

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

SECTION I. NAME

Historic: Whitnall House

Common Name:

SECTION II. LOCATION

1200-1204, 1208 E. Locust Street

3rd Aldermanic District
Alderman Michael D'Amato

Legal description: Tax Key No.: 315-0910-000 (1200-1204)
315-0911-000 (1208)

RE-SUBD OF BLK 2 WHITNALL KNOLL IN NE 1/4 SEC 16-7-22
BLOCK 2 (LOT 10 & W 10' LOT 11) and E 35' LOT 11 EXC ST W 20'
LOT 12

SECTION III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

SECTION IV. OWNER

Kurt R. Holzauer
1208 E. Locust St.
Milwaukee, WI 53212-2642

SECTION V. YEAR BUILT: 1851 and later

ARCHITECT: Unknown

SECTION VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Frank Whitnall House is located in Milwaukee's Riverwest neighborhood approximately 2.25 miles from the heart of the Central Business District. The neighborhood's proximity to the Milwaukee River gives it a unique ambiance. Across the street from the Whitnall House at the southeast corner of Humboldt Ave. and E. Locust St. is Gordon Park, a 13+ acre county park acquired in 1907. To the east, buffered by green space, is a small industrial building and the high rise Locust Court which houses seniors. To the west and north of the Whitnall House is a small subdivision created on former Whitnall land. The secluded subdivision is approached by a single roadway, N. Dousman St., and backs up to the grounds of the Riverside Pumping Station; most of the houses are not visible from busy Locust St.

The Whitnall House sits on a knoll above Locust Street and is set back from the roadway. It is screened from view by various plantings and the roadway (N. Dousman St.) into the subdivision makes a jog in front of the house. The house itself is irregular in form, having been added onto over the course of several decades. Fronting Locust St. is a one-story, hip roofed, gable fronted wing with an oculus at the gable, a center entry with Italianate style porch and six-over-six double hung sash flanking the entry. Two chimneys extend from this wing, one is broad and the change in brick indicates that it was doubled in size from its original dimensions. This portion of the house is the most architecturally articulated. It is said to be the oldest portion of the dwelling, featuring a basement kitchen and dining room in the manner of Whitnall's native England. Stylistically, the exterior of this wing appears to date more from the late 1860's to the 1870's and may represent a remodeling of the original, more modest facade. To the north extends a two story wing with gabled roof, also with its own chimney. To the west extends a story and a half wing with side porch and a window on the first story and in the gable end. A shed roof extends from the north end of this wing and serves as a carport. To the east extends a gabled story and a half wing with a dormer at the roof. The brick throughout is local cream color brick. A driveway is located at the north end of the property off Dousman St. and a stone hitching post is also located along Dousman Street.

Alterations to the building are not documented in local records but writers Frances Stover and H. Russell Zimmermann indicate that each of the wings of the house is located on a different level from the others, each has its own fireplace and chimney and three outside walls. Altogether there are 12 rooms on 6 levels including a subbasement with a dry cistern. Zimmermann describes the interior as having mostly wide pine floors except for the kitchen which has two inch ash flooring and that there were at one time some nine outside doors. Each room requires stepping either up or down for entry. The house is believed to have arrived at its present form in the late 1860's or early 1870's and has not had significant alterations since that time.

SECTION VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The Frank Whitnall House is significant as one of Milwaukee's few examples of pre-Civil War residential buildings and for its associations with the Whitnall family. The house is an excellent example of early Milwaukee vernacular architecture in which the function of the dwelling took precedence over aesthetic considerations. Frank Whitnall established one of the most prominent florist and seed businesses in the city. When Frank's son Charles B. Whitnall joined the business in the 1870's, he initiated the method of ordering fresh flowers by telephone and telegraph, a system now known as the Florist Transworld Delivery service (FTD) still in use today. Charles B. Whitnall established the National Association of Florists in 1884 and became an nationally renown city planner and has been called the father of the Milwaukee Park system because of his dedication to the development of parks throughout the metropolitan area. Whitnall also served as City Treasurer under Socialist Mayor Seidel and founded Commonwealth Mutual Savings Bank among his many other accomplishments.

SECTION VIII. HISTORY

The Frank Whitnall House has been an unofficial Milwaukee landmark for decades, long recognized for its association with Frank Whitnall whose business here began the Florist Transworld Delivery (FTD) system and its

association with Charles B. Whitnall, nationally recognized city planner and father of the Milwaukee park system. The building was nominated for landmark status under the old Landmarks Commission in 1974 but the nomination was not acted upon due to the large number of applicants that year (40) and the fact that the Landmarks Commission was restricted to acting on only 10 to 12 applications per year.

Frank Whitnall (1830-1904) was the youngest of four Whitnall brothers who left Kent, England to settle in Milwaukee when they were young men. Records on Charles (1820-1901) and William indicate that they arrived in the states in 1844. Frank Whitnall arrived around 1846 or 1848 depending on the source consulted. John T. Whitnall (1827-1904) probably arrived about the same time. The four were characterized as having "strong intelligence and an unusual abstemiousness in their personal habits." Their mother is credited with imprinting them with her own "strong, refined and moral nature."

Charles and Frank Whitnall acquired land at the northeast corner of today's Humboldt Ave. and E. Locust St.; Government Lot 30 was purchased in 1851 and Charles received title to Government Lot 29 in 1860. On tax rolls and maps, however, the Whitnalls were recognized as owners of Government Lot 29 by at least the mid-1850's and it is on Lot 29 that 1208 E. Locust stands today.

In his early years in Milwaukee Frank Whitnall worked as a painter for his brother John as did brothers William and Charles. Charles was also a "gardener" in the city directories, probably an indication of a truck farm or nursery business which began around 1857. Frank, however, was a student and lover of nature. He saved money and attended Oberlin College for two years where he studied botany, biology and chemistry. He was also something of a philosopher and "[f]ew men had so wide a scope of general information or were so well read in the modern thought of the day." When he returned to Milwaukee, Frank made the nursery his full time occupation beginning in 1860. By this time Frank had married Milwaukee school teacher Elizabeth Jane Byrne and their only child, Charles B., was born on January 21, 1859.

Professional nurseries came into their own in Milwaukee in the 1850's and the field was dominated by immigrants from the British Isles or Germany. Among the pioneers in this field were Martin Dorward from Scotland (c. 1845 whose nursery was located along Humboldt Ave. south of today's Gordon Park), George Scherz from Germany (1851), T. G. Armstrong & Son from Ireland (1854), William Kitzerow from Germany (1855) and Charles Hoppenrath from Germany (1858). An early resident who turned to gardening and landscape design around 1863 was William Brotherhood, from Middlesex England. Interestingly, Charles and John Whitnall lived near Brotherhood on Vliet St. for a few years in the 1850's.

Around 1862 Frank Whitnall opened a retail floral and seed shop with partner Carl Schirmmacher first on Broadway then on Juneau Ave. between Water and Market Streets. From 1865 to 1874 Whitnall was in partnership with Frank R. Ellis, a cousin on his mother's side. Their downtown shop moved from E. Juneau Ave. to 734 N. Milwaukee St. in 1871 and remained there through 1890. The last downtown shop was located at 752 N. Milwaukee St. and closed around 1899/1900.

In addition to the seeds, plants and cut flowers sold through his shop downtown, Frank Whitnall also leased potted plants for decorating homes, churches, special events and banquets and a specialty was potted palms, which otherwise lived in the greenhouses on Whitnall Knoll. Whitnall is also credited with being the first to use potted plants for decorative purposes in this area. The greenhouses, which were located north of the residence, were described as full of tropical splendor with the floral fragrances "making one fancy that he was in fairy land" as one local journalist enthusiastically described the premises in 1867. Later articles document additional greenhouse construction in 1871, 1873, and 1875 at which time Whitnall is credited with building one of the largest greenhouses in the country. Fire insurance atlases show these extensive hothouses north of 1208 E. Locust St. parallel to today's Roadsmeeet St. Whitnall's prominence in the business was recognized by 1881 when he was cited in *Flowers' History of Milwaukee* as the leading florist in the city. Son Charles B. Whitnall joined the business at age 16 during the 1870's and soon took the family business as well as the nursery industry to higher levels of professionalism. The first telegraph line was installed between the Whitnall greenhouses and the downtown store in 1876 to facilitate the delivery of plants and a telephone connection was installed in 1878. From this evolved the Florist Telegraph Delivery System (now Florist Transworld Delivery System) of which Charles served as the general manager for many years. This system revolutionized the floral industry and made possible the delivery of flowers to distant cities within the system, a practice we still utilize today. Charles B. Whitnall went on to open the first Wholesale Commission Flower Market in Milwaukee and was later a charter member of the Society

of American Florists. He was also an incorporator and director of the American Florist Co. which produced the first successful trade journal in the country.

Charles took over the family business when his parents moved to Los Angeles, California around 1888. They later deeded their portion of Whitnall Knoll to Charles in 1889. Frank Whitnall, ill with cancer, returned to Milwaukee to visit his son and surviving brothers in the summer of 1904 and died on September 10, 1904 at the age of 74 in Charles' home. Newspaper accounts recalled his "singularly sweet, sunny disposition, at one with flowers and birds and all manifestations of nature" and emphasized that Whitnall "was in the truest sense of the word a philosopher, working faithfully at details, but carrying them on to broad and farreaching conclusions". Widow Elizabeth Whitnall followed him in death a year later in November, 1905 in Los Angeles.

After his parents death, Charles Whitnall changed the direction of his professional life and threw his energies into planning. The greenhouses were leased to Holton & Hunkel who operated the business until about 1932. Whitnall described his early years as "just making things look beautiful" but became dissatisfied when he saw how development was occurring in the metropolitan area. He became interested in landscaping and through this, in planning. His accomplishments in this field are legendary. He helped pass state legislation creating the Milwaukee County Park Board and served on the County Park Commission for some 40 years. He likewise served on the Board of Public Land Commissioners for the city, both as president and secretary into the 1940's. Whitnall was also a charter member of the Regional Planning Board of Chicago and was the first president of the Milwaukee County Agriculture School. An outspoken advocate of parks and parkways, Whitnall was frequently quoted in the press on various zoning and development issues and by the 1930's was already affectionately known as the "Father of the Parks". In addition to these accomplishments, Whitnall was an organizer of the Milwaukee Ethical Society, was a charter member of the Social Democratic Party and served as City Treasurer from 1910-1912 under Socialist Mayor Seidel. In 1940 he was elected honorary member of the Wisconsin chapter of the American Institute of Architects, only the fifth non-member to be so honored. Whitnall also served on the school board, was chairman of the draft board in World War I, belonged to two Masonic lodges (Independence Lodge No. 80, Kilbourn Chapter No. 29), the City Club, the Old Settlers' Club, the American Forestry Association, the American Civic Association, the Wisconsin Chapter of Friends of Our Native Landscape, and the Wisconsin Historical Society among other groups. He also organized the Commonwealth Mutual Savings Bank in July, 1912 and served as an officer until his death.

Charles B. Whitnall survived being struck by a car in September of 1929 when he was 69 years of age. Reports indicated that he was near death but he recovered and remained active until his death on January 5, 1949 when he was just short of his 90th birthday. Whitnall was survived by his wife Marie Kottnauer, and his son George Gordon, a nationally recognized city planner in his own right who developed the first zoning ordinance for Los Angeles.

The house and property at 1208 E. Locust St. has had a long and interesting history. It first served Frank Whitnall and articles indicated that in the earliest portion of the house, Charles Whitnall was born in 1859. For brief periods in the 1850's it appears that brothers John T. and Charles also lived on the premises in the 1850's. John would soon establish himself in his painting business and lived at various residences on the west side. Charles alternated between painting and working at the family nursery but tended to live nearby along Humboldt Blvd. when not working at the greenhouses. From about 1877 until his death in 1901 at the age of 81, Charles would occupy the original homestead. Frank and his son Charles B. meanwhile built a new frame house in the Victorian Gothic style north of the old homestead around 1875. This house, addressed today at 2942 N. Dousman St., remained Charles' residence until his death in 1949. It was to this house in 1883 that he brought his first wife, Annie G. Gordon, who grew up across today's Locust St. in the Gordon family's Octagon house. The two separated in 1902 and divorced in 1910. For awhile at least, Annie may have lived in the old family homestead and continued as secretary-treasurer of the Whitnall Floral Co. before moving to Los Angeles to be with her son and his family. Charles' second wife, Marie Kottnauer, would live out her life at 2942 N. Dousman. She died in 1957 at the age of 83.

Later occupants of the Whitnall homestead included Miss Emma Whitnall, probably the senior Charles' daughter or granddaughter, who lived there until her death in 1950; Marie's mother and brother Annette and Edwin Kottnauer (1914-1915); and Joseph A. and Gladys Freeman (1932-1950). The tenancy of the Freemans indicates that a portion of the house may have been rented out or that the Freemans helped to take care of Miss Emma. The property sold to Robert A. and Jean Holzhauser in 1951. Their son Kurt is the current owner and occupant. Jean Holzhauser later remarried

Irving Dorheim but recounted to the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission in 1974 that "In our time, 1208 housed both W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas on their respective lecture tours, as well as various other visiting Elks. Auden was fascinated, and asked for a guided tour. "It looks just like an English cottage!" he said, and I [Jean] told him that was only proper since an English family had built it. Thomas peed in the rose bushes and sat up all night drinking, despite my efforts to get him to bed in the freshly cleaned and prepared guest room."

The original 18.30 acres (comprising Lots 29 and 30) acquired by the Whitnalls has since been developed and the extensive greenhouses razed. The north half of Lot 30 was parceled off by the mid-1850's. Another section, at the northeast corner of Locust and Humboldt was sold off and developed as Lawn Square subdivision in 1887. Land to the east of the old homestead eventually went to the Random Lake Ice Co. which had an extensive ice warehouse and processing complex on the premises around the turn of the century. Random Lake Ice and Coal Co. as it was later known remained in business until the 1950's. A Kroeger super market was later built on the site in 1962. Heinemann's subsequently had the property. Further east toward the Milwaukee River, a senior high rise tower was built in 1969. Some of the land at the south end of the Whitnall holdings was sold off to the city in 1892 when Locust St. was cut through to the Milwaukee River. The remainder of the Whitnall property was subdivided by Charles B., Marie and Emma as Whitnall Knoll in 1927 and a portion was re-subdivided in 1936. The Whitnall house at 1208 E. Locust St. occupies parts of lots 11 and 12 of the Re-subdivision of Whitnall Knoll. Lot 10, to the west of the house and addressed at 1200-1204 E. Locust St., is greenspace adjacent to the house and is included in the designation since it constitutes part of the original grounds of the house and is currently owned by the Holzhausers.

SECTION IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Whitnall Family House at 1200-1204 and 1208 E. Locust Street be designated as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-3, e-5, e-9 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e) of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

e-3. Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the culture and development of the city of Milwaukee.

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

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

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 roof shape. Skylights or dormers are discouraged but may be added to roof surfaces if they are not visible from the street or public right of way. Avoid making changes to the roof shape which would alter the building height, roof line or pitch. If replacement is necessary, duplicate the appearance of the original roofing as closely as possible.

B. MATERIALS

1. Masonry

- a. Unpainted brick, terra cotta, or stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural terra cotta or stone. This is historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- b. Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles which were unavailable or were not used when the building was constructed.
- c. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting limestone, terra cotta, or cream brick surfaces is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products which could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone.
- d. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material which 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 such as the Italianate style porch fronting Locust Street.
- 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 which do not duplicate the appearance of the original materials. Covering wood trim with aluminum or vinyl is not permitted.

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 window panes or sash. Use storm windows or protective glazing which have glazing configurations similar to the prime windows and which obscure the prime windows as little as possible.
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 and material of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements. Avoid the filling-in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as glass block or concrete block. Avoid using modern style window units, such as horizontal sliding sash or casements, in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building. Vinyl or metal clad prime window units are not permitted. Glass block basement windows are not permitted, except on elevations where they will not be visible from the street.
3. Steel bar security doors and window guards are generally not allowed. If permitted, the doors or grates shall be of the simplest design and installed so as to be as unobtrusive as possible.

D. 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, color and appearance.

E. ADDITIONS

No additions will be permitted on the south (front), west or east elevations as this would destroy the character of the house. Any other addition requires 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, color, and materials, and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the principal elevations or is visible from the public right of way.

F. SIGNS/EXTERIOR LIGHTING

The installation of any permanent exterior sign or light fixture shall require the approval of the Commission.

Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign or light with the historic and architectural character of the building. Plastic internally illuminated box signs are not permitted.

G. SITE FEATURES

New plant materials, paving, fencing, or accessory structures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building if visible from the public right of way.

H. GUIDELINES FOR NEW CONSTRUCTION

It is important that new construction be designed to be as sympathetic as possible with the character of the structure.

1. Siting

New construction must respect the historic siting of the building. It should be accomplished so as to maintain the appearance of the building from the street as a free-standing structure.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk, the expression of major building divisions including foundation, body and roof, and individual building components, such as overhangs and fenestration that are in close proximity to a historic building must be compatible to and sympathetic with the design of the commercial building.

3. Form

The massing of the new construction must be compatible with the goal of maintaining the integrity of the building as a free standing structure. The profiles of roofs and building elements which project and receded from the main block should express the same continuity established by the historic building if they are in close proximity to it.

4. Materials

The building materials which are visible from the public right-of-way and in close proximity to the building should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions, and combinations of cladding materials used on the building. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.

I. GUIDELINES FOR DEMOLITION

Although demolition is not encouraged and is generally not permissible, there may be instances when demolition may be acceptable if approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. The following guidelines, with those found in subsection 9(h) of the ordinance, shall be taken into consideration by the Commission 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 which is not in keeping with the original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.