

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

OCTAGON HOUSE

(Revised August, 1998)

I. NAME

Historic: None

Common Name: Octagon House

II. LOCATION

2443 N. Gordon Place

6th Aldermanic District
Alderwoman Marlene E. Johnson-Odom

Tax Key No.: 320-1234-000

Legal description: SUBD OF W 6.609 AC ETC IN SE 1/4 SEC 16-7-22 VOL 3 PG 12
BLOCK 70 LOT 6

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

Barbara Joy Bythell
2443 N. Gordon Place
Milwaukee, WI 53212-3041

V. YEAR BUILT

c. 1850's - 1860's

Architect: Unknown

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Octagon House is located in Milwaukee's Riverwest neighborhood approximately 1.87 miles from the heart of the Central Business District. The neighborhood, located between Humboldt Blvd. and the Milwaukee River, is characterized by numerous Polish Flats and manufacturing buildings. The Octagon House occupies a 50-foot by 120-foot lot on the west side of Gordon Place, in mid-block between E. Meinecke and E. Wright Streets. The house is sited toward the south end of the lot. At the alley is a garage with hip roof, built in 1970.

The 8-sided Octagon House rests on a concrete-veneered foundation and features a shallow pitch 8-sectioned roof. A brick chimney extends from the apex of the roof and partially obscures a 4-sided, gabled cupola. Concrete steps with brick veneered knee walls lead to the entry. The entry is centered in the side of the house facing Gordon Pl. and is surmounted by a hood. Two windows are located in the section of wall to the right (north) of the entry but other walls feature single windows. All windows appear to be simple one-over-one sash. The only ornamentation on the building is the scalloped trim board at the eaves that extends around the perimeter of the building.

While the building's basic form, cupola and trim detail are original, many alterations have been made to the exterior. Asbestos siding was applied to the exterior in 1953 and aluminum siding was added in 1970. The concrete steps and stoop and stone railings were added by Clarence Schultz in 1945. Photographs from the mid-1940's also show that the foundation was clad in vertical board siding and that the windows were 6-over-6 sash. The same photos show that a tall shed was once located at the rear entryway but has since been reduced in size. This shed covers the access to the basement as well as the rear entrance to the house.

Since the time that the house first shows up in the tax rolls and city directories at this location in 1889, the house has been used as a residence.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The Octagon House is significant as Milwaukee's last surviving example of an architectural novelty that swept the country between 1848 and 1860 following the publication of Orson Squire Fowler's book *A Home for All or a New, Cheap, Convenient, and Superior Mode of Building* (first printing, 1848; revised edition in 1853 titled *A Home for All or the Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building New, Cheap, Convenient, Superior and Adapted to Rich and Poor*). The octagon form was considered an important construction breakthrough in its day, claiming to provide more interior space for the same amount of exterior wall constructed. Only two, possibly three, octagon houses are known to have been built in Milwaukee in addition to the one now on Gordon Place. These include the Linus Dewey House that stood at 1631 N. 4th Street (razed); the George Gordon House located at what is now Gordon Park south of Locust St. and east of Humboldt Blvd. along the Milwaukee River (razed). References to an octagonal log house built by artist Bernard I. Durward also exist. Gordon later acquired the Durward property. It is not known at this time if Gordon subsequently remodeled Durward's log octagon into the delightful Gothic Revival structure that appears in historic photographs. Both were single story structures like the one on Gordon Place.

VIII. HISTORY

No conclusive evidence exists to definitively date the Octagon House or attribute it to a specific owner. If the structure were built as a residence at or near its current site, and during the heyday of the Octagon Mode, then the building would certainly have been associated with long-term owners Charles and Charlotte Quentin. There is evidence, however, that the Gordon Place Octagon House may have been built as an accessory structure at a different location and moved to this site during the surge of development that occurred along the Milwaukee River's west bank in the 1880's.

The Octagon House stands today on land that was set aside by the State as a school section.

The building's site actually rests on the border between State Lot 19 and Lot 20 in the Southeast Quarter of Section 16, Town 7 North, Range 22 East. Lot 19 encompassed the land between E. Meinecke St. and the south lot line of the Gordon Place Octagon House. Lot 20 encompassed the area from the Octagon House to E. Wright St. The first land sales took place in 1851 when W. K. Wilson acquired Lots 19 and 20 from the State of Wisconsin. Charles Quentin acquired Lot 20 from Wilson in December of 1852 and Quentin had acquired Lot 19 by 1854 when he sold a portion to the Milwaukee, Fond Du Lac and Green Bay Railroad (now the Soo Line) which ran track parallel to and along the west bank of the Milwaukee River. Quentin received a patent from the State of Wisconsin to Lot 20 on March 26, 1861 and for Lot 19 on April 3, 1862. Prior to this date only a handful of property transactions took place on the two lots and involved such individuals as E.F. Gabain, F. Kuehn, E. Pavenstedt, all of whom had dealings with Quentin. Gabain and Pavenstedt were residents of Bremen, Germany for whom Quentin held the property in trust. Quentin himself died in May of 1862 and his widow and children returned to Germany. Widow Charlotte A. Quentin subsequently died in Bonn, Germany on April 9, 1887. If the Octagon House were in fact built in the 1850's during the height of popularity for this building form and remains on its original site then the Quentins would have been responsible for its construction as a summer cottage or private retreat away from their in-town house at 9th and Walnut Streets. The Quentins may also have leased the land to tenants who constructed the structure. A mark on the 1858 Walling Map at the Milwaukee County Historical Society, on Lot 20, might represent the Octagon House or may just be an imperfection on the paper. This mark is located approximately where lots addressed at 2460-2479 N. Dousman are situated today and not at today's 2443 N. Gordon Place.

However, there is good reason to believe that the Octagon was moved to its present site at a later time and was actually constructed elsewhere. The current subdivision in which the Octagon is located was platted in 1867 with the actual recording of the subdivision taking place by the Register of Deeds office on June 8, 1868. Tax rolls thereafter from 1868 through 1888 (1889 tax rolls are missing) show that no improvements were assessed for Block 70 Lot 6, today's legal description for the land on which the Octagon House sits. Since the tax rolls show improvements valued as little as \$25 or \$30, it is likely that no structure stood at today's 2443 N. Gordon Place prior to 1889.

It is possible that the Octagon was built elsewhere on either State Lot 19 or State Lot 20. This area was annexed by Milwaukee on February 21, 1855 and the tax rolls for that year show no improvements on either of the above two lots. In 1856 a modest improvement of \$20 is shown on Lot 20 while Lot 19 is vacant. The following year, Lot 19 shows an improvement of \$50 while Lot 20 is vacant. Neither parcel has any improvements in 1858. Improvements thereafter fluctuate in value until the property was subdivided in 1868.

At the time that Charlotte Quentin and Edmund Pavenstedt subdivided Lots 19 and 20 in 1868, there were no structures anywhere within the subdivision. There were a few parcels, however, sold off earlier in the 1860's that were located at the southeast corner of Dousman and Wright Streets (B. Riley owner) and the northeast corner of Meinecke and Humboldt Blvd. (A. E. Allcott owner) that did show improvements by this time. Some parcels east of the railroad tracks had also been sold and showed improvements as well although these tended to be structures associated with the ice harvesting industry that was active along the banks of the Milwaukee River in the 19th century. The Octagon House may well have been originally constructed on one of these sites.

There is also the possibility that the Octagon House was located on property not originally

owned by the Quentins, such as State Lot 21, which showed improvements as early as 1861. It is known that John D. Allcott and his wife Mary Jane Allcott bought 8 acres in State Lot 21 and built a "Swiss Cottage" on the grounds in 1876. The Octagon House may have been a garden structure on the grounds there or been an earlier structure that the Allcotts incorporated into their estate. The Allcott house still stands, moved onto a lot now located at 2532 N. Dousman St. when the estate was subdivided. Interestingly, the Allcott estate was described in the *Sentinel* as being "located on one of the most picturesque points along the Milwaukee River" indicating that this stretch along Humboldt Blvd. was considered fashionable for summer cottages and year round residences.

Development in the subdivision platted by Quentin and Pavenstedt proceeded slowly through the 1870's. Lafayette M. Follett purchased several lots in 1871 and was listed in the directories as a farmer or gardener. William E. Kittridge likewise purchased two lots at the southwest corner of Meinecke and Dousman in 1874 and had his residence there. Joseph Dolphin, a Milwaukee artist, purchased Lots 3,4,5, and 6 in Block 70 (Lot 6 currently the location of the Octagon House) in 1879 from Charlotte Quentin's associate Edmund Pavenstedt of Bremen, Germany. Dolphin did not live on the property but did have a relative, James, who lived nearby and worked as a gardener. Such references seem to imply that the property was used for truck gardening before residences were constructed. Polish residents began buying lots in the subdivision in 1884 and most of the 50-foot lots were subdivided in half so that two or more Polish flats could be constructed on each one.

Taking advantage of the rapid development of this area, Joseph Dolphin must have had the Octagon House moved to Lot 6 in 1889; prior to this the property had not been assessed with any improvements. The Osmanski's rented the building from Dolphin beginning that year and purchased the premises from him on December 3, 1892 for \$800. Johann or John Osmanski worked at a variety of occupations including laborer, fisherman, and currier. With him lived his wife Dorothea, and sons John Jr., Julius, August and Leon. The fact that the Octagon House is oddly sited on its lot has led to the belief that it was originally located here and the subdivision was created around it. However, given the pattern of development around the building, it could very well have been the case that the Osmanski's planned to construct an additional dwelling unit on the property but were unable to do so. As stated earlier, tax rolls show no improvements on the site before 1889. After John's death at the age of 77 on November 10, 1909, his widow transferred the property to Anna Tadajewski on December 31, 1909. Interestingly, John Osmanski Jr., son of first-known owner-occupant, mentioned in a 1954 newspaper article that the family always called the house "The Carrousel", perhaps reflecting the Octagon's original use.

Since 1889 the building has been used for residence purposes and has had a number of occupants and owners. The Davidsons acquired the property in 1970 and the current owner acquired the house from Davidson descendants in March, 1998.

Frances Stover of the *Milwaukee Journal* wrote about the Octagon on August 21, 1954 and H. Russell Zimmermann re-worked the article with some updated information for the *Milwaukee Journal* on October 31, 1971. The building also appears in his *Heritage Guidebook*.

Octagon Houses

Phrenologist and self-help advocate Orson Squire Fowler was a prolific writer and lecturer who published such titles as "Marriage, Its History and Philosophy"; "Matrimony, or Phrenology and Physiology Applied to the Selection of Congenial Companions for Life";

"Sexual Science"; "Love and Parentage Applied to the Improvement of Offspring". Imbued with the nineteenth century belief that all human problems could be solved through study and rational action Fowler also published a book that advocated the construction of octagonal houses. First published in 1848, *A Home for All or a New, Cheap, Convenient, and Superior Mode of Building* went through at least six editions. The second edition in 1853, *A Home for All or The Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building New, Cheap, Convenient, Superior and Adapted to Rich and Poor*, was inspired after striking up an acquaintance with Joseph Goodrich in Milton, Wisconsin. Goodrich constructed a number of buildings in concrete. This economical building material inspired Fowler to construct his own residence of concrete and write in advocacy of its widespread use. Fowler's goal was to improve the lot of all mankind, not just the affluent. To this end he saw concrete as a material available throughout the country and affordable to the poorest classes. He contended that the octagonal plan enclosed one fifth more floor area than a square with the same total length of wall and had greater beauty as it more closely approximates the predominant form of nature, the sphere. Fowler also contended that the compact plan would better serve a family's needs and would provide better heating and would be more convenient for the homemaker.

The octagon form caught on across the country with most examples being constructed of wood or masonry rather than concrete. Many were two stories and had elaborate porches, bays, cupolas, and trim that ranged from Gothic to Italianate or even Greek Revival in inspiration. Most were built between 1848 and 1860 when the fad began to wane. Most were built by local carpenters or builders and based on the patterns provided in Fowler's book.

New York State is documented with the largest number of octagons (25); Massachusetts is said to take second place with 21 and Wisconsin is third with 19 known examples. Surprisingly, only two or three other Octagon houses were constructed in Milwaukee. Perhaps Milwaukee's large and conservative immigrant population was skeptical of the new fad. Perhaps the large numbers of skilled carpenters and architects discouraged clients from building anything perceived as too out of the mainstream and discouraged the do-it-yourself philosophy encouraged by Fowler. The earliest of the city's Octagons, a log Octagon, was built in the 1850's by Bernard I. Durward an artist and poet along the bluffs overlooking the Milwaukee River. The property was later acquired by George Gordon and photos show a modest one-story structure with Gothic Revival details, perhaps representing a remodeling of Durward's cabin. Gordon's property along with his Octagon house was acquired by the Park Commission in 1907. Park reports indicate that the Octagon was remodeled into a children's rest room in 1911. It was later razed. Another Octagon was constructed by Linus Dewey at 1631 N. 4th St.. A more ambitious residence, the Dewey house was a two story structure and featured an octagonal cupola and large veranda. It too has been razed. Fowler himself made numerous visits to Milwaukee between 1850 and 1877 and lectured on such topics as self-perfection, phrenology, intellect and memory. The Gordon Place Octagon House was probably inspired by Fowler's publication as well as his visits to Milwaukee and perhaps was built after 1860 after the popularity of the octagon mode had waned elsewhere.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Octagon House at 2443 N. Gordon Place be designated as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-5 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e) of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

e-5. Its embodiment of the distinguishing characteristics of an

architectural type or specimen.

IX. 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. Roof

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 that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch. If replacement is necessary, duplicate the appearance of the original roofing as closely as possible. The cupola is to be retained but may be reconfigured if the original design can be documented.

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 that 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 that 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 that 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.

- 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 that do not duplicate the appearance of the original materials. Covering wood trim with aluminum or vinyl is not permitted. Removal of the existing aluminum siding and restoration of the wood siding is 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 windowpanes 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. Reopening the storefront windows to their original dimension would be approvable.
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 east (front), west or south elevations as this would destroy the character and the octagon form 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 freestanding 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 freestanding structure. The profiles of roofs and building elements that 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 that is not in keeping with the original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.