



**86 BALMORAL STREET**  
**THOMAS A. VAN VLIET HOUSE**

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – FEBRUARY 2008



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## 86 BALMORAL STREET THOMAS A. VAN VLIET HOUSE

**Date of Construction:** 1911

**Building Permit:** 1548/1911

**Architect:** Semmens, J.N.

**Contractor:** Picken, H.

### ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

One of the outstanding single-family dwellings on this block of Balmoral Street is the Van Vliet House, carefully designed and built to be conspicuous even among the picturesque homes that populate this area.

The front (east) façade main door, featuring a pointed arch and small panes of glass, is set atop a short flight of stairs and topped by an open deck accessed by a second storey doorway. The dark red brick cladding of the ground floor rests on a raised rusticated stone foundation and the second floor is covered in stucco. There is a wealth of wood accenting throughout the front including as framing for windows, as decoration around windows and as half-timbering in the gable ends. Windows on this façade are original and comprised of numerous small panes of glass.



Front (east) and north façades, 2007

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The side elevations, north and south, and the rear (west) façade continue the architectural language of the front; bay windows, dormers and other elements animate the elevations.

The home stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. Alterations do not appear to have seriously affected the original exterior layout or materials. The house cost \$9,000 to build and required 15 cords of stone for the foundation and accents, 11,000 bricks, 800 square yards of plaster and 7 cubic yards of concrete.<sup>1</sup>

The interior of this house is a mixture of original space (dining room, foyer and living room) and renovated space (kitchen). Recent owners sensitively renovated some areas of the house that were altered when the home was used as a boarding house (ca.1950s). The original areas feature dark wood accents, built-in cabinets and benches, beam ceilings and ornate lighting and hardware.

Tudor-style homes were constructed throughout Winnipeg and North America from the 1890s until World War II, although the decades of the 1920s and 1930s saw an explosion in Tudor-style house construction on this continent. The style is loosely based on a number of late Medieval English structures ranging from thatch-roofed cottages to grand mansions. In North America, the style developed several distinctive elements - ornamental half-timbering, steeply pitched roofs, front-facing gables, and stucco, masonry or masonry-veneered walls.<sup>2</sup>

The most common feature of Tudor homes is a steeply pitched central roof with cross gables. Tall, narrow windows in multiple groups, and massive chimneys crowned by chimney pots, are other common elements. About half of all examples of the style contain decorative (non-structural) half-timbering with stucco or brick infill.<sup>3</sup>



Rear (west) and north façades, 2007

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Architect Colonel John N. Semmens was born in Toronto, Ontario in 1880, the son of a pioneer Methodist minister. He graduated from Wesley College and received his architectural degree from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1910, he moved west to Winnipeg, opened a practice, and soon became associated with the prominent New York firm of McKim, Mead and White. While in its employ, Semmens served as local supervising architect for the Bank of Montreal project at the southeast corner of Portage Avenue and Main Street. During his career, he was twice president of the Manitoba Association of Architects, 1921 and 1941.<sup>4</sup>

In 1920 he was hired as a consultant for the Winnipeg School Division by J. B. Mitchell. In that role (which was expanded as Mitchell approached retirement in 1928), Semmens designed a great number of Winnipeg schools and supervised the planning of others. During World War II, Semmens organized the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadiers, but did not go overseas. He spent the remainder of the war as Commandant at Camp Shilo.<sup>5</sup>

In 1958 he moved to Victoria, B.C. and died three years later. A list of Semmens's major work in Winnipeg includes: Bank of Montreal, 335 Portage Avenue, (1911-13, Grade II, local supervising architect for McKim, Mead and White); Turner-Walker Block, 425 Henry Avenue (1912, Grade III); R.R. Scott House, 29 Ruskin Row (1914, Grade II); Sir Sam Steele, 15 Chester Street (1921, Grade III); and Wolseley, 511 Clifton Street South (1921, Grade III). He has been given 10 points by the Historical Buildings Committee.



Rear (west) façade, 2007

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HISTORICAL INTEREST:

Thomas A. Van Vliet was the secretary-treasurer of the successful Winnipeg Saddlery Company when he built this home for himself and his wife Catherine. Mrs. Van Vliet lived in the home until 1934 when she moved to Detroit, Michigan although she maintained her ownership of the property until 1949 when it was sold to Ruby Anderson (and husband G.D. Anderson, employee at Stovel Press) and converted into a boarding house, a similar fate to many large downtown residences. Michael and Julia V. Kirk owned and lived in the house in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup>



Interior, 1998

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RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

Under the Historical Buildings By-law, this building meets a number of important criteria:

- its historical importance- an example of a single-family dwelling built for an influential and well-to-do family shortly before World War I;
- its associations- its long-term connections to businessman T.A. Van Vliet;
- its design- an excellent example of a Tudor style home;
- its architect- J.N. Semmens was a respected and important practitioner;
- its location- contributes greatly to its extensive historic streetscape; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display many of their original elements and design.



Front (east) façade, 1978

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ENDNOTES:

- 1 City of Winnipeg Building Permit, #1548/1911.
- 2 V. and L. McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1984), p. 358.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 355-356.
- 4 Information courtesy of the Manitoba Association of Architects, Winnipeg.
- 5 Winnipeg Free Press, November 5, 1961; and J. N. Semmens, "Typical Schools of Western Canada" in The Journal, The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Vol. IV, No. 11 (November 1927), pp. 401-406.
- 6 City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 12-091417000, 1910-1990; and Henderson's Directory, 1910-1990.