



**315 VICTORIA AVENUE EAST**  
**EUSÈBE JOSEPH BLAIS HOUSE**

City of Winnipeg  
Historical Buildings Committee

October 2012

### 315 VICTORIA AVENUE EAST – EUSÈBE JOSEPH BLAIS HOUSE

The Grand Trunk Pacific/National Transcontinental Railway had been created by Act of Parliament in September 1903 as part of Prime Minister Laurier's push to create a transcontinental railway to compete with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), built two decades before. The new line would consist of a publicly funded line from Winnipeg to Moncton, New Brunswick (3,250 kilometres) known as the National Transcontinental Railway (NTR) and western portion, Winnipeg to the West Coast (2,800 kilometres), to be known as the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTPR) funded by a British railroad operating in Eastern Canada.

It was part of Laurier's Liberal government's incredibly ambitious plan to populate the West with European immigrants, add impetus to the fledgling prairie agricultural economy and create population centres and markets for the established manufacturing concerns in Eastern Canada. By the early 1910s, Canada had two new transcontinental railways, hundreds of thousands of settlers spread out across the West and its two new provinces (Alberta and Saskatchewan), burgeoning population centres and cultivated land as far as the eye could see. Winnipeg, as the region's premier city, was the centre of all of this growth.<sup>1</sup>

In 1906, real estate broker John Henry Kern sold two sections of his land in the Municipality of Springfield, east of Winnipeg, 324 hectares in all, to the GTPR for \$138,000.<sup>2</sup> It consisted of scattered agricultural holdings and homes, and a few businesses north of present-day Regent Avenue. Development was rapid, however, after plans for the massive service and maintenance shops were finalized in 1908 (Plate 1).

The site had many features which made it suitable for this development. The shops required a large parcel of flat land, something the area could easily supply. The complex would also require a reliable source of fresh water and hydro-electric power, and the railway was able to tap

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<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Encyclopedia, Second Edition, Vol. 2 (Edmonton, AL: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), p. 1183.

<sup>2</sup> Transcona – On the Horizon of a Great Future, 50 Years of Progress (Transcona, MB: Golden Jubilee Historical Booklet Committee, 1961), p. 38.

in to both the power and water sources of Winnipeg.<sup>3</sup> The site was close enough to Winnipeg to benefit from its large population base, its varied labour pool and its service industries. Because the areas to the west, north and south of the provincial capital had been developed and settled for many decades, it led to the purchase of this large block of land in the Springfield Municipality. And as Winnipeg had done previously, the shop site was able to capitalize on its central location in Canada; it was the perfect place in which to service and maintain the rolling stock of the entire GTPR/NTR system.

A tent community quickly developed as construction began on the shops, housing the workers from across Canada who poured into the area. On February 10, 1911, with work on the shops progressing well, local businessmen organized a Board of Trade, a process that had been repeated throughout the West as railways spurred development. Interestingly, the Board was in place for more than a year before the town was incorporated, on April 6, 1912.<sup>4</sup> The name chosen, by a public contest, was Transcona, “Trans” to commemorate the transcontinental railway that signalled the town’s beginning and “cona” after Lord Strathcona who drove the last spike in the CPR line.<sup>5</sup>

In total, \$6,000,000 was spent to build the shop complex which included a forge shop, a locomotive carpentry shop, a 61-metre chimney and a 24-locomotive roundhouse (Plates 2-5).<sup>6</sup> The Town of Transcona grew quickly, especially north of the shops. Restaurants, hotels, pool halls and other commercial establishments located along the main commercial road, Regent Avenue (Plate 6), while to the north grew the residential districts of small, comfortable homes housing the shop workers and their families (Plate 7).

Transcona, located on the eastern edge of Winnipeg, Western Canada’s largest and most influential city of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a quintessential railway town – intimately connected to the sector’s ups and downs as it evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1917 and

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<sup>3</sup> Transcona, 1911-1986, Celebrating 75 years of community (Transcona, MB: Transcona 75<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Incorporated, 1986), p. 19. Below as Transcona, 1911-1986.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Railway and Marine World, No. 138 (August 1909), pp. 561, 563.

1923, the Federal Government created the Canadian National Railways Company (CNR), incorporated June 6, 1919, to take over control of a number of small and large railways in Canada struggling with rising debt. These included, among others, the Canadian Northern Railway (1919) and the GTPR/NTR (1923).<sup>7</sup> The shops in Transcona became the property of the CNR.

The town experienced severe economic hardship during the 1920s and went bankrupt in 1921. The Mayor and Council were required to resign and the Province of Manitoba administered the Town of Transcona until 1927.

But Transcona, because of its distance from Winnipeg, was fiercely independent, an attitude that survives to this day. In the early years, the railroad was the only means of transportation to and from the city; many of the town's women would board a train in the morning, arrive in Winnipeg, shop and return home in the afternoon. Treacherous dirt roads allowed for more access, although early buses were often trapped in mud. It was not until 1931 that an asphalt road was completed, a Depression-era make work project costing \$135,000, heralding a new era for Transcona.<sup>8</sup> Growth continued and Transcona became a City with its population of 13,000 in 1961 and then became part of the City of Winnipeg under Unicity in 1972.

In 1913, as the shops were nearing completion, supervisors, managers, shop foremen from all across the globe began to arrive. Houses began to rise along the surveyed streets north of Regent Avenue. The Blais House, owned by railway tinsmith foreman Eusèbe Joseph Blais,<sup>9</sup> was planned in 1913 and completed in 1914,<sup>10</sup> although documentation suggests some of the mechanical work was not finished for several years.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Canadian Encyclopedia (Edmonton, AL: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), p. 345; and Donald MacKay, The People's Railway (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992), p. 304.

<sup>8</sup> Transcona, 1911-1986, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Manitoba Land Titles Office, Winnipeg, Certificate of Title No. 263639, dated May 23, 1917, courtesy of owner.

<sup>10</sup> City of Winnipeg, Assessment Department.

<sup>11</sup> Among the documents held by the present owner are: quotes on sewer and plumbing dated February 22 and March 22, 1916 and August 1, 1917 and "air heating device" quote dated September 25, 1917. The home was originally numbered 117 Victoria Avenue.

## STYLE

This building is an example of the Queen Anne Revival style, one of the most popular of all the residential architectural styles from the 1880s until World War I.<sup>12</sup> At its best, the style was known for its picturesqueness; a seemingly unconnected, unbalance attempt to fill or cover all flat surfaces on every façade. Bay windows, towers, wrap-around porches, irregular rooflines, dormers, cross gables, ornamented chimneystacks, projecting wings, balconies and varied materials and colours were applied in combination to animate the structures.

It was used in most districts of Winnipeg on both small and large dwellings. Table One is a list of Queen Anne Revival dwellings designated by the Historical Buildings Committee. Of that list, only four have remained single-family dwellings (Dalnavert, 61 Carlton Street, is included). In terms of exterior ornamentation and detailing, the Blais House on Victoria Avenue East would fit somewhere in the middle of the list, not as detailed as Dalnavert, Bernard House, 454 Edmonton Street or the Klinik Building, 545 Broadway, but more complex architecturally than the Ashdown House, 121 Kate Street, Monk House, 134 West Gate or the Harris House, 26 Edmonton Street. The Blais House would also be the newest Queen Anne Revival style home.

## CONSTRUCTION

The original building plans<sup>13</sup> describe a 2½-storey frame single-family home resting on a 0.61-metre raised foundation (Plate 8). The main building measured 6.7 metres wide by 8.5 metres long with a two-storey bay window and a 2.1-metre deep, full width two-storey open veranda (Plate 9) on the front (south) façade and a 3.1 x 3.1-metre one-storey summer kitchen on the rear (north) façade (Plate 10). The building was covered with a galvanized iron roof, still extant today.

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<sup>12</sup> L. Maitland, et al., A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1992), pp. 98-99.

<sup>13</sup> Plans supplied by owner.

**TABLE ONE**  
**DESIGNATED QUEEN ANNE STYLE HOUSES (SORTED BY AGE)**

ADDRESS	NAME	YEAR BUILT	GRADE	COMMENTS
88 Adelaide St.	Kelly House	1882	III	Vacant
121 Kate St.	William Ashdown House	1882	III	Single-family dwelling
444 Logan Ave. (moved from 232 Bell Ave. in 1987)	Penrose House	1894	III	Single-family dwelling
61 Carlton St.	H.J. Macdonald House ("Dalnavert Museum")	1895	I	Museum
134 West Gate	Monk House	1895	III	Single-family dwelling
368 Edmonton St.	Duplex	1901	III	Offices
26 Edmonton St.	J.W. Harris House	1902	III	Offices
137 Scott St.	Graham House	1902	III	Offices
454 Edmonton St.	Benard House	1903	III	Offices
545 Broadway	Klinic Building	1904	III	Health care facility/offices
55 Hargrave St.	Glines House	1906	III	Apartment block

## DESIGN

As originally built, the Blais House featured a short flight of open wooded steps to access the open, full-width, two storey open veranda supported by plain wooden columns (Plate 11). The upper storey of the veranda featured a wooden balustrade. The entrance was located at the east end of the veranda, a bay window that rose to the second storey was found on the west end. The simple gable roof featured a smaller gable above this bay window. Plain horizontal wood siding clad the home.

According to information handed down from owner to owner, major changes to the front façade occurred in 1937.<sup>14</sup> The porch was removed, replaced by an enclosed two-storey addition on the east end of the elevation, used as the entrance porch on the ground floor and a summer bedroom on the second floor (Plate 12). The west elevation is windowless except for one small window towards the rear, the east façade includes window openings on both floors and the raised basement wall and a covered entrance (Plate 13). The rear includes the one-storey lean-to (Plate 14). Ornamental tin cladding was added to the gable ends at some point after construction.

<sup>14</sup> Information courtesy of owner.

A garage, built in 1969,<sup>15</sup> is found at the rear of the lot.

## **INTERIOR**

Much of the original layout, materials and finish of the interior of the Blais House has remained original and was featured many of the traditional spaces found in a turn-of-the-century home. When built, the ground floor included an entrance hall with staircase to the second floor along the east wall (Plate 10). A large parlour was located in the southwest corner with the formal dining room in the northwest corner. The kitchen was located beside the dining room with access to the summer kitchen behind. Panes of leaded glass, French doors separating the parlour and dining room, wood flooring and carved wood banister on the staircase are some of the original elements still present (Plates 15-17). The kitchen has been upgraded and the summer kitchen converted into a bathroom. The original plans do not show an east side entrance or a basement (which is accessed by a staircase off the kitchen). Oral history suggests this new entrance was added in 1942 along with a new basement floor.<sup>16</sup>

The second floor was designed with three large bedrooms and a bathroom (Plate 18) with access to the second storey veranda through a door in the southeast corner bedroom. Little has changed on this level since construction, although the open veranda was replaced by a glazed porch (Plate 19-20). According to the owner, the bedroom in the southeast corner was converted into a kitchen in the late 1930s, and was changed back into a bedroom in the late 1980s.

The attic was designed with two bedrooms (Plate 21) and continues to be used as designed (Plate 22).

## **INTEGRITY**

The building stands on its original site and is in excellent structural condition. Alterations to the original design, finishes and materials have not been significant.

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<sup>15</sup> Information from owner.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## STREETSCAPE/SITE

Located on a quiet residential street in Transcona, the Blais House sits on a block of residential structures, most of the homes on the north side of the street were built in the 1910-1915 period (the oldest being #311, built in 1909), most on the south side were built in the 1930s and 1940s (see Table Two). The Blais House would be considered an integral part of one of Transcona's early residential streetscapes and among best kept and most original (Plate 23).

**TABLE TWO**  
**CONSTRUCTION DATES, VICTORIA AVENUE EAST<sup>17</sup>**

<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>DATE OF CONSTRUCTION</b>
300	1976
301	1922
302	1912
303	1914
304	1946
305	1914
308	1946
309	1912
311	1909
312	1931
313	1912
314	1930
315	1914
318	1930
319	1910
320	1946
321	1915
323	1914
324	2004
326	1920
327	1914
328	1922
329	1914
331	1915
332	1913
333	1927

<sup>17</sup> City of Winnipeg Assessment Department information.

## ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS

The architect named on the original plans was William Henry Girling. Girling was born in Stratford-on-Avon, England, in 1876, arriving in Canada in 1903 and ultimately settling in Manitou, MB.<sup>18</sup> He is also listed as living in Glenlea, MB and Wawanesa, MB during this period.<sup>19</sup> He then took up residence in Portage la Prairie, MB and worked as a building contractor. In 1907 he moved to Rivers, MB, a railway centre in the southwest corner of the province. In 1913 he was hired by the GTPR and was transferred to Transcona to work in the motive power department and then the car department before his retirement in 1935. According to one source, he lived at 78 Harvard Avenue West for many years. He died on November 15, 1941.<sup>20</sup> His son W.A. “Arthur” Girling was a contractor who also worked in Transcona and throughout Winnipeg in the 1930s.

Beyond the Blais House, William Henry Girling was responsible for the design of the following buildings:<sup>21</sup>

Bandstand, Park Circle, Transcona (ca.1911 – demolished) – Plate 24

White House, Crescent Rd., Transcona (date unknown)

Transcona Cemetery Building, Dugald Rd., Transcona (ca.1932)

This is the first W.H. Girling building evaluated by the Historical Buildings Committee.

## PERSON/INSTITUTION

Eusèbe Joseph Blais was born in Gracefield, Quebec on November 26, 1876. He married Éléontine Marie Blais (July 23, 1883-July 26-1961) in July 1908 in her hometown of Pointe Gatineau, Quebec.<sup>22</sup> The couple (Plate 25) had two sons (Felix and John) and four daughters, Marguerite Emilienne, born February 20, 1919, Lillianne, Hélène and Thérèse.<sup>23</sup> Blais came to Transcona from Rivers, MB in 1912 and worked in the railway shops as the foreman of the tin shop. He also served

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<sup>18</sup> Winnipeg Free Press, November 17, 1941, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Manitoba Free Press, October 27, 1905, p. 8 and June 27, 1906.

<sup>20</sup> Winnipeg Free Press, November 17, 1941, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Compiled from a list found in the “Girling [sic] Collection” – Western Canada Pictorial Index, University of Winnipeg.

<sup>22</sup> Family history at [www.familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/c/o/u/Hal-R-Courchesne/GENE3-0009.html](http://www.familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/c/o/u/Hal-R-Courchesne/GENE3-0009.html).

<sup>23</sup> Another daughter, Marie, died shortly after birth in 1914. Information from owner.

on Transcona's town council and was a school trustee. He died at his home on August 12, 1936.<sup>24</sup> Both he and his wife are buried in the St. Boniface cemetery. His widow remained in the house until her death in 1961.

### **EVENT**

There is no known significant event connected with this building.

### **CONTEXT**

This comfortable, large middle-class house was built at the very early stages of the creation of Transcona and is an excellent and well-preserved example of the type of residential structure built for the higher salaried railway men and their families. Similar to homes found in Fort Rouge and River Heights, the Blais House stands in contrast to the smaller worker's homes that are more plentiful in this neighbourhood.

### **LANDMARK**

Built mid-block in a residential section of Transcona, this house would be known in the neighbourhood as one of the older, better-kept single family homes.

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<sup>24</sup> Winnipeg Free Press, August 17, 1936, p. 10 and April 10, 1961, p. 27.

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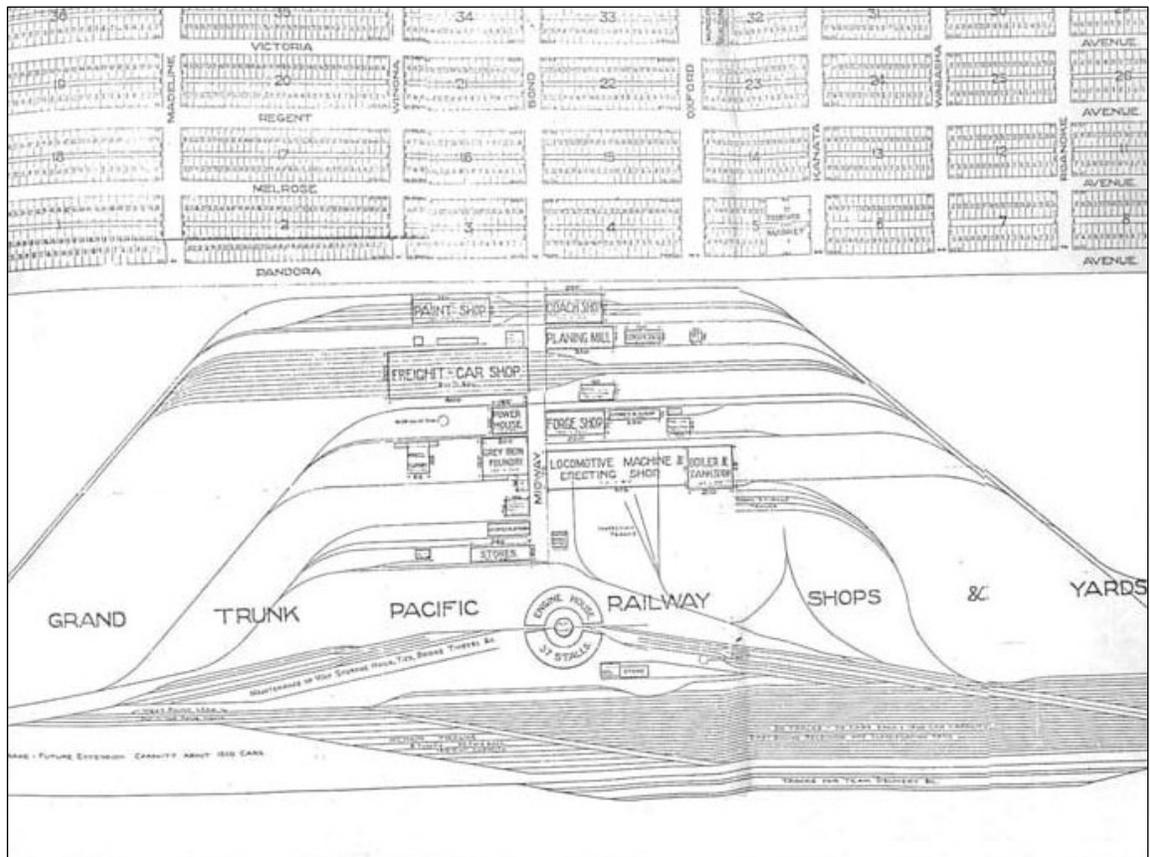


Plate 1 – Part of the original plan for the layout of the GTPR Shops and yards, 1912. Street layout north of the shops includes Regent Avenue, the commercial centre of the community and Victoria Avenue one block north. (Reproduced from 1912 Booklet created by W.J. Christie and Co., Selling Agents, Winnipeg, Manitoba.)

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Plate 2 – Construction of the Motive Power Shop, with the scattered community of Transcona in the background, 1911. (Courtesy of the Transcona Historical Museum, TH80.2.9.2.)



Plate 3 – Transcona railway shop construction, ca.1911. (Courtesy of the Transcona Historical Museum, TH85.3.17.)

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Plate 4 – Transcona Wheel Shops, no date. (Courtesy of the Transcona Historical Museum, [TH82.12.2.](#))



Plate 5 – Interior of the Transcona Shops, no date. (Courtesy of the Transcona Historical Museum, [TH80.2.9.25.](#))

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Plate 6 – Two views of Transcona’s commercial centre, Regent Avenue. The top view (undated) is looking west and the bottom was taken in 1931 during Regent’s paving. (Courtesy of the Transcona Historical Museum, TH88.25.2 [top] and TH73.481 [bottom].)

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Plate 7 – Looking north through the CN shops into Transcona, ca.1935. The Blais House is located at the arrow. Note that there are still many vacant residential lots in the neighbourhood. (Courtesy of the Transcona Museum, TH85.3.6.)

315 VICTORIA AVENUE EAST – EUSÈBE JOSEPH BLAIS HOUSE

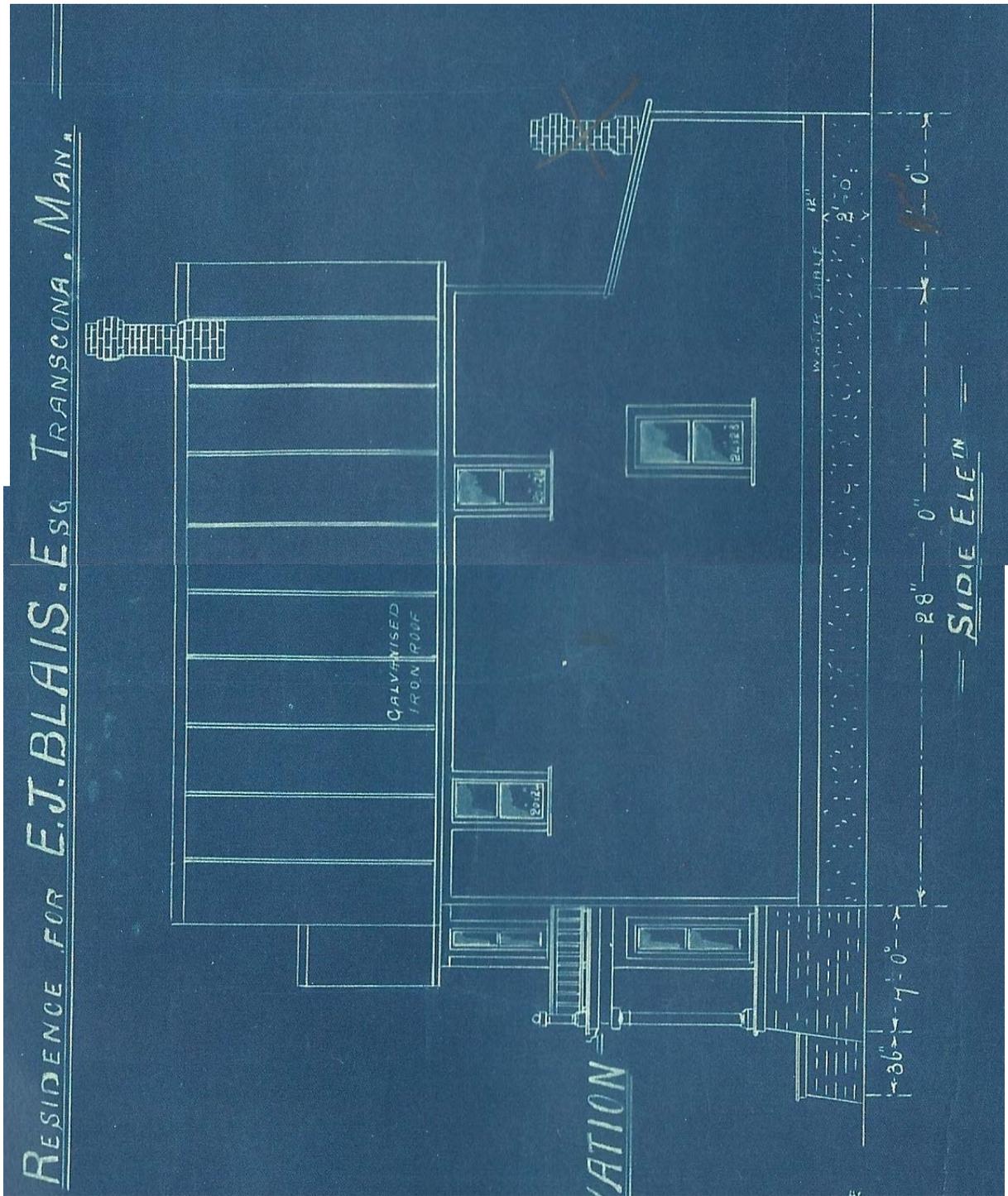


Plate 8 – Architect's Plans, Blais House, "Side Elevation". (Courtesy of owner.)

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Plate 9 – Architect’s Plans, Blais House, “Front Elevation”. (Courtesy of owner.)

315 VICTORIA AVENUE EAST – EUSÈBE JOSEPH BLAIS HOUSE

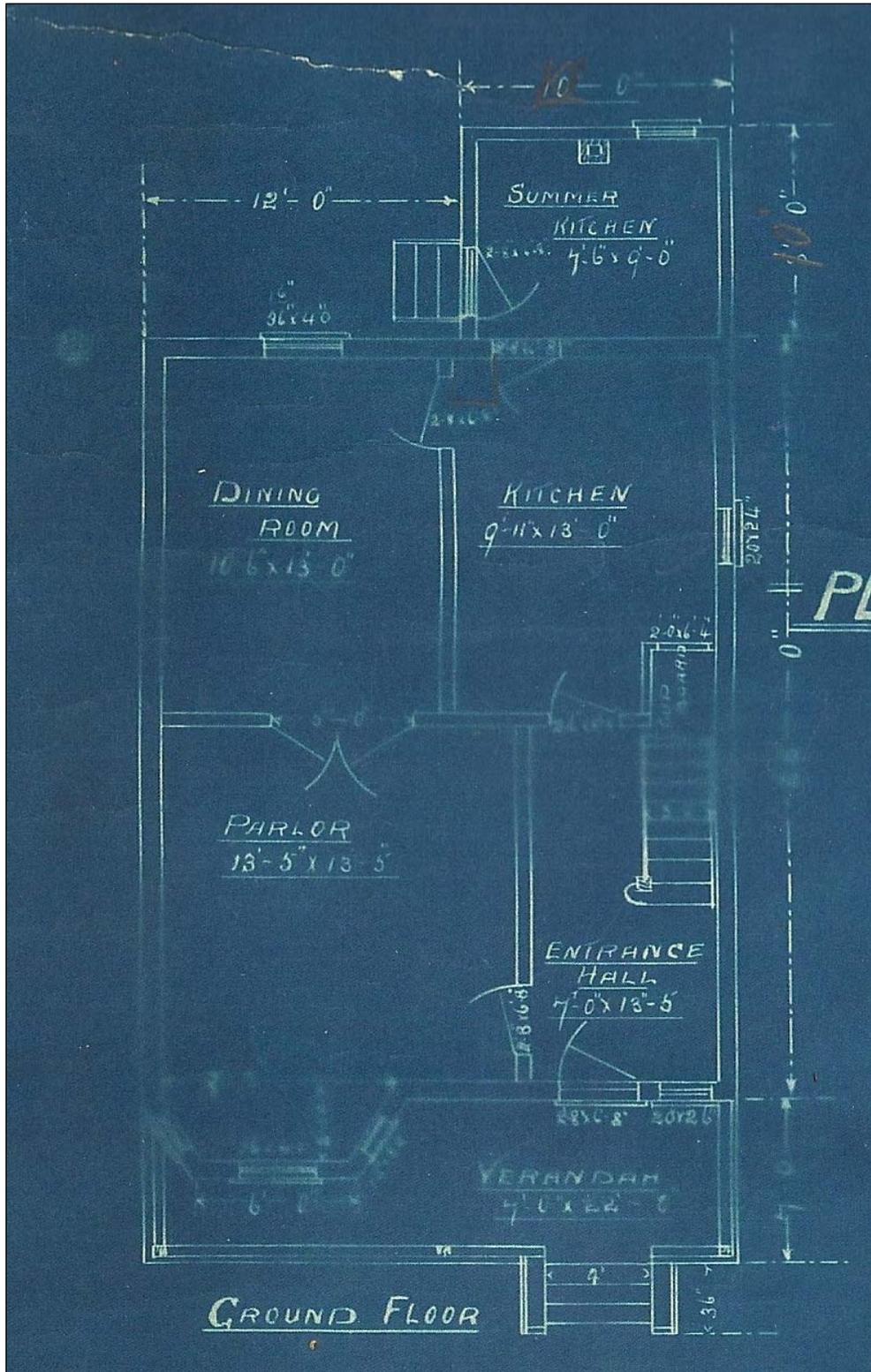


Plate 10 – Architect’s Plans, Blais House, “Ground Floor”. (Courtesy of owner.)

**315 VICTORIA AVENUE EAST – EUSÈBE JOSEPH BLAIS HOUSE**



Plate 11 – This photograph, dated October 24, 1914, shows the Blais Family posing on the porch of their new house on Victoria Avenue East. (Courtesy of owner.)

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Plate 12 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, front (south) and west façades, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)



Plate 13 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, front (south) and east façades, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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Plate 14 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, rear (north) façade, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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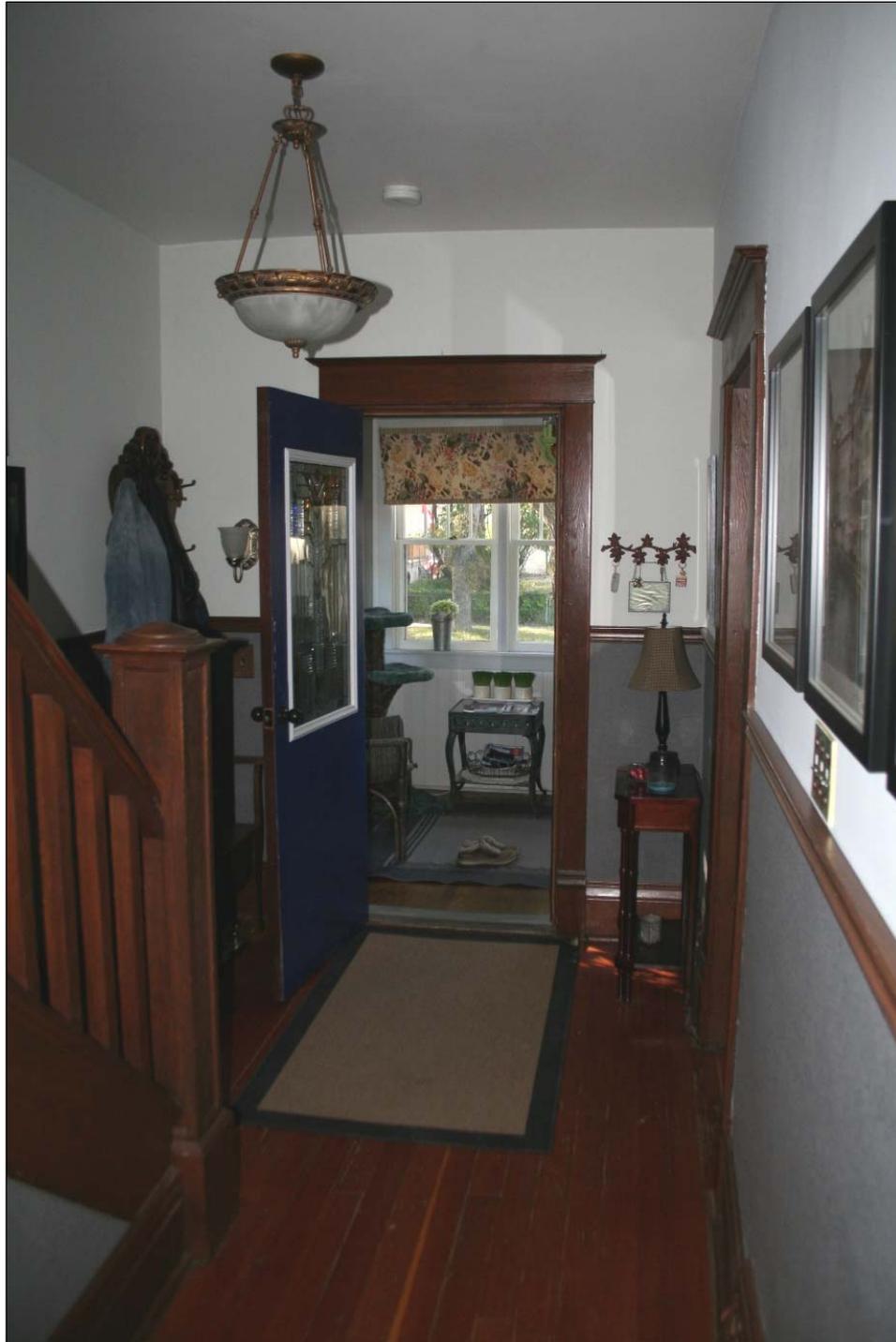


Plate 15 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, entrance foyer, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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Plate 16 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, parlour with bay window and leaded glass, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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Plate 17 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, dining room and parlour, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

315 VICTORIA AVENUE EAST – EUSÈBE JOSEPH BLAIS HOUSE

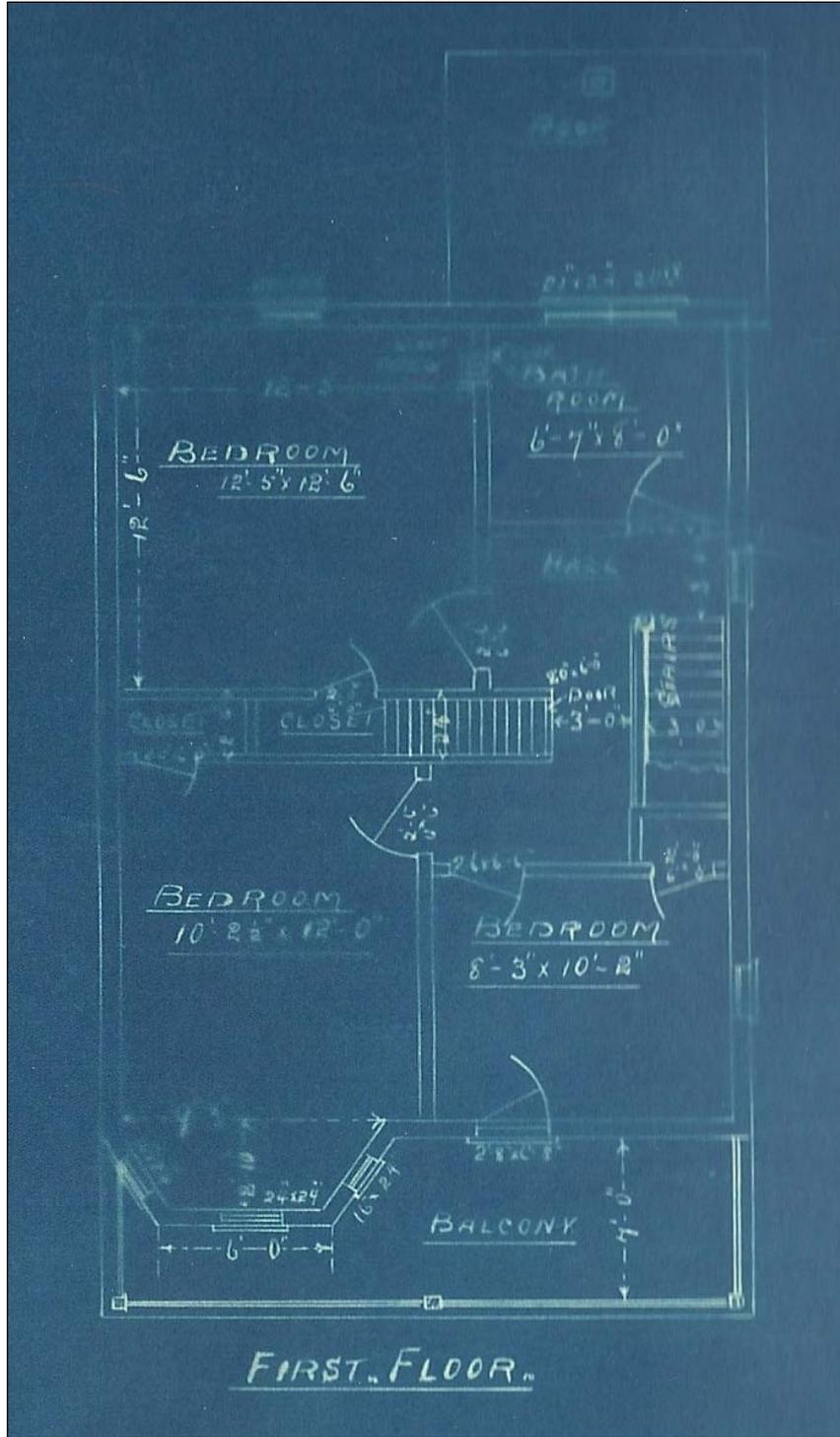


Plate 18 – Architect’s Plans, Blais House, “First Floor”. (Courtesy of owner.)

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Plate 19 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, second floor hallway, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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Plate 20 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, second floor glazed porch, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

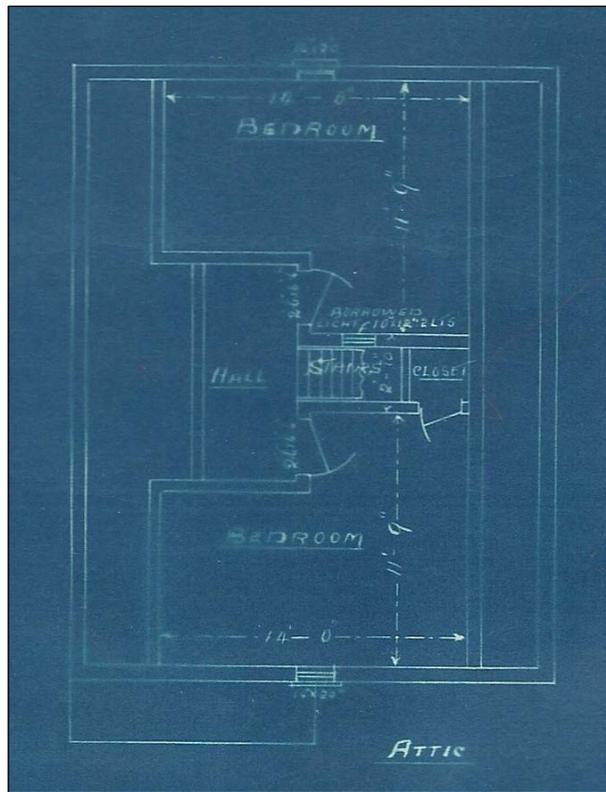


Plate 21 – Architect's Plans, Blais House, "Attic". (Courtesy of owner.)

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Plate 22 – Blais House, 315 Victoria Avenue East, attic bedroom, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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Plate 23 – Residential structures on the 300 block of Victoria Avenue East: #1- 321, built 1915; #2- 318, built 1930; #3- 319, built 1910; and #4- 314, built 1930. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

**315 VICTORIA AVENUE EAST – EUSÈBE JOSEPH BLAIS HOUSE**



Plate 24 – Bandstand, Park Circle, Transcona, taken in 1914, designed by W.H. Girling.  
(Courtesy of Transcona Museum.)

**315 VICTORIA AVENUE EAST – EUSÈBE JOSEPH BLAIS HOUSE**



Plate 25 – Mr. and Mrs. Blais sitting on the front steps of 315 Victoria Avenue East, no date.  
(Courtesy of owner.)