

McKibbin House
(Office of Kuch Stephenson Gibson Malo; Architects and Engineer)
131 Court Street North



Year Built: 1910

Architect: Haliburtan (Hattie) Barbara King McKibbin

Style: Edwardian

Notable Features: Elaborate stained glass windows

Ornately detailed solid oak staircase

Corner fireplace with case terra cotta tiles on the mantle

Sandstone based porch with tuned wooden columns

Date of Designation: September 14th, 1992

By-Law Number: 258 - 1992

Legal Description: Plan 1277 Lot 9, 10, 11 & N20 Ft Lot 8

Current Owner: Quatro Investments Corp

Description:

The reason for this site's long and intriguing history is due largely to its' ideal location by the picturesque McVicar Creek, named for the family that originally owned the property. Robert McVicar, father of the family has the distinction of being the first person to establish a homestead in Port Arthur's Prince Arthur's Landing. The date was 1859, and Robert McVicar had already retired as Chief Trader for the Hudson's Bay Company. He moved to the landing with his wife, Christie, and their youngest children Christina, Victoria and George. Acquiring 600 acres worth of land, for a mere 20 cents per acre, the McVicar family laid the foundation for a house, with the apparent intentions of remaining in the area for an extended period. Robert, however, accepted the position of HBC postmaster in Fort William and moved the entire family with him. He was later forced to relinquish the Prince Arthur property to the Crown Land Agency, although his daughters would subsequently appeal this decision.

The property remained in the hands of McVicar family members until 1899, when, upon the death of Victoria McVicar, the property was subdivided and a portion of it was sold to Joseph 'The Planter King' King. An apt title for a man with a green thumb,

'The Planter King' was almost as well known for his dedication to the beautification of Port Arthur as he was for his grain elevators. He planted trees in parks and on boulevards and maintained an extensive green space along McVicar Creek, calling it 'King's Gardens,' which was near his mansard-roofed residence.

Joseph King died in 1910 and left his property to his daughter, Haliburtan (Hattie) Barbara King. Hattie was married to Herbert Albert McKibbin and built a house at 131 Court Street North. It was Hattie who designed the structure and Herbert who helped to build it. The total cost of the structure was apparently \$10,000. Herbert was president of the Port Arthur Board of Trade and a manager of the Ray, Street and Co. Bank, as well as the clerk of the Township of Shuniah. Although he died in 1927, Hattie continued to live in the house with her long-term nursemaid/housekeeper, Kate Gordon, who died in 1956 at the age of 76, after being with the family for 41 years. Upon Kate's death Hattie moved to live with her sister in P.E.I., and then with one of her sons in Ottawa, although she eventually returned to Port Arthur where she died in 1965.

In 1992 the house came into the possession of Walter Kuch and John Stephenson, who planned to use the building as a site for their architectural firm. Undergoing major renovations, the men re-shingled the roof with cedar shingles, and restored the original south facing bay windows. Kuch and Stephenson worked at obtaining Heritage Designation status, so that the building could be formally recognized as culturally and architecturally significant. The house also received a name change at this time to 'McVicar Manor,' although it was not long after that a bed and breakfast opened nearby and advertised itself as 'McVicar Manor' as well. To avoid confusion, Kuch and Stephenson began referring once more to 131 Court Street North as the 'McKibbin House.'



McKibbin House, during restoration 1992

Architecture:

The house at 131 North Court Street is a two and a half storey Victorian structure, the body being a clay-brick of unknown origin. The foundation walls around the house are faced with Simpson Island sandstone. The sills on all of the windows are also of Simpson Island sandstone. The gabled roof was originally cedar shingle and the old

shingles are still evident under the later asphalt shingles. The gable ends of the home are decorated with cut and coloured cedar shingles in a horizontal geometric pattern. There is a shingle covered skirting at the bottom of each gable. The skirting is held in place by carved brackets at regular intervals.

The porch is of sandstone base and has six turned (entasis) columns to grace the entrance. The large front window of the home is enhanced with a parabolic arch. The wood storm windows are original. Leaded upper lights appear on all the windows.

There are four piano windows, which were probably added in the 1920's, two upstairs in the large front bedroom and two downstairs in what would have been the parlour. The piano windows are composed of beveled glass and lead comes. A pattern of tulip leaves superimposed on diamond shapes form the bottom band.

The oak staircase is immediately evident upon entering the salon. Also a focal point is the corner fireplace which has terracotta tiles attached to the mantle in classical ornamentation. The original floor tiles in front of the fireplace were, unfortunately, destroyed, although the original brick chimneys are still in place.

When the property was acquired by Walter Kuch and John Stephenson for their architectural firm in 1992, it underwent a major restoration. They attempted to preserve the important historical features of the house such as the stained glass windows, the oak staircase and the terra cotta fireplace. The original south facing bay windows were restored, after they had discovered had been bricked in when a fireplace was constructed. Kuch and Stephenson also restored the cedar shingled roof and the brick chimney. The men were creative with the design, reclaiming 100-year old Douglas fir wood beams from the demolished CN freight sheds to help support the house. Also, they include certain elements of the original exterior, such as some of the preserved bricks and included them in the interior design.



McKibbin House with Studebaker, c. 1913

The McVicar

Robert McVicar arrived in Port Arthur's Prince Arthur's Landing in 1859, upon retiring as Chief Trader for the Hudson's Bay Company. He promptly purchased 600

acres of land for 20 cents/acre and laid the foundation for a home. He was shortly after offered the position of HBC postmaster in Fort William and moved the entire family, his wife, Christie and their three children, so as to be able to fulfill his work duties. After his retirement he was forced to relinquish his Prince Arthur property, although he was still a land owner in Fort William. Robert died in 1864 and left his property holdings to his wife, who died in 1867.

Christina McVicar, oldest daughter of Robert and Christie, was said to have quite the sense of humour and was reportedly a “welcome visitor” in many homes. She succeeded her father as postmistresses, a position which she held until 1899.

Victoria McVicar (late 1830's-1899) was a woman of utmost interest, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the accounts of her life and character are varied. She is at times described as “charming,” a “heroine” full of “gallantry,” while others admonish her “harsh and audacious” nature, claiming to be “disgusted” with her behaviour. One aspect of her character that is generally agreed upon is her tendency to embellish the truth, often exaggerating tales of her life to the point of “dubious accuracy.” Although it has been noted that her ‘stubborn,’ ‘emotional’ and ‘strong-willed’ ways were “typical of spinsters,” (Victoria never married) her life and times were certainly not ‘typical’ in any way.

There are a couple events in the life of Victoria McVicar that stand out as extraordinary. The first is her connection with the Louis Riel Rebellion of 1870. It was a widely known fact that as a child Victoria had spent a considerable amount of time with Louis Riel, at the Red River settlement; where they had gone to school together and “maintained a long-term affection” for each other. Some have speculated that “Riel was at one time in love with her,” and Victoria herself suggested that Riel desired for her to dine with him, although her own “sense of Victorian propriety” caused her to flee, stating that she “would never break bread with a rebel.” Certainly, McVicar had some sort of romantic inclinations for Riel, describing him as “dreamy, handsome, clever...and half mad with ambition.”

Victoria's long-term history with Louis Riel enabled her to convince the rebel to release his all but one of his many prisoners, who had all been condemned to death. While one account heralds this act of Victoria's as “heroic and courageous,” a man who was present at the scene, which took place on February 20th, 1870, described her behaviour as “disgusting.” She apparently had entered the room where Riel was and promptly “threw herself on her knees crying Mercy! Mercy!” Regardless, her tactics were obviously effective.

The second major event of Victoria's life earned her the reputation as both a “competent business woman” and a “grasping utilitarian.” Her father, Robert McVicar, had purchased a significant amount of property at Prince Arthur's Landing in 1859. He was later forced to relinquish this property to the Crown Land Agency. Victoria and her sister Christina applied for this land upon the death of their father, claiming it had been promised to him, and vicariously, to them. The sisters were triumphant in their appeal

and were granted the 600 acres of land that originally had belonged to their father. When, in the 1880's, the Canadian Pacific Railway construction neared the Lakehead, "Victoria's 600 acres, north of the creek, stood solidly in the way of progress." At first she "audaciously" refused to sell the property to William Van Horne, the CPR boss but after many negotiations (which included deciding the location of the CPR Station), Victoria sold her 20 cent per acre land for ninety-thousand dollars!

Victoria died in a manner congruent to the way in which she lived. She had the habit of driving around the towns (Fort William and Port Arthur) in a buggy drawn by "two high-spirited stallions." Although some local men attempted to warn her that "a woman shouldn't be driving powerful stallions," Victoria's "strong spirit" prevailed. On one outing in 1899, her horses bolted and Victoria's buggy overturned. She sustained serious injuries, from which she would never fully recover and she eventually died as a result.

The McKibbins:

Herbert Albert McKibbin, born in 1863, grew up on a farm in Peterborough and moved to Port Arthur in 1890 when he was appointed manager of the Ray, Street and Company Bank manager. He was active in the community as a Clerk-Treasurer for the Township of Shuniah, as owner-operator of the short-lived Port Arthur Bottling Works, and chairman of the board of education, in 1914. Herbert was also well-known in Masonic circles, for he obtained the position of master of Shuniah Lodge in 1902 and went on to become grand district superintendent for the Algoma district. He was also the director of ceremonies for the Thunder Bay lodge.

Apparently, Herbert McKibbin had a "retiring personality," and was an ardent fisherman and hunter who loved to spend time in the woods. Upon his death, influential members of the Masonic Order served as pallbearers and the flags of Port Arthur flew at half-mast.

Haliburtan (Hattie) Barbara King married Herbert Albert McKibbin in the early 1900s. They acquired property from her father, Joseph King, who was an alderman, and businessman in Port Arthur, as well as dedicated to the beautification of the area. Hattie obviously possessed some skill for building design, as she was the architect for the family's home at 131 Court Street. She also possessed quite the talent for golf, as she was the first person "man or woman" to make a hole-in-one on the fourth hole at the Port Arthur Country Club. This feat earned her prizes of golf balls and golf shoes, as well as a lifetime membership in the famously exclusive "Hole in One Club." The couple had two children, Arthur in 1913 and Kenneth in 1915.

Both Herbert Albert McKibbin and Haliburtan Barbara King McKibbin are buried in the King Plot in Riverside Cemetery, Thunder Bay.