

115 RUPERTSLAND AVENUE EAST – SEVEN OAKS HOUSE
John Inkster, 1851-53



When merchant John Inkster began building a new home on his Kildonan farm in 1851, he placed the stone foundation on the second rise of land from the Red River. His prudence notwithstanding, floodwaters invaded the site the following year. Many other settlers evacuated the area, but Inkster and his wife waited out the flood in the shelter of a tent secured to the hastily installed second floor of their dwelling.

The building emerged intact from the receding waters, allowing Inkster to continue construction. His finished product not only withstood later floods, but also became one of Winnipeg's oldest surviving habitable houses. It was used as a private residence for a full century before being restored and reopened in 1958 as the Seven Oaks House Museum.

Inkster (1799-1874) was a stonemason and one of many Scots from the Orkney Islands who came to Rupert's Land with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). A few years after his arrival in

c.1821, he opted to become an independent trader, freighter and farmer in the Red River Settlement rather than serve out his HBC contract.

Nicknamed “Orkney Johnny,” Inkster prospered as he established a regional trade supplying local produce and imported goods from England, Scotland, Canada West, and the United States to fellow settlers, missionaries, tripmen, and other traders, including his brother-in-law James Sinclair. He also set up a water mill on his river lot and in 1856 became president of a company that established a local steam grist and sawmill.

His public service included posts as magistrate for the Lower District (1850-58), justice of the peace, member of the Council of Assiniboia (1857-68), and auditor of public accounts (beginning in 1863). He also was an active participant in the development of roads and other public works, served as the rector’s warden at St. John’s Cathedral, and briefly taught in a school organized in 1849 by the Kildonan Scots.

His farm on the west side of the Red River provided a base for his activities. It was named for a nearby stand of large oak trees and Seven Oaks Creek, both of which marked the site of the 1816 Battle of Seven Oaks between supporters of the rival Hudson’s Bay and North-West trading companies.

Inkster settled on the land in 1826 after marrying Mary Sinclair (1804-1892), the daughter of the HBC’s Chief Factor William Sinclair. The couple first lived in a two-room log house built in the common Red River frame style. Various outbuildings eventually were added to the site, as were nine children, five girls and four boys, born between the mid-1820s and latter 1840s.

This large family provided the impetus for development of a new home — an imposing two-storey, nine-room, symmetrical structure designed in a vernacular Georgian style and oriented with its long front façade facing east to the river.

The cut-stone foundation was laid without the use of mortar. A stone-lined cellar also was installed. Oak logs floated down the Assiniboine River from Baie Saint-Paul, Manitoba, were

whipsawed and hewed some 17.8 centimetres square. They were then stacked horizontally and their corner butt joints were fastened with “tree nails” (wooden pegs). Milled horizontal siding was used to protect the exterior, while the main-floor interior was insulated with buffalo hair and fur held to the walls by nearly five centimetres of plaster.

Inkster enclosed his structure under a steeply pitched hip roof with side dormers and a cover of cedar shingles. He also built a one-storey verandah which extended beyond the length of the otherwise unadorned front. Similar to other local buildings of the time, the main façade was divided into five bays of openings, including a central entrance with sidelights and multi-paned, double-hung windows.

The interior of the first floor was finished with basswood ceilings and organized into an entrance hall, front and back parlours, and dining and breakfast rooms. The upper level was divided by panelling and hand-cut moulding into four bedrooms plus a small area that may have been a washroom. Part of the original Inkster cabin was added to the north side of the house to serve as the kitchen. The other part, situated to the south of the dwellings, became a store and post office.

Members of the Inkster family occupied Seven Oaks House until the death of John’s eldest daughter Mary (1833-1912). Over the years, their river lot was subdivided to accommodate urban growth and the homes of two other Inkster children. Colin (1843-1934), a provincial court official, established a house on Main Street in the mid-1870s and farmed part of the site. Harriet (c.1846-1922), a widow with five children, lived in a dwelling to the west of the main family home.

Seven Oaks House and its grounds were turned over to the City of Winnipeg for park purposes after Mary Inkster’s death. Ownership was later (1952) transferred to the City of West Kildonan. The building accommodated residents until 1954, after which restoration work began. The resulting museum is now open to the public on a seasonal basis. It contains various period artifacts, including some furniture and other items owned by the Inksters.