and the rear wing may also date from that time. There has been an extension in the same place since at least 1919. The distinctive window trim is long gone, and aluminium frames have replaced the wooden ones. Inside, the original staircase, some mouldings and hardware remain but repeated alterations have removed most of the early interior elements. Over the years since 1878, the factors which kept the house viable have broken down the historic fabric.

At its new location on Rue Laverendrye, the house is three blocks from its original site, and still within the same historic neighbourhood. In its Provencher location, the Kittson house was a

landmark for local residents.¹⁹ The Kittson family has had a considerable impact in the development of Red River, and more especially of St. Boniface.

FOOTNOTES--

1. 1880 map of St. Boniface, reproduced in Ville Cathédrale de Saint Boniface St. Boniface 1958 p. 42-3.
2. Both Alexandre and Alexander have been used to spell Kittson's name. It is not certain which spelling Kittson himself used.
3. C.H. Mackintosh, ed. Canadian Parliamentary Companion and Annual Register 1881 Citizens' Printing & Publishing Co. Ottawa 1881, p. 349.
4. J.P. Robertson A Political Manual of the Province of Manitoba and the North-West Territories The Call Printing Co. Winnipeg 1887 p. 93. The Ste. Agathe electoral district included the important village of St. Norbert, and it was here that Kittson derived his support. Le Métis 15 April 1880.
5. Le Métis 29 April 1880
6. "Nécrologie" Le Manitoba 2 May 1883.
7. "Alex, Kittson, M.P.P., Dies Somewhat Suddenly at St. Boniface" Manitoba Daily Free Press 28 April 1883.
8. Clarence W. Rife "Norman W. Kittson, a Fur-Trader at Pembina" Minnesota History March 1925 p. 227.
9. Rhonda Gilman, Carolyn Gilman & Deborah M. Stultz The Red River Trails Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement 1820-1870.
10. "Com. Kittson Dead" Manitoba Free Press 11 May 1888.
11. Le Métis 25 April 1878 "M. Alexandre Kittson est en ce moment a se faire batir une residence confortable sur l'avenue Provencher. Contracteur, M. Couture."
12. Verschoyle Benson Blake and Ralph Greenhill Rural Ontario University of Toronto Press U.S.A. 1969 plates 27, 36 & 38.
13. Henderson's Directory and Gazeteer for Winnipeg and the North-West Territories, 1892 & 1898.
14. Taped interview with Marius Benoist, July 1979. Courtesy of Ray Garnett.
15. Le Métis 31 January 1878 14 Feb. 1880.
16. "Marius Benoist" introduction for Les Editions du Ble 7 May 1975.

17. Taped interview, op.cit.
18. "St. Boniface Home Full of Memories" Free Press 2 October 1946 and "St. Boniface Landmark Moved After 69 years" Tribune 7 July 1947.
19. "St. Boniface Landmark", op.cit.

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Plate 1 – Kittson house, College and Provencher, ca.1920. (Courtesy of Ray Garnett, owner of house.)



Plate 2 – Moving the house, summer 1947. (Courtesy of the Ray Garnett, owner of house.)

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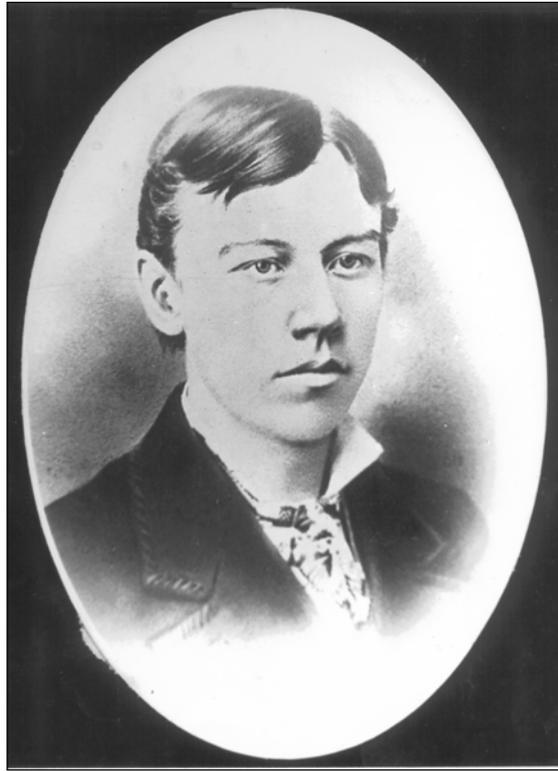


Plate 3 – Alexander Kittson, ca.1883. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – Kittson House, 165 rue Laverendrye, 1967. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, D. Spurrill Collection #78.)

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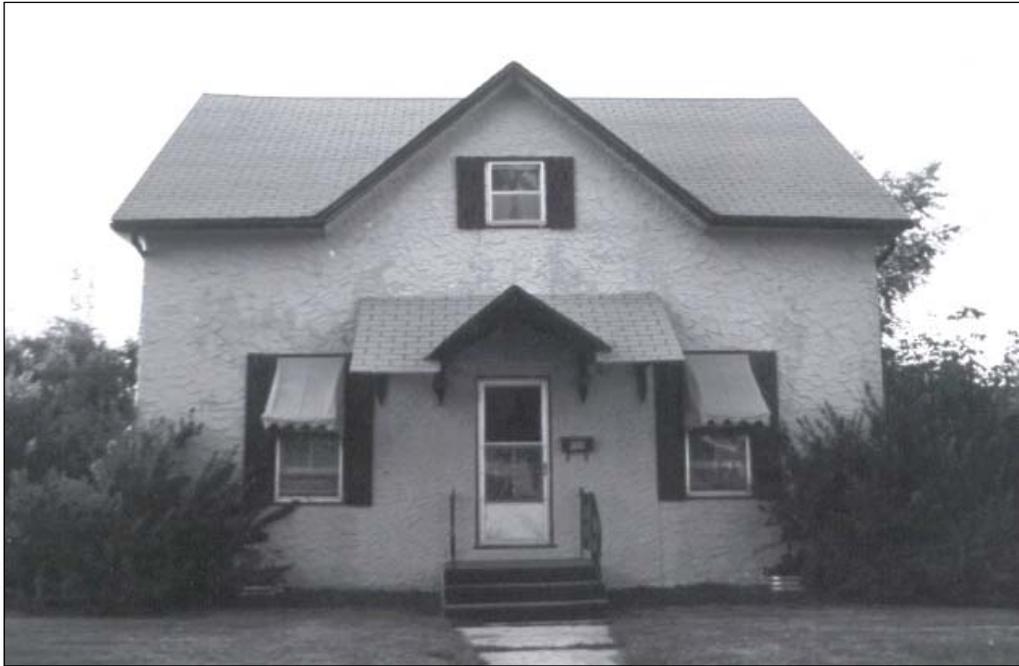


Plate 5 - Kittson House, 165 rue Laverendrye, south façade, 1982. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)



Plate 6 - Kittson House, 165 rue Laverendrye, east façade, 1982. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 7 – Interior staircase, 1982. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)