

117

Tennyson Court



*Dark house, by
which once
more I stand
Here in the long
unlovely street.
Doors, where my
heart was used
to beat
So quickly,
waiting for a
hand.*

-Alfred Lord Tennyson

When Edmund and Lucy Sampson Gifford arrived in Elgin in 1844 from Fairhaven, Massachusetts, Edmund brought with him the first good law library ever owned in Elgin. In fact, he was himself a good practitioner of the law. He was the city attorney until 1858, superintendent of city schools until 1859, and superintendent of county schools for one year, ending with his resignation in 1861. He and Lucy had nine children, only four of whom lived to adulthood.

Their residence was built in the 1850s, and remained for many years the only house on the lot, which stretched from Division Street to North Street. At that time, the house faced south and was numbered 176 Division Street.

Following the end of the Civil War, Edmund and Lucy sold the house to Sylvester and Caroline Mann. Sylvester Mann was a cattle breeder and a member of the State Legislature. Their daughter, Nellie, married a

prominent dentist, Dr. Ora Chappell, and perhaps through an inheritance, Dr. & Mrs. Chappell eventually became owners of the house.

On March 24, 1896, the Elgin City Council approved the plat of the Tennyson Park Addition to Elgin. By now there were four lots comprising the addition, owned by Reuben Tuck, Nellie Chappell, Louisa Whedon and Lydia Wilber. Perhaps in renaming the plat, the owners were inspired by the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. In any case, it was at that time, possibly to reflect the concept of the court, that Nellie Chappell's house at 176 Division was re-numbered to 117 Tennyson Court.

By the early 1900s, the four lots had been carved up further, and homes were built on the subdivided lots, changing the feel of Tennyson Court from an idyllic private enclave in the city, to an over-built, over crowded street.

The current owner of 117, Dirk Dypold, has owned the property since 1981. On Christmas Eve, 1983, while he was entertaining guests, the third floor of his house was besieged with a fire which destroyed it, and caused extensive and severe water damage to the first and second floors.

Although much restoration work had already been completed by that time, Dirk was undaunted by this tragedy,

and adapting a phoenix-like attitude, he rose from the ashes to continue the restoration.

The house is Second Empire Style, imitative of the popular French building fashion of the 19th century. It was originally a 2-story, single family home, and in the late 1800s, the third floor was built on as a ballroom, and the mansard roof was added. The house, now a three-unit, was a single family home for only a short time. Dirk learned since moving here that a friend of his grandmother's lived here from 1914 to 1919, and it was already a two-flat at that time, with the third floor addition.

The mansard roof form is nicely functional since it allows the top story of this relatively large building to be inconspicuous, thus reducing the apparent size of the house to a more modest and neighborly residential scale. Still, this brick edifice is quite stately and dominant on the Court.

The house was previously painted - yes, the brick - and using water and chemicals, Dirk stripped it to its original authentic nakedness. The roof with its arch-topped dormers, rests on a wide cornice punctuated with relatively simple brackets, not typical of this style. The elegantly carved limestone blocks below it define the corners in one continuous piece, unlike the brick. Limestone is also used in the hooded lintels of the windows.

The porch supports at the ground floor are simple stop-chamfered columns with Italianate-style capitals. The layout of the porch, which wraps the house on three sides, lends itself nicely to the fact that the house at one time had a Division Street address, and therefore, faced south, whereas now it has a Tennyson Court address, and appears to face west.

Much of the detail you see inside the house is salvaged, either from before the fire, or from other old houses. The owner assures us that 90% of the woodwork is original, and was stripped of 5-6 layers of paint, sanded, and refinished with tender loving care. Some of the salvaged wood trim came from the old Getzelman farm house before it was demolished.

The layout of the house has been altered slightly, to accommodate the three units; one of the most notable changes being the direction of the front staircase, which was flipped from its original position of ascending toward the outside wall rather than away from it. As a single family home, the staircase was probably open, and led up from the center of the first floor parlor to an open hallway above.

There are two marble fireplaces in the house, one in the front parlor of the first floor, and the second in the kitchen of the second floor apartment. This was most probably a master bedroom originally, and it's likely the house also had other fireplaces in addition to these, which are now gone.

For those who hate the tiny kitchens that old houses have to offer, this house is a refreshing change, with *three* roomy kitchens, which only makes sense, since Dirk is a contractor by trade and deals mostly with kitchens and baths. The first

floor kitchen was salvaged from a house on the North Shore which was being remodeled. The wainscot in the second floor kitchen was also part of the salvaged woodwork from the Getzelman farmhouse. And although you won't see the third floor kitchen, it's just as spacious and light as the other two.

The room off the first floor parlor was the original foyer, but is now being utilized as a bedroom. And at the time that Dr. Chappell lived here, it is believed he ran his dental practice out of the house. Dirk has seen a picture of the house with a large awning leading from the west entry to the street, with a dental office sign at the front of it. Dirk theorizes that this is where patients entered, into a waiting room which is now his daughter's bedroom.

The wood trim is simple and classic throughout the building, with interesting transoms on some of the doors, which Dirk fashioned from original windows on the third floor. Before the fire, he discovered beautiful and intricate stenciling beneath wallpaper on the plaster walls, and took several photos of it. Unfortunately, the walls did not survive the fire, and so the photos are all that remain of this handiwork.

The survival of this building through dozens of land transactions, additions, remodels, and even a devastating fire is truly remarkable. Thanks to the determination of homeowners like Dirk Dypold, more of Elgin's history is preserved, despite the wear and tear of time.

Along *the* Way

118 Tennyson Court is a rare example of Egyptian Revival style combined with Greek Revival, which is now camouflaged by later additions. It was built in 1850 and originally faced Division Street.

364 Division was built in 1887 for A.B. Church, stepson of Gail Borden, Jr. This large masonry structure represents a blending of Eastlake, Romanesque, and Chateausque detailing. In 1939, this residence was converted to a funeral home.

321 Division is one of Elgin's most famous Queen Anne style homes. Originally the home of butter merchant John Newman, it was most recently known as Buttermen's restaurant. This building offers a literal feast of details, including turrets, stone banding, and a porte cochere.

