

Edward Diederichs House
1241 North Franklin Place
Milwaukee
Milwaukee County
Wisconsin

HABS No. WIS-262

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40-MILWA,
21-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

EDWARD DIEDERICHS HOUSE

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Location: 1241 North Franklin Place (west side of North Franklin Place between East Juneau Avenue and East Knapp Street), Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Present Owner: Eliot Fitch

Present Occupants: Mr. and Mrs. Eliot Fitch

Present Use: Residence

Statement of Significance: This is the finest surviving ante-bellum house in Milwaukee and ranks among the city's outstanding Neo-classical buildings. The extensive modifications carried out during the 1890's are in complete harmony with the earlier fabric, and the composition is one of exceptional dignity and elegance. On both exterior and interior, the house has been meticulously maintained.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Edward Diederichs bought the lot from George C. Wood of Kentucky on October 11, 1852, and was living at this address at the time the Milwaukee City Directory for 1854-55 was compiled. It appears that fire all but destroyed the dwelling in December, 1859. Diederichs had the house rebuilt and was residing there once more by June, 1860.
2. Architect: There is a tradition that Diederichs himself designed the house. Thus far there is no evidence to corroborate or to deny this.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The house was built for Edward Diederichs c. 1852-54 and rebuilt in 1860. On February 15, 1862, he sold the heavily mortgaged property to Maurice Grashof of New York for \$8,200. It changed hands again on March 2, 1864, when Henry Mann bought it from the State Bank of Wisconsin for \$10,000. Mann sold to Ethelinda (Mrs. John) Johnston in August, 1895. The home's fifth (present) owner purchased it in 1943.

4. Builders and suppliers: Unknown. It is said that the wooden lions which once flanked the entrance portico were created by Milwaukee's A. D. Seaman Company.

5. Alterations and additions:

a. A front-page story in the Milwaukee Sentinel for December 5, 1859, reported:

"Saturday evening a fire broke out in the large and handsome mansion of Edward Diederichs, on Franklin Street . . .

"The firemen, when they arrived on the ground, worked manfully to arrest the progress of destruction; but owing to the strong wind and the combustible nature of the edifice, the most strenuous exertions seemed unavailing to save the building, or indeed the contents, and we were told that the greater part of the furniture was destroyed."

Then, on June 22, 1860, the same paper stated:

"The house of Mr. Diederichs /sic/ on Prospect street /sic/, which burned last December, is now rebuilt and makes as fine an appearance as ever. It is a unique and handsome structure."

The newspaper accounts leave unanswered questions as to the precise extent of the fire damages (though the implication is that the house was almost demolished) and the degree to which the rebuilt residence depended upon its predecessor for size, plan, and appearance.

b. Soon after they purchased the residence from Henry Mann in 1895, the Johnstons set about remodelling and enlarging it--at a total cost, according to the present owner, of \$45,000. They added the second story and rebuilt much of the interior. (A newspaper interview of c. 1920-27 with Mrs. Johnston states that the ". . . interior was completely changed. A library of noble proportions, a spacious dining room, reception room and household offices replaced the small and more numerous rooms that occupied the first floor.") The present central hall plan and the ceiling height on the main floor seem, however, to

predate the Johnston project. Fitch has stated that the majority of the floors, woodwork, and hardware date from the 1890's, as do the broad staircase leading from the hall to second story and the one-story alcove on the south wall. So, too, in all probability, does the single-story alcove at the rear. The Johnstons had two fireplaces removed--one from the northwest room (their library, the present kitchen) and one from the dining room. For the Johnstons, the entrance porch was also altered, a third column having been added to the original pair on each side of the porch. Architect for the project was Howland Russel of Milwaukee.

- c. In September, 1925, a one-story brick garage 22' x 30' was added on the southwest corner. The cost was approximately \$3,000, and the architects were Eschweiler and Eschweiler of Milwaukee.
- d. The present owner made a number of changes not long after he bought the house in 1943. The panelling, built-in cupboard, and bookcases installed by the Johnstons in the south rooms of the main level were removed. A kitchen and kitchen storage areas were built at the rear of this same level, truncating the central hall and occupying the northwest corner room, which had been the Johnston's library. (During the Johnston's days, the kitchen was in the basement.) The Johnston's stained glass, in the south alcove, was removed and the remaining fireplace, in the northeast corner room, was given marble trim, replacing the green tile trim installed for the Johnstons. Beyond this, extensive repairs to and redecoration of the interior were carried out. The wooden lions which had long guarded the entrance portico were beyond repair by 1943 and were destroyed. The exterior was repaired and refurbished and given its present color scheme. And, finally, more recently, one of the six wood columns of the entrance porch has been replaced.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Three of the home's occupants have been prominent businessmen. A native of Bohemia, Henry Mann (1827-1905) settled in Milwaukee in 1848 and became a wholesale grocer, railroad director, wooden-ware and furniture manufacturer, and land owner. Humboldt Park on Milwaukee's south side was developed

on property purchased from Mann by the city in 1892. John Johnston (1836-1904), banker, writer, and philanthropist, came to Milwaukee from Scotland in 1856 to work in the Wisconsin Marine and Fire Insurance Bank owned by his uncle Alexander Mitchell. He remained with the firm until 1893 and during these years also served as an alderman, as president of the Milwaukee Chamber of Commerce, as a trustee of the Milwaukee Public Library, Milwaukee and Carroll colleges, and Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, and as a director of the Milwaukee Cement Company. He was, further, a member of the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents. A published historian, Johnston was elected president of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. He donated the land for Johnston Emergency Hospital and numbered among the founders of Calvary Presbyterian Church. The present owner, Eliot Fitch, is chairman of the board of the Marine National Exchange Bank, president and board chairman of the Marine Corporation, chairman of the board of the Marine Capital Corporation, a director of Northwestern National Insurance Company, Brownberry Ovens, Inc., and the Nordberg Manufacturing Company, past president of the Citizens Government Research Bureau, and a member of the Board of Regents of Marquette University.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photographs of the exterior are in the collection of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Book of Deeds, City of Milwaukee, XXXVII, 74-75; XLI, 372-373; XLIII, 279-281; XLVII, 323-324; XLVIII, 81-83; LXXIII, 33, Milwaukee County Courthouse, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Book of Mortgages, City of Milwaukee, LI, 505, Milwaukee County Courthouse, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Building permit for September 17-18, 1925, General Office, Inspector of Buildings, 1010 Municipal Building, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Inspection of structure, July 15 and December 31, 1968 and January 4, 1969.

Interview with Eliot Fitch, July 15, 1968.

Milwaukee Sentinel Index, Local History Room, Milwaukee Public Library.

"Old Settlers' Scrapbook," Fig. 166, in the collection of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Records of ownership, Records and Research, 509 City Hall, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

b. Secondary and published sources:

"Brevities," Milwaukee Sentinel, September 9, 1874, 8 and February 9, 1875, 8.

"Destructive Fire," Milwaukee Sentinel, April 16, 1860, 1.

"Fire," Milwaukee Sentinel, December 5, 1859, 1.

"Funeral of Henry Mann," Milwaukee Sentinel, August 19, 1905, 5.

"Geilfuss Named President at Marine, Fitch Chairman," Milwaukee Sentinel, January 15, 1965, Part 2, 6.

"German Republican Club," Milwaukee Sentinel, July 22, 1856, 2.

Milwaukee City Directory, 1847 and later.

Milwaukee Writers' Project, History of Milwaukee County, Milwaukee, 1947, 489.

Perrin, Richard W. E., "Milwaukee Landmarks; Part IV, Houses," Lore, XVII, Spring, 1967, 49-50.

Unidentified clippings on John Johnston and on the residence, in the collection of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Untitled article on the residence, Milwaukee Sentinel, June 22, 1860, 1.

3. Potential sources not consulted: Contemporary accounts, if any, of Diederichs, his home, and the fire, in papers other than the Milwaukee Sentinel.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The two-story building is unusual among ante-bellum midwestern houses in the Neo-

classical vein in reflecting Palladian rather than Federal style or Greek Revival influences. Uncommon, too, are the richness, sophistication, and monumentality of its design.

2. Condition of fabric: Excellent

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 50 feet wide x 65 feet deep with shallow, one-story alcoves on south and west elevations and a one-story garage at the southwest corner.
2. Foundations: Stone and brick surfaced to simulate stone.
3. Wall construction: Brick with wood and stone trim; brick portions above the basement level are painted light gray, all trim and basement walls deep gray.
4. Chimneys: Four; brick; painted.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance, on the east, is a simple, rectangular, wooden double door having windows above the lock rail and rectangular panels below. Above the doors is a transom. In the basement level are three doors, one of them beneath the entrance porch on the east. Two doors open off the main level at the rear (west), one at the southwest corner and one near the northwest corner. Lastly, there is a double door on the second floor, west wall, giving access to the flat roof of the kitchen alcove.
 - b. Windows: All windows except those in the cupola are double-hung sash windows. Windows of main and second floors are capped with garland-crowned moldings, those on main floor bracketed with consoles.
6. Porch: Stepped wooden base, and eleven stairs; and six wooden Tuscan columns support the Roman Doric entablature and gabled porch roof with pediment. At one time the porch had an unstepped base, appears to have been shallower, had only four columns, and was ornamented with acroteria at the apex and ends of the pediment.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: According to Fitch, the roof over the dwelling proper is slightly hipped, covered with

metal. The alcoves, cupola, and garage have flat roofs.

- b. Framing: Timber
- c. Cornice, eaves: Above the main level is a Roman Doric entablature and boldly projecting cornice. The second-story and cupola cornices are simpler and less prominent, and the former is crowned by a row of palmette antifixae.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: When the Johnstons bought the house, the kitchen was in the basement, and it remained there during their tenure. This level now houses the servant's quarters and the heating and air-conditioning system.
- b. Main level: Central hall plan. The present owner believes that the original plan was strictly symmetrical and had three rooms to the south and three to the north of the hallway. However, a newspaper story of the 1920's indicates that by the 1890's the arrangement was more complex than this. During the Johnston years, the main level included a living and a dining room south of the central hall and, from east to west, a reception room, stairhall, and library north of the hall. At the present time, the living and dining areas compose one large space on the south; kitchen and pantry are on the west, the stairhall (with a small powder room beneath the stairs) and the study on the north.
- c. Second story: Added for the Johnstons, this level now comprises five bedrooms and three baths.
- d. Cupola: A single space (with windows, inexplicably, above eye level) now used for storage.

2. Stairways: There are three stairways: a. at the rear, which the present owner believes to have been the place of the principal staircase in the original house (1860); b. north of the central hall, between the present study and kitchen, joining main and second stories. This staircase was added for the Johnstons; c. from the second story to the cupola.

3. Flooring: According to Fitch, the floors are oak and were installed for the Johnstons.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster, painted and papered. Ceilings on the south side of the main level are beamed. Ceiling height on this level is 14 feet 6 inches. The stairhall walls are ornamented with a pattern of wreath-and-flame motifs executed in plaster relief.
5. Doorways and doors: Installed by the Johnstons, the doors are rectangular and panelled with pressed wood. All are now painted. All are thoroughly classical in style.
6. Trim: Almost all interior wood trim dates from the Johnston years and is now painted. Fitch states that the living area trim is mahogany; the dining area trim, golden oak.
7. Hardware: Installed by the Johnstons
8. Lighting: Electric
9. Fireplaces: When the Johnstons acquired the house, there were three. They removed two of them, leaving one in the northeast room (present study). This, the present owner had remodelled.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces east and is now set back from Franklin Place on an elevated site. An early photograph reveals that the Franklin Place sidewalk was once closer to the house and the level of this sidewalk higher than it is now.
2. Enclosures: The same early photograph tells us that there was once an iron fence at the front of the lot. The iron fence now separating front yard from basement staircase came from the Schandein estate.
3. Walks: There is a sidewalk, with steps, from Franklin Place to the entrance porch; a narrow walk runs along the north side of the house; and there is a driveway on the south.

Prepared by Mary Ellen Wietczykowski
1111 North Astor Street
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
January 4, 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were made during the 1969 Milwaukee Project which was sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, and the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission of the City of Milwaukee, Richard W. E. Perrin, Chairman. The project was done under the direction of James C. Massey, then Chief of HABS, and the team members included architect John N. DeHaas, Jr. (Montana State University), Project Supervisor, Mary Ellen Wietczykowski--now Mary Ellen Young--(Milwaukee Landmarks Commission), Project Historian, and student architects Larry Hermsen (Iowa State University), Roger Little (Kansas University), Thomas Sanford (Washington State University), and Donna Woodrum (Virginia Polytechnic Institute). The data was prepared for transmittal to the Library of Congress by HABS editors Carolyn R. Heath, Mary Farrell, Candace Reed and Philip Hamp. Photographs were taken by HABS staff photographer Jack Boucher.