

Final Designation Study Report



William J. Turner House

743 North 25th Street

*City of Milwaukee
Department of City Development
Spring, 2005*

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HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

JUDGE WILLIAM J. TURNER HOUSE

I. NAME

Historic: William J. Turner House
Common name: 743 N. 25th Street

II. LOCATION

743 North 25th Street
4th Aldermanic District, **Ald. Robert Bauman**

Legal Description: Place's Subd of Part of W 100 Ac in NW ¼ section 30-7-22 Block 284 Lot 6 and N1/2 of Lot 7

III. CLASSIFICATION Structure

OWNER: M&R Properties Investments LLC
850 Golden Meadow Ct.
Brookfield, WI 53045

V. DESIGNATION REQUESTED BY: Ald. Robert Bauman

VI. YEAR BUILT: 1887¹

ARCHITECT: James Douglas²

¹ Douglas Family Manuscripts, box 3 file 1887, MMS 299 at the Milwaukee County Historical Society; and the Milwaukee tax rolls for the years 1886, 1887 and 1888.

² Ibid.

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Introduction

The Turner house is a “castle in wood” with its commanding size, multiple gables, and soaring corner tower. It is an outstanding example of the finely detailed, Queen Anne style houses built for Milwaukee’s merchants and professionals during the late nineteenth century. For more than 30 years the house was the residence of William J. Turner, a prominent lawyer and judge in the city of the Milwaukee.

In the era between 1870 and 1910 the surrounding West End neighborhood was one of the city’s premier residential districts. Queen Anne style houses, such as the Turner residence, are one of the quintessential forms of Victorian-era domestic architecture. Today these houses are highly prized because of their size, complexity and fine

A circa 1890 photo of the Turner house (right) that was probably composed for publication in a book. Hand-tinted professional photos such as these were usually reserved for the best of Milwaukee’s 19th century houses.



Photo courtesy of Milwaukee County Historical Society. Reproduction without permission prohibited.

wooden exterior details. Relatively few large, Queen Anne style houses with towers remain in Milwaukee today because many have been lost to the wrecking ball. Preservation of the remaining examples is a top priority. The significance of the Turner house is enhanced by its location on the same block as the Fred Sivyer house at 761 N. 25th which is considered one of the city's finest examples of Shingle Style architecture. These two impressive houses are remarkable examples of the zenith of 1880s residential architecture in Milwaukee.



The impressive, round corner tower topped with a bell-shaped roof.

Description

The Turner house is located at the top of a small bermed grass lawn on N. 25th Street between W. Wisconsin Avenue and W. Wells Street. It is a rambling, 2-1/2-story, asymmetrical, Queen Anne style frame structure resting on a rusticated, raised limestone foundation. Handsomely finished with very narrow clapboards and extensive wood shingle trim, the building is trimmed with ornamental wood shingle belt courses, and a combination of shingles and stick style vertical trim boards in the front gable.

The principal elevation facing North 25th Street is composed of a front-gabled block and a soaring, three story round corner tower, which is topped by a bell-shaped roof that in turn is surmounted by an original sheet metal finial. The tower is fenestrated with regularly placed, double hung windows and it features bands of ornamental wooden shingling at the base of each story. The main block of the house features a central, two-story bay that is fenestrated with a large landscape sash on each story. Entry to the house is by means of a tall wooden door behind a short wooden porch at the north end of the front elevation. The front gable, which is trimmed with wooden

shingles, is fenestrated with a bay of three centrally-placed double hung windows.

The side elevation that faces north features a projecting staircase bay trimmed with extensive wood paneling. The rest of the elevation is fenestrated with randomly placed double hung windows, which respond to the needs of the interior.

The south elevation features a projecting, one story frame addition built in the 1920s. The rest of elevation has remained virtually unchanged since the house was built. It features a large side gable trimmed with wood shingles and windows randomly placed to respond to the needs of the interior. Despite the presence of a non-contributing addition to the south elevation, the building remains relatively intact on the exterior and passers-by on the street today would notice little change to the structure.

Changes to the exterior of the house are all reversible and do not substantially diminish the architectural and historic significance of the building. The wood frame one story addition built in 1926 on the south elevation is a non-contributing part of the house, which means that it presently is not known to possess any architectural or historic significance. The front porch was altered in the 1920s, or 1930s but it could easily be rebuilt to its original design in the historic photograph.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The Turner house is architecturally significant as one of the city's best remaining examples of a fine, Queen Anne style residence with a soaring corner tower. The house is also important as a large, custom-built, Queen Anne style residence designed by a leading Milwaukee architect, James Douglas, who contributed significantly to the design of the city and especially its residential neighborhoods.

VIII. HISTORY

Architecture

The Turner house is a splendid example of Queen Anne style architecture. Hallmarks of the style include an asymmetrical, picturesque massing, finely crafted embellishments such as towers, turrets, ornamental wood shingling and projecting bays. Roofs are usually steeply pitched and multi-gabled, sometimes incorporating a large corner turret or tower and a picturesque character that typically incorporates, steeply pitched, multi-gabled roofs, corner towers and turrets, projecting bay windows and incorporated sweeping roofs, block-like projecting bays and asymmetrical massing.

The ca. 1890 photo of the house shows that it has changed very little with the exception of alterations to the front porch and construction of a small, one story side addition.

The style has its roots in nineteenth century England when architects looked back to the past centuries to reinterpret historic styles of architecture and reportedly got its name during the 1870s from English architect J.J. Stevenson. The Queen Anne was based on English architecture of the late medieval and Renaissance periods in England. While the style was building in popularity in England during the 1870s, it didn't really catch on in America until about 1880 and then it remained popular for more than a decade. The best American wooden examples of the style, such as the Turner House, are often so highly embellished that their exteriors are compared with the design of fine *interior* cabinetry work.



In Milwaukee Queen Anne style houses were also sometimes embellished with distinctively German features for the area's large German-American clientele. Research has revealed that the city's largest, towered queen Anne style houses were usually custom-designed by the city's most prominent architects. Because of the size and complexity of these houses, they would have been considered major commissions by their respective architects.

It is important to place the Turner house in its proper architectural context. A very large, towered Queen Anne style house belongs to a decidedly small and elite grouping of buildings in Milwaukee. While there are many other smaller Queen Anne houses with towers, only a few rank comparably in size and detail with the Turner House. A century ago however, there were many large, towered Queen Anne style houses in Milwaukee, but most have since been demolished making it important to preserve the few remaining examples. Today, the Turner House ranks among the best surviving wooden Queen Anne style houses in Milwaukee.

In terms of its architectural significance, the Turner residence is comparable to another Douglas-designed mansion, the Charles Quarles House (1891), which is located at 2531 N. Farwell Ave. and individually listed on the National Register of Historic places since 1988. Perhaps the grandest of all the remaining wooden towered houses in Milwaukee is the Charles Stolper house at 2463 N. 1st St., which was designed by John Roth, Jr. It is a contributing structure in the North First Street National Register Historic District.



The Charles Quarles House (1891), located at 2531 N. Farwell Ave., was designed by James Douglas and has been individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1988. It is comparable to the house Douglas designed for William Turner at 743 N. 25th St.

The materials, massing and sheer elegance of the Turner house all reflect the dexterous ability of the designer. The house is finely proportioned with windows and doors carefully sized to respond to the overall size of the house. This is a system of design that is very seldom applied to today's contemporary architecture.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the house is its remarkable 3-story round corner tower, which is topped with a bell-shaped roof. The tower is one of the quintessential features associated with the best examples of Queen Anne style architecture in this county. The Turner house tower is unquestionably a masterpiece of carpentry and constructing it required that each piece of siding had to be meticulously sawn to a precise boomerang shape in order to bend neatly in a level line around the tower.

In sum, the Turner house is important as a pivotal residential structure on the city's near West Side. It represents the zenith of the development of the Queen Anne style in Milwaukee and it is one of the few remaining examples of its kind in the city.

House History and William J. Turner

The picturesque Queen Anne style house gets its historic name from its first occupant, Judge William J. Turner who lived there with his family for more than three decades. Earlier in his life he moved frequently, but the big, comfortable house on North 25th Street is where he settled permanently and lived out his life. He came from a family of lawyers and politicians, with his grandfather serving in the state legislature during the 1840s and his father serving as a judge.

Construction of the Turner house began in the spring of 1887 by investor Howard H. Hoyt who lived nearby at the northwest corner of N. 25th and W. Wisconsin Ave. (razed).³ Hoyt put the newly completed house up for sale when it was finished and William Turner bought it in March of 1888 for \$19,000. This was certainly among the most expensive houses erected in the city that year, according to research of the building lists published in the Milwaukee Sentinel.⁴

When Mr. Turner moved into the house, his downtown Milwaukee law practice was thriving and he was nearing the peak of his career as a lawyer. His impressive new residence represented a substantial boost in prestige and investment compared with his previous house located about a half mile east at 751 N. 13th Street (razed) where he and his family had been living since 1882. Turner's extended family was reportedly among the earliest settlers of Connecticut. His grandfather Joseph, a veteran of the War of 1812, brought the family to Wisconsin in 1839 settling in what is now Waukesha where William J. was born in 1848. At age 13, William moved with his family to New York City where he attended public schools. The family later returned to the Milwaukee area and William enrolled at Carroll College in Waukesha, but soon transferred to Beloit College before transferring again to the University of Albany in New York where he graduated with a law degree in 1871. He subsequently returned to Wisconsin and opened a law practice in Port Washington, but moved to Manitowoc a year later to start a law practice with his father.⁵



³ Research of deeds, tax rolls and the architect's family manuscript collection indicates construction began in spring, 1887.

⁴ Milwaukee Sentinel October 17, 1887, page 8, column 1.

⁵ Ellis Baker Usher, Wisconsin. Its Story and Biography 1848-1913. Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1914, pages 1713-1719

William relocated to Milwaukee in 1882 and opened another law firm with a partner, Leander F. Frisby, who was also the state's Attorney General. Like his father before him, Mr. Turner pursued an interest in politics and was elected to serve on the school board between 1887 and 1894. In 1908 his career entered a new and decidedly more prominent phase when he was appointed circuit court judge in Milwaukee. While serving on the bench he garnered a reputation as hard worker who seldom took a vacation. He died in his house Feb. 15, 1919 after a long illness.⁶ He was a very active member of St. James Episcopal Church at 833 W. Wisconsin Ave.

After Turner died his wife continued to live at the house until she sold it in March of 1920 to Lawrence and Catherine Rinke for \$11,000. That was substantially less than the purchase price 32 years earlier.

During the mid-1930s at the peak of the Great Depression when housing was in particularly short supply, the Turner residence was transformed into a rooming house with seven boarders listed in the city directory. At least four other houses on the block were also rooming houses at that time reflecting a distinctive change in the neighborhood that had been a focal point for fine, single family homes. By 1980 the building was listed in the directories with 12 apartments. In the late 1990s, Rev. Paul and Cindy Hoover bought the house and returned it to single-family use following an extensive renovation of the interior. The house was sold to a new owner a few years ago and turned into a bed and breakfast.



James Douglas from his obituary Sept. 4, 1894 in the Milwaukee Sentinel

Architect

Scottish architect James Douglas (1823-1894) designed so many houses on the city's lower east side during the late 19th century, that people sometimes referred to the area as "Douglasville."⁷ His work was not confined to the city, however, and Douglas-designed houses were found coast to coast perhaps partly because his designs were published in magazines of his day. Several of his surviving works are listed on the national and local registers today.

Douglas was at the peak of his career when he designed the Turner house. He began his career as a carpenter not long

after arriving in Canada from Scotland in 1840. Three years later he moved to Milwaukee and became involved with constructing many early buildings in the city. He reportedly worked on constructing the first bridge across the Milwaukee

River at the foot of North Water Street. He is also known to have worked on St. John Cathedral (1847) at 812 N. Jackson Street, Holy Trinity church (1849) at 605 S. 4th St. on the near south side and the first Milwaukee City Hall (razed).⁸ He began working

⁶ Unidentified Newspaper clipping dated Feb. 16, 1919 filed at the Milwaukee county Historical Society under Microfilm Biographies and obituaries collection Roll 95.

⁷ Edward Louis Conard, Ed., *History of Milwaukee from its First Settlement to the Year 1895* Vol. II, page 464.

⁸ *History of Milwaukee*. Frank A. Flower, Ed., Chicago: Western Historical Publishing Co., 1881, page 1500.

as both an architect and builder in 1847 along with his younger brother, Alexander, under the name J&A Douglas, architects and builders. In 1863 Mr. Douglas took a management position with Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company but went back to a full time architectural practice in the spring of 1872. He was known best in his day for his residential designs, which were popular throughout many states. In the south they were reputedly known as “Douglas Style” homes.⁹

James Douglas designed the Willard Merrill House at 1425 N. Prospect Ave. in 1890 and it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Prospect Avenue Mansions Historic District.

While much of his design work has been lost to demolition, his extant work in Milwaukee includes the incomparable Sanford Kane House (1883) at 1841 N. Prospect Ave., which is both locally and nationally listed. Another fine example of his work is the Willard Merrill House (1890) at 1425 N. Prospect Ave., which is listed on the National Register as part of the Prospect Avenue Mansions Historic District. The Elias Calkins Double House, which he designed in 1875 at 1612-14 W. Kane Place, is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Douglas is also important because a later generation of Milwaukee architects trained in his office. Prominent apprentices who went on to success include Alfred C. Clas, Cornelius Leenhouts, Fred Graf and Otto C. Uehling. Another apprentice, James Naughton, became the superintendent of building for the Brooklyn, New York School Board.

In the last years of his practice, failing health moved Douglas to put his sons in charge of the company. Douglas died in his home at 1325 N. Jackson St. (razed) on August 31, 1894. The firm continued through 1900 but was never the same without his guidance.

⁹ Ibid, p. 1500.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The William J. Turner House meets three criteria (e-5, e-6 and e-9) for designation in the city's Historic Preservation Ordinance. It is pivotal example of a large Queen Anne style house in Milwaukee and it is vital to the architectural significance of the west side neighborhood in which it is located. The house is also a splendid example of the residential design work of a very important Milwaukee architect, James Douglas.

e-5 Its embodiment of the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen.

Rationale: Criterion **e-5** is applied because the Turner house is one of the finest Queen Anne style "castles in wood" remaining in Milwaukee today.

e-6 Its identification as the work of an artist, architect, interior designer, craftsman, or master builder whose individual works have influenced the development of the City of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin or the United States.

Rationale: Criterion **e-6** is applied because the designer of the house, James Douglas, was one of the city's most influential architects during the mid and late nineteenth century. His work has contributed significantly to the architectural character of the city as it stands today.

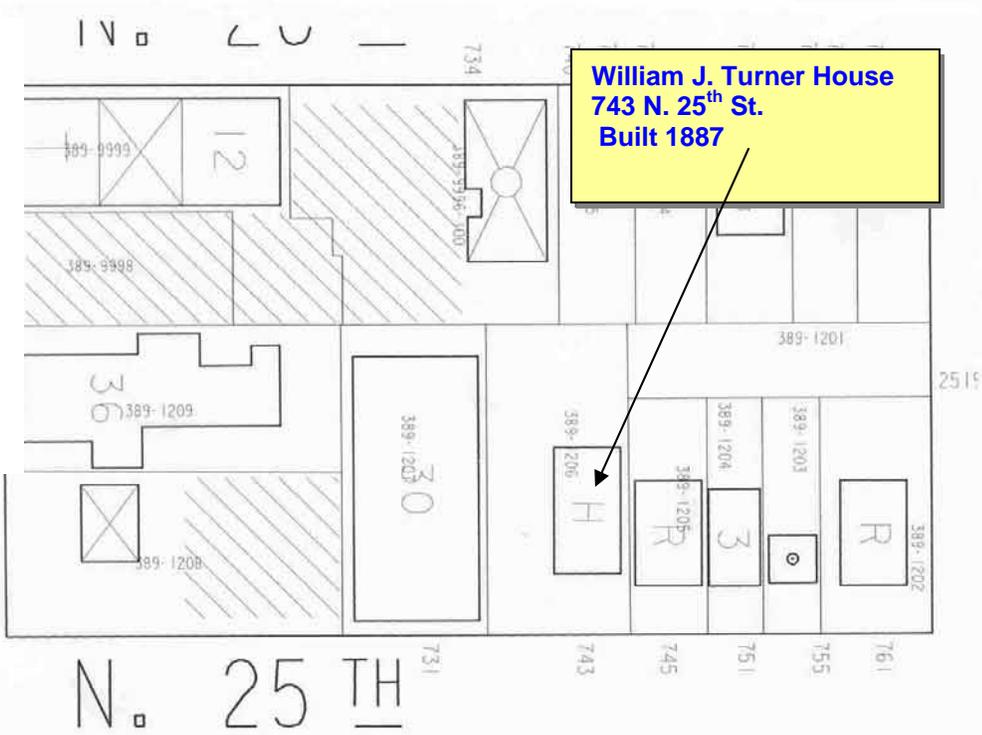
e-9 Its unique location as a singular physical characteristic which represents an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City of Milwaukee.

Rationale: Criterion **e-9** is applied because the Turner House house is one of the pivotal residences in its west side neighborhood and is one of the city's few remaining big, Queen Anne style houses with a soaring corner tower.

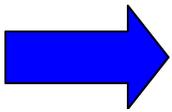
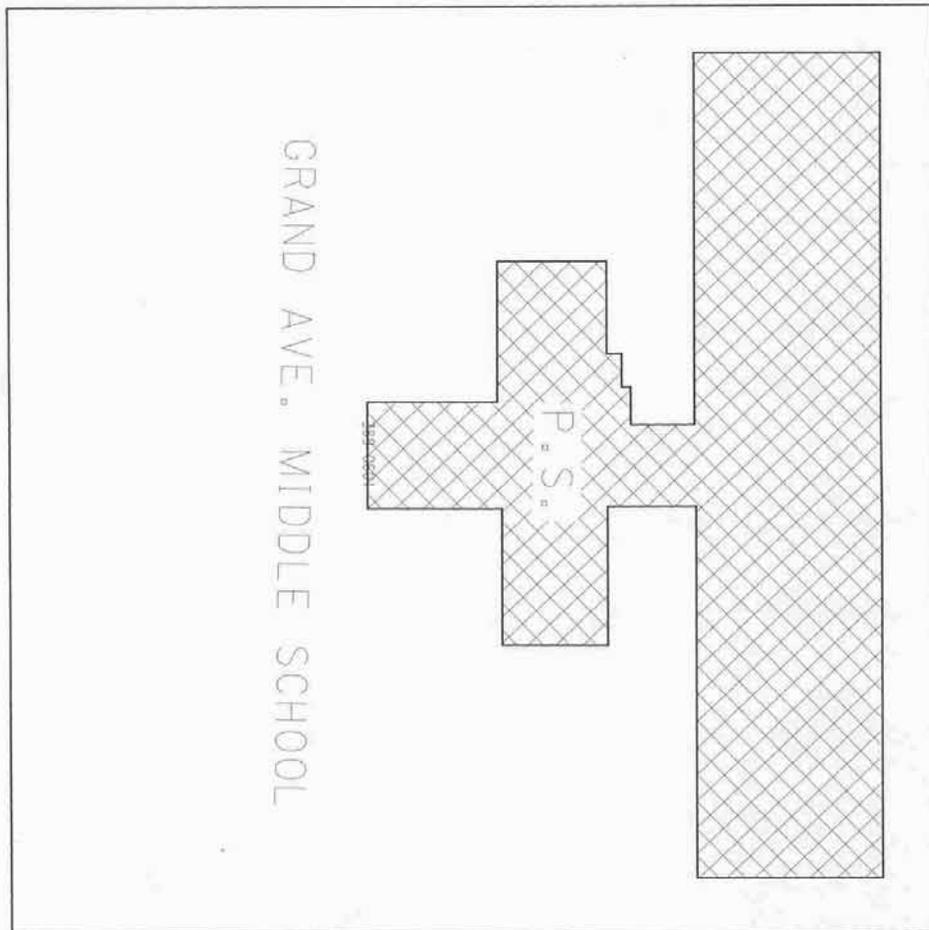
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W. Wells Street



W. Wisconsin Ave.



North

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The guidelines are primarily intended to preserve the exterior of the house and are not meant to inhibit or prevent ordinary repairs. Proper maintenance techniques are encouraged in the guidelines. Restoring missing or altered original features, such as the front porch, is highly encouraged, but **not** required in the designation. The preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Commission regarding his historic designation. The commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions.

A. Roofs

Retain the original roof shape. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch.

B. Materials

1. Masonry

- a. Unpainted brick or stone should not be painted or covered. This is an alteration that would change the appearance of the house and could cause irreversible or expensive-to-repair damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- b. Deteriorated mortar joints in the exterior brick walls should be tuck pointed using mortar that duplicates the original in terms of color, style, texture and strength. See the masonry chapters in the books, *As Good As New* or *Good for Business* for explanations on why the use of a proper mortar mix is crucial to making lasting repairs that will not contribute to new deterioration of the masonry. Replaced mortar joints should be tooled to match the style of the original joints.
- d. Clean masonry only when necessary and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting and other abrasive blasting to brick or stone surfaces is prohibited. These methods of cleaning erode the surface of the material and accelerate deterioration and the accumulation of dirt on the exterior of the building. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials (i.e., use acid cleaners with caution on limestone sills and trim). Please note that even when water blasting alone is used at very high pressure, it can cause irreversible damage to brick and stone. Because of the inherent dangers of pressure washing and chemical cleaning it should be done by experienced individuals.
- e. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new materials that duplicate the old as closely as possible.

2. Wood/Metal

- a. Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance. The wooden sidewall shingles narrow wood siding and crown moldings around the eaves are important features and should be retained.
- 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 modern materials that are incompatible with the historic character of the building. The installation of new vinyl trim or siding is not allowed.

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 to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing fenestration by enlarging or reducing window 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 doors. Avoid filling-in or covering up openings with incompatible materials such as concrete or glass block. Avoid the installation of modern window units with glazing configurations that are incompatible with the style of the building (e.g., installing multi pane Colonial style windows in place of original double hung windows). Any original wooden windows should be retained and repaired if at all possible.

D. Trim and Ornamentation

Existing trim or ornamentation should not be changed except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features should match the original member in scale, design and appearance, but not necessarily in material.

E. Additions

Additions are permitted with the approval of the Historic Preservation Commission. Ideally an addition should either compliment or have a neutral effect upon the historic character of the building. The commission will review the compatibility of the addition with the historic house and may consider the

following details: Window size and placement, scale, design, materials, roof configuration, height and the degree to which the addition impacts the principal elevation(s) of the house. The one story addition on the south side of the house, which rests on, a concrete block foundation is not considered a contributing part of the building and can be removed.

F. Signs

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

G. Site features

New plant materials, fencing, paving and lighting fixtures should respect and enhance the historic architectural character of the building. HPC review of major relandscaping is required.

H. Guidelines for New Construction that is separate from the house (i.e., garage, utility building, garden structure, etc.)

It is important that any new construction on the site will enhance and be compatible with the character of the house.

1. Location and massing of new construction

New construction must respect the historic setting of the house. It should be designed to maintain the appearance of the house from the street as a freestanding structure. A new, replacement garage, for example, should ideally be located at the back of the lot near the west property line.

2. Scale

A new building on the lot should be designed to appear as a secondary structure that complements rather than competes with or overwhelms the architecture of the house.

3. Materials

To enhance and complement the architecture of the house, the building materials used in any new construction project should generally be compatible with the house's colors, textures, proportions and combinations of cladding materials. Because the house is finished with quality, long-lasting, repairable materials such as wood, brick and stone, those materials are preferable for new construction on the property.

I. Guidelines for Demolition

Although demolition is not encouraged and is generally not permissible, there are instances when demolition may be acceptable if approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. The Commission shall take the following guidelines, with those found in subsection 9(h) of the ordinance, into consideration when reviewing demolition requests.

1. Condition

Demolition requests may be granted when it can be clearly demonstrated that the condition of a building or a portion thereof is such that it constitutes an immediate threat to health and safety and is beyond hope of repair.

2. Importance

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is of historical or architectural significance or displays a quality of material and craftsmanship that does not exist in other structures in the area.

3. Location

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building contributes to the neighborhood and the general street appearance and has a positive effect on other buildings in the area.

4. Potential for Restoration

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is beyond economically feasible repair.

5. Additions

Consideration will be given to whether or not the proposed demolition is a later addition that is not in keeping with original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.