



539 WILLIAM STREET

GISLI OLAFSON HOUSE

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – FEBRUARY 2009



539 WILLIAM STREET GISLI OLAFSON HOUSE

Date of Construction: 1895

Building Permit: N/A

Architect: Unknown

Contractor: Unknown

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

This is one of the more outstanding single-family dwellings built in the pre-1900 era in Winnipeg.

This solid brick, 2½-storey home stands on the north side of William Avenue, its front (south) façade includes ornamental and design features such as a recessed corner turret with domical roof and bracketed eaves, a full width open porch with second storey deck supported by square wood columns and a front-facing gable with ornate bargeboard and a pair of small windows. At the rear of the building is a large boxy addition used as suites, replacing small lean-tos that were original to the design.

The building is an excellent example of a Queen Anne style structure.¹ The style borrowed heavily from English architecture of the 15th century, blending classical and medieval motifs



Front (south) and east façades and roof detail (inset), 2009

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.²

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 home stands on its original site, appears to be in good structural condition and has not been affected by major exterior alteration.

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

Gisli Olafson and his family were the original owners of this house. Olafson was a successful and early Icelandic businessman who founded the Olafson Flour and Feed Company. The family included wife Ellan and a daughter Alpha (also as Alfa). Mr. Olafson died in August 1909 and the home was soon sold to Alexander R. Melville, well-known local architect. He and his wife Helen and their three daughters and one son remained in the home for many years.³



East façade, 2009

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

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

- its historical importance- a pre-1900 example of a luxurious home built for a successful businessman in Winnipeg;
- its associations- its long-term connections to early and influential businessman G. Olafson and architect A.R. Melville;
- its design- an excellent example of the Queen Anne style;
- its architect- N/A;
- its location- contributes greatly to its historic streetscape; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display many of their original elements and design.



Front (south) façade, 1978

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Identifying Architectural Styles in Manitoba (Winnipeg: Department of Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, 1991), p. 17; L. Maitland et al., A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1992), p. 102; and L. Maitland, The Queen Anne Revival Style in Canadian Architecture (Ottawa: Environment Canada, 1990), p. 64.
- ² L. Maitland, op. cit., p. 98.
- ³ City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 13-070247000, 1895-1930; Canada Census, 1901, 1906, 1911; and Henderson's Directory, 1895-1930.