97 NASSAU STREET NORTH

WILLIAM EDWIN ROBINSON HOUSE

PREPARED BY MURRAY PETERSON – AUGUST 2020
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Date of Construction: 1903
Building Permit: 267/1903
Architect: Browne, George Creeford
Contractor: Dolmer, J.

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

Built at a cost of $7,000,¹ a high price for a single-family dwelling in 1903, the Robinson House was a solid, brick building resting on a raised stone foundation that has been part of this area's streetscape for over 100 years.

The front (east) façade is asymmetrically designed with a two-storey bay window at the north end and a centrally placed main entrance set underneath a modest overhang supported by wooden columns. The windows of the ground floor feature radiating brick heads and stone lug sills. The complex hip roof includes a front-facing gable and a small gable dormer window.

The side elevations are plain, a newer, open wood staircase has been built on the south side to the second storey.
The home stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. No major exterior alterations have been completed to this building.

The house is an example of a Queen Anne style structure. The style borrowed heavily from English architecture of the 15th century, blending classical and medieval motifs into a picturesque form. Asymmetry was achieved through combinations of porches, bay windows, projecting wings, balconies and other devices. Roofs were usually irregular and complex, with dormers, gables and ornamental chimneys. Variations in materials and colours were also used to animate the façades. Given this freedom of design, however, accomplished designers were still able to create balance in the structures, offsetting busy surfaces by placing calmer elements nearby.

The popularity of the style in Canada began in the 1880s and lasted until World War I. On the prairies, pre-1900 examples of the style were not numerous because large-scale development occurred after the turn of the century. Post-1900, it was quickly adopted for use in the growing residential districts, especially the more affluent neighbourhoods where its showy qualities were greatly admired.

The architect of this house was George C. Browne who was born in Montreal in 1852, the son of architect George Browne, a prominent designer and major real estate holder. After finishing high school, he immediately went to work in his father's office. At the age of eighteen, he went to New York and worked for Russell Sturgis, one of that city's leading architects. After three years, Browne resigned and left for Europe to study design history. He spent over three years in England, Ireland, France, Italy and Switzerland, and won an international design competition in England. He returned to Montreal in 1877 and in 1879
he inexplicably gave up architecture to homestead on 129.5 ha of land in the Tiger Hills district south of Holland, Manitoba.\(^6\)

Browne moved to Winnipeg in 1882\(^7\) and set up a private architectural practice. He continued to design buildings throughout Manitoba and Western Canada into the new century. In 1907, he had his name officially changed from George Browne to George Creeford Browne.\(^8\) His work ranged from small houses and cottages to major office structures and warehouses. He moved to New York City ca. 1910.\(^9\) Perhaps his two most famous designs were the Public Market Building behind City Hall, built in 1889-90 (demolished in 1964), and Wesley College (University of Winnipeg), Portage Avenue, built in 1895 and still standing. It was announced in 1904 that he was retiring and moving to New York State.\(^10\) He died in South Nyack, New York on March 12, 1919.\(^11\)

A list of his major work includes: Massey Building, 294 William Avenue (1885, Grade II); Miller, Morse and Co. Warehouse, 86 Princess Street (1887, Grade III); Mackenzie and Powis Warehouse, 78 Princess Street (1891, Grade III); Wesley College (University of Winnipeg), 515 Portage Avenue, with S.F. Peters (1895, Grade II); Young Men's Christian Association Building (Birk's Building), 276 Portage Avenue (1900, Grade II); Gault Building, 92-104 Arthur Street (1900, Grade II); and Toronto Type Foundry Warehouse, major addition, 175 McDermot Avenue (1904, Grade III).\(^12\)
HISTORICAL INTEREST:

Well-known hockey star William Edwin “Ted” Robinson was the original and long-time owner of this house. He and his wife Ella and sons Alan Sheppard and John Edwin along with two domestic servants are listed in the home in 1911.13

Robinson was born in Harrison, Ontario in 1874 and came to Winnipeg in 1888. His father, T.D. Robinson, established a successful coal distribution company under his name that his son took over and acted as its president in later years. Ted Robinson was a pioneer sportsman in the city, a player for the Victoria Hockey Club and its secretary when it won the Stanley Cup in 1901. He died at his home on Nassau Street on January 14, 1934.14

After his death, the home was occupied by the Zata Psi Yet Fraternity. Mrs. Alex Matheson is listed in the home in 1945, Mrs. M. Skoulding in 1955 and the home was duplexed in the 1990s.15
RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

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

- its historical importance - a good example of a well-appointed house built for an influential family in one of the City's finer neighbourhoods at the turn-of-the-century;
- its associations - its long-term connections to early and influential businessman and sportsman W.E. “Ted” Robinson;
- its design - an example of the Queen Anne style;
- its architect - G.C. Browne was a respected and important practitioner;
- its location - contributes greatly to the historic streetscape of its neighbourhood; and
- its integrity - its main façades continue to display many of their original elements and design.
ENDNOTES:

1 City of Winnipeg Building Permit, #267/1903.
3 L. Maitland, op. cit., p. 98.
6 Winnipeg Daily Tribune, August 1, 1891, p. 13.
7 Men of Canada, p. 222 (unidentified article in the Department of Culture and Heritage, Historic Resources Branch files).
8 Statutes of Manitoba, 1907, Chapter 51, p. 11 (Historic Resources Branch files).
9 W.P. Thompson, op. cit., p. 289.
10 Canadian Architect and Builder, Vol. 17 (1904), Issue 5, p. 85.
12 This list is compiled from: personal files of the author; various local newspapers' building issues, 1879-1911; Canadian Architect and Builder, 1896-99; City of Winnipeg, Building Permits, 1899-1904; Giles Bugailiskis, "Quiet Dignity," unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, 1990, p. 156; and files of the City of Winnipeg, Heritage Planner.
13 Census of Canada, 1911.
15 City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 12032176100, 1920-1990.