

THE LACAC OF BROCKVILLE

Designation Report

January 24, 1991

Designation Recommendation and
Description for:

Robert Wright House

17 Sherwood Street
Brockville, Ontario



a. Reasons for Designation

The Robert Wright house is being recommended for designation for architectural and historical reasons.

b. Historical Background

The house stands on ground acquired from the Crown in 1819 by Jonathan Buell,¹ a younger brother of William Buell, who is considered to have been the founder, with their father, Timothy, of Brockville. In 1820, Buell sold a major parcel of land, including Lot 19, on which the house under discussion was later built, to his son-in-law, Anthony McCrady.² McCrady (1778-1853), who had served in the War of 1812, was married to Rachel Buell (1789-1834).³ The relevance to the Buell connection will be seen later in this presentation.

During the next sixty years, the property had several owners.⁴ In 1880, Mary Wright and her husband, Robert, acquired it⁵ and built the house which is under consideration.

When Robert Wright died in 1921, the house was deeded to his widow, Mary, and to their son, Robert Leslie Wright, jointly, with the proviso that Mrs. Wright would have the use of part of it during her lifetime.⁶ It is fair to assume that it was at this time that the house was divided to become a two-family dwelling. In 1930, Mrs. Wright sold her rights to the house to her son, Robert L. for one dollar and considerations, one of which was that she could continue to live in the quarters she had been occupying since 1920.⁷ In 1933, Mrs. Wright died, at the age of 85.⁸ Robert L. Wright and his wife continued to live in the northern part, and rented the southern (and larger) part to tenants. From 1933 to 1957, the tenants were Dr. and Mrs. D.H. Mallory, and their daughter, Noreen.⁹

In 1938, Robert L. Wright sold the house to his daughter, Gladys Wright Turner, wife of Edward Turner, for one dollar and considerations...the major consideration was that Robert L. and his wife, Agnes, would continue to live in 'their' part of the house.¹⁰ Robert L. Wright predeceased his wife, and by 1957 she had died, and their daughter, Gladys (Mrs. Edward Turner), was in possession.¹¹ She died in 1961, and her husband in 1964.¹² Since 1880, the house had been in the Wright family for 84 years.

In 1964, Mary Jane Brown (Mrs. Alan Brown) bought the house from Edward Turner's Estate.¹³ In 1990, she sold it to Robert Dayton Hammond and his wife, Elizabeth Osborne, and they are the present owners.¹⁴

Of interest, concerning the family, one of Robert and Mary Wright's sons, George, married Lillian Billings. Her sister, Luella Billings, was Dr. D.H. Mallory's mother. The Billings' were direct descendants of Jonathan Buell, whose granddaughter, Katherine McCrady, married Ira Billings. A son of this latter couple, Marble Billings, was the father of Lillian Billings Wright and of Leulla Billings Mallory.¹⁵ So the Mallorys, who were tenants in the house for 25 years, were not only connected to the Wrights by marriage, but also were direct descendants of the initial owners of the property - Jonathan Buell and Anthony McCrady.

Robert Wright, who, with his wife, Mary Ann Row, was the builder of the house in 1880, began his business career in 1857 as an employee of George Hutcheson, described as the leading merchant of Brockville at that time.¹⁶ Wright's first business venture was in 1870, when he formed a partnership with James Moore. In 1880, Mr. Wright bought out his partner. In 1893, the store moved to the south-west corner of King and Broad Streets, to a building designed

especially for its use, no longer "dry goods", but a department store. Some idea of the expansion of the business is indicated when we learn that in 1893 the staff numbered less than 20, and by 1911 there were nearly 100 employed, and that the store had been enlarged three times, to encompass 30,000 square feet of floor space. There are references to furnishings of handsome mahogany wardrobes and showcases, and to Axminster rugs on the floors of some departments.

Until 1910, when he delegated the duty to his son, Robert L., Mr. Wright had for 15 years made a trip to Europe every summer in order to import goods directly.

In later years, the T. Eaton Co. of Canada, would buy the store, to be succeeded by Canadian Department Stores. In 1990, owners and occupiers are the National Trust Co.

In a tribute to Robert Wright, the first owner of the house at 17 Sherwood Street, the Brockville Times, July 20, 1911, described the house as "a fine residence in the west end of Brockville, overlooking the broad St. Lawrence..." and remarked as well, on "the splendid garden".

The house stands as an example of a home built 110 years ago by a successful middle-class Brockville merchant, to be occupied for three generations of his family, and as well by connections descended from Jonathan Buell, the original purchaser. It is deemed worthy of designation on this account.

c. Architectural Description

This large and imposing house is a fine example of the Second Empire style and the only one of its kind in Brockville with a wooden, rather than brick, exterior. Most of the original features of that style are preserved.

It consists of three storeys and five bays, with the front on Sherwood Street dominated by a three storey ~~in~~ frontispiece culminating in a square-topped tower. Wrought iron cresting, which originally went all round the roof and both upstairs balconies, remains in evidence on the tower.

On the south side there are bay windows on the first and second floors. All windows are one-up one-down double hung. Other features of the period are the mansard roof with dormer windows which have ornately carved pediments, and the carved medallion ornamentations on the frontispiece above the second storey windows. The heavily bracketed eaves are an echo of the Italianate style. A large verandah wraps round the south, west and part of the north side.

d. Recommendation

The Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee recommends that the Robert Wright House be designated under the Ontario Heritage Act, 1974.

The Wright family played a prominent part in the community as successful merchants and the house stands as a fitting tribute to that success. We are particularly concerned that the exterior architectural features retain their integrity and would wish to be consulted on any external repairs that might be required.

REFERENCES

1. Abstract of Deeds filed at Leeds County Registry Office.
2. Ibid.
3. Genealogy of JONATHAN BUELL, on file, the Brockville Museum.
4. Abstract of Deeds filed at Leeds County Registry Office.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Cemetery Records, Brockville Cemetery.
9. Conversation with Mrs. Noreen Hood, formerly Mallory, November, 1990.
10. Abstract of Deeds filed at Leeds County Registry Office.
11. Ibid.

12. Cemetery Records, Brockville Cemetery.
13. Abstract of Deeds filed at Leeds County Registry Office.
14. Ibid.
15. Genealogy of descendants of JONATHAN BUELL, on file, the Brockville Museum.
16. Paragraph beginning: "Robert Wright, who, with his wife..." and the shorter paragraph which follows it are excerpted from the Brockville TIMES, July 20, 1911, on file in the Brockville Museum.