

HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDY REPORT

C. FREDERICK EHLERS HOUSE

(Written August, 1990)

I. NAME

Historic: C. Frederick Ehlers House

Common: None

II. LOCATION

2576 North Fourth Street

Legal Description: Tax Key # 322-1085-100

WM P YOUNG'S SUBD OF W 58.722 ACRES IN SE ¼ SEC 7-7-22
BLOCK 6 W 66' (LOTS 29 & 30)

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

City of Milwaukee
Attn: Del Dettmann
809 North Broadway
Milwaukee, WI 53202

V. YEAR BUILT

1886

Architect: Unknown

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Ehlers House is located in a middle-class, late nineteenth century residential area about two miles north of the central business district. The house is sited on the southeast corner of North 4th and West Clarke Streets. It is set back from the sidewalk behind a small lawn. The house is large and occupies almost its entire site. A two-car garage aligned with the front wall of the house fills the south side yard.

The house itself is a rectangular, two-story, painted cream brick, Victorian Gothic-style structure with a low cross-gabled roof. Its narrow façade is oriented to North 4th Street with its long side elevation facing West Clarke Street.

The façade facing North 4th Street is picturesquely massed and richly detailed. The three-bay, gabled body of the house is abutted on the south by a small, square, three-story, pyramidal

roofed tower containing the main entrance. The six windows of the main block are enframed with projecting brick surrounds with mouse-tooth brickwork spandrel panels centered beneath those on the first floor. The small attic window in the gable is sheltered by a jettied wooden sunburst gable at the peak supported on massive scrolled consoles. The first story of the entrance tower is faced with an ornate, arched wooden porch with turned posts and spindled fretwork. Its miniature hipped-roof is ornamented with a dwarf gable. The second stage of the tower contains a large one-over-one window enframed in projecting brick to match those on the main body of the house. The third stage of the tower is smaller in plan than the lower two levels and is built of wood. A shingled base serves the transition from the brick second story to the clapboarded top story. Tall, narrow, multi-panel windows light the south and west sides of the tower. Above a massive corbelled cornice the pyramidal roof is capped with an ornate iron lightning rod weather vane finial. The most notable feature of the tower is the patterned brickwork on the south side of the tower. This virtuoso display of the mason's art includes two rectangular decorative panels topped by a large heart-shaped panel filled with basketweave brickwork.

The north elevation is relatively plain by comparison. Projecting brick surrounds like those on the front windows and a shallow prow-shaped bay window centered under a cross-gabled pavilion near the east end of the building are the principal features. The gable has decorative wooden sunburst paneling in its peak. The south elevation is similar to the north elevation in character, composition and detailing except that it has a pair of windows in the gabled pavilion rather than a bay window. A one-story bay window is located just behind the tower. The east elevation features an ornate, two-level wooden porch similar in character to the front porch.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The C. Frederick Ehlers House is architecturally significant as one of the finest and least altered brick Victorian Gothic houses in Milwaukee. It is especially notable for the ornamental brickwork executed by its mason owner as a display of his skill.

VIII. HISTORY

Charles Frederick Ehlers, better known to his contemporaries as Fritz or Fred, apparently began work in Milwaukee in the late 1860s. Records show that he was born in Mecklenberg, Germany on February 18, 1843, but it is not known when he came to Milwaukee. Ehlers place of residence in the late 1860s cannot be determined accurately since the city directories show a number of Frederick's and Fritz's, most of who worked as laborers and most of who lived on the west side.

In 1871, Fritz Ehlers purchased the land at 1576 North 4th Street. This location and the surrounding neighborhood is known as W. P. Young's Subdivision. W. P. Young had acquired the area between today's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive (North Third Street), North 5th Street, West North Avenue and West Center Street prior to the Civil War and subsequently subdivided it into 300 city lots. The entire plat was acquired by Frederick and Eleanor Ihmsen of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, who recorded the platting of the subdivision on December 13, 1863.

Wagonmaker Henry Bibow (also spelled Biebow) acquired two lots at the southeast corner of 4th and Clarke Streets from the Ihmsens on September 3, 1867 for about \$300. Tax rolls show that Bibow made no improvement to this property.

Fritz Ehlers purchased these two lots from Biebow's estate from \$500 on February 4, 1871. Ehlers then took out a \$200 mortgage on the property on February 21, 1871. Tax rolls for 1871 show that a \$300 improvement was made to the corner lot, today's 2576 North 4th Street and Ehlers is shown as living at this address beginning in this year. From those sources, it is clear that Ehlers constructed a house on the property at this time, but we do not believe that it was the present dwelling.

Through 1874 Ehlers was listed in the city directory as a laborer, then as a mason beginning in 1875 and later as a mason-contractor beginning in 1883 with his business address the same as his residence. His listing as a mason in 1875 corresponds to an increase in the taxable improvement on his property to \$450 that coincides with a \$150 mortgage he had taken out on July 28, 1874.

During Ehlers' lifetime he caused to be built three different structures on the corner lot (2576) and two additional houses on his adjacent lot to the south (2572). Just when all these buildings were constructed is a little difficult to determine since tax rolls show a progression of steady, small increases in the value of improvements on these lots in the 1870s and 1880s.

We know that Ehlers built his large frame stable and maybe even expanded it, probably to accommodate his business, some time between 1875 and 1880. We know that his barn encroached 13' onto the adjoining lot to the south and possibly explains the tax roll increases in 1875 and again in 1877. The 1877 increase, specifically attached to 2572 North 4th Street, could also possibly represent the construction of the small, frame, one-story cottage that we know was built on the lot. Ehlers sold the south 27' of 2572 North 4th Street to Frederick and Dorothea Brinker on November 7, 1880 for \$375.

In the 1880s and 1890s, Fritz Ehlers took out a number of mortgages on his property: August 14, 1884 (\$400), August 9, 1886 (\$1,000), November 19, 1894 (\$5,000) and February 21, 1899 (\$6,000). The \$1,000 mortgage of 1886 correlates with the single biggest jump in the tax roll assessment for 2576 and probably reflects the construction of the present brick house or a substantial rebuilding of the 1871 cottage to its present form.

A simple, single-story, frame house appeared some time before 1894 at the rear of Ehler's lot along the alley facing Clarke Street. Ehlers may have constructed this dwelling as a rental property, but more likely it was his original 1871 dwelling moved to the back of the lot to make way for the present house. It was quite common for property owners to move their original houses to the back of their property when their fortunes improved and they were able to construct a more substantial house. The simple frame cottage had been enlarged to two stories by 1910. It was razed in the 1980s.

Ehlers was considered a reasonably successful mason contractor during most of his career. He is said to have erected many large buildings in the city including several public school buildings, a part of the Pabst Brewery complex and a part of the Schlitz Brewing Company complex. Ehlers' fortunes apparently declined in the 1890s. His wife, Fredericke, three years his junior, is thought to have died during this period. The Brinkers sold back to Ehlers their property at 2572 North 4th Street on May 22, 1889 and Ehlers thereafter retained ownership of that parcel. Ehlers also took out the two large mortgages, referred to above, in 1884 and 1899.

Payment on the 1899 mortgage was due in 1902 and when Ehlers failed to repay the debt, the two lots and their improvements were sold at a sheriff's sale on August 24, 1903 for \$6,000.

Milwaukee Trust Company, which held the mortgage, purchased the property and divided it into several parcels and sold them off in the following years.

The rear house behind 2576 North 4th Street was sold to carpenter Herman Stieglitz and his wife, Emma, on November 30, 1904. The premises at 2572 North 4th Street were sold to Hans Jorgen Lytge and his wife, Lena, on December 14, 1904 for \$1,825. The Lytges' lot, as sold by the Milwaukee Trust Company, was a foot wider than the Brinkers' lot had been, and this necessitated the removal of a portion of the barn that Ehlers had built and that now encroached on the Lytges' property. Ehlers' brick house and frame barn were sold to architect John Roth, Jr. and his wife, Elenora, on January 13, 1906. Roth pulled down what was left of the barn and constructed a frame house on it site and also remodeled Ehlers' house into a duplex. Permits for both projects were taken out on February 24, 1906. Roth sold off the new frame house to city agent Paul F. Zach on August 18, 1906, thus creating a third parcel out of what had been a single lot. Roth and his wife sold the Ehlers house to William J. Sebutz on January 30, 1909, but continued to live there until 1911. The Ehlers house was subsequently sold to a number of individuals as an income property and had become a rooming house by the 1940s.

Fritz Ehlers lived out the rest of his life as a broken man. Having lost his home, he moved in with his daughter, Bertha, and her husband, Oscar Leverenz. Leverenz worked at his father's nearby flour and feed store on 2518 King Drive (North Third Street) located between Wright and Clarke Streets. The Leverenzes, who earlier lived with Oscar's father, moved to 2651 North 5th Street in 1904, probably to care for the aging Ehlers. Despondent over ill health and drinking heavily, Ehlers threatened to take his own life and number of times and finally did commit suicide by shooting himself in the head at 9:30 p.m. on Tuesday, October 6, 1908 at the Leverenz home. Ehlers' funeral took place from Fass and Nicolai's Chapel at 2116 North King Drive (North 3rd Street), and Ehlers was buried at Union Cemetery on October 9th.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the C. Frederick Ehlers House, 2576 North 4th Street, be designated as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-5 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e) of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

Retain the original roof shape. Dormers, skylights and solar collector panels may be added to roof surfaces if they are not visible from the street. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch. Avoid using new roofing materials that are inappropriate to the style and period of the building. Replace deteriorated roof coverings with new materials that resemble the original roofing in size, shape, color and texture.

B. Materials

1. Masonry

- a. Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles that were unavailable or were not used when the building was constructed.
- b. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting brick or stone surfaces is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone.
- c. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed.

2. Wood/Metal

- a. Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance.
- b. Retain or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that are inappropriate or were unavailable when the building was constructed.

C. Windows and Doors

1. Retain existing window and door openings. Retain the existing configuration of panes, sash, surrounds and sills, except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing

fenestration by enlarging or reducing windows or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes. Avoid changing the size or configuration of windowpanes or sash.

2. Respect the building's stylistic period. If the replacement of doors or window sash is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements such as unpainted aluminum combination storm and screen units. Avoid the filling-in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as glass block. Avoid using modern style window units such as horizontal sliding sash in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building or the use of vinyl or metal clad units.

D. Porches, Trim and Ornamentation

There should be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design and appearance.

E. Additions

All elevations are integral to the structure's architectural significance. Additions are not recommended and require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the addition's design compatibility with the building in terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design and materials, and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the principal elevations.

F. Non-Historic Addition/Non-Historic Structures

Alterations to non-historic buildings shall be made in such a way as to be as sympathetic as possible to the historic building or neighboring buildings. If possible, alterations should seek to lessen the adverse impact of the non-historic building on the historic components of the structure. Consideration should be given to removing the existing garage.

G. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the building.

H. Site Features

New plant materials, wooden patio decks, fencing, paving and lighting fixtures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building. Stockade and chain link fencing are generally not appropriate to the character of the building.