



**Interim
Historic Designation
Study Report**

**Mary C. Higby House
2570 N. Stowell Avenue**

City of Milwaukee
Department of City Development
Fall, 2001

VII. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Mary Higby house is one of the more exuberant examples of Colonial Revival style residential architecture in the Upper East Side neighborhood that surrounds it. The eye-catching frame building is a pivotal structure in a row of four prominent houses and duplexes that share pleasing urban qualities which include a uniform setback and scale, meticulous detailing and time-honored architectural proportioning. The visual interest of the house is further enhanced by its location at the top of a bermed front lawn.

The area surrounding the house and its immediate neighbors is an eclectic mix of late nineteenth and early twentieth century houses, duplexes and brick apartment buildings. The North Downer Avenue commercial strip, a thriving two-block long hub of East Side commerce, is located ½ block to the east of the subject property.

The house is a 2-1/2 story, side gabled structure that rests on a raised, cream city brick basement. The main elevation, which faces North Stowell Avenue, is symmetrically composed of a large hip roofed front porch on the first story, double hung windows on the second story and a massive front-gabled dormer that projects from the steeply pitched roof. The exterior is finished with original, narrow wooden clapboards that are mitered at the outside corners to enhance the fine finished appearance of the house. Another fine detail is the original oak front door, which is fitted with a large oval-shaped beveled glass window. The front porch retains its original Doric-style, fluted wooden columns and most of its original, Colonial Revival spindles in the railings.

The second story is fenestrated with four regularly placed double hung windows. The two central, round-arched window units are focal points of the exterior and are each richly embellished with an egg and dart wooden back banding, carved corner blocks and Colonial style top sash. Each of the top sash is fitted with meticulously-crafted wooden muntins that have the delicate appearance of a series of intersecting pointed Gothic arches. This feature is one of the hallmarks of late Colonial and early Federal styles of architecture that were popular in America during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The attic story features a large front-gabled dormer fenestrated with three double hung windows that are fitted with elliptically shaped muntins in their top sash. The corners of the dormer are trimmed with fluted Doric style wooden columns that are topped by the gable and its returns that are cantilevered above them.

The side elevations facing north and south are relatively simple in character featuring wooden clapboard siding on the first and second stories and wooden shingling in the gable ends. Each elevation is fenestrated with its original double hung windows that are randomly placed to respond to the needs of the interior. The rear elevation faces east and overlooks a small featureless rear yard that borders a brick-paved alley. This elevation features a rear exit door set into a small lean to addition and has randomly placed double hung windows.

The exterior of the house is in nearly original condition and it has been spared the unsympathetic changes that have befallen many of the city's other Colonial Revival style residences that were built about a century ago. Houses of this style, condition and quality are now rare in Milwaukee.

The house designed by Graf at 2570 N. Stowell Avenue stands out from its neighbors by its striking use of sash with unique muntin patterns and casings, elaborate dormer detail and columned porch. It is distinctive in his body of work in Milwaukee.

History of the Property

The Mary C. Higby House was once part of a multi-acre tract that had belonged to banking and railroad magnate Alexander Mitchell. Real estate developer Edmund Burke purchased ten acres of this tract in 1882. Burke had the land surveyed in April of 1883 and platted a subdivision named after himself. Lots were generously sized at 60-feet by 122-feet with corner lots laid out at 72-feet by 122-feet. E. Burke's Subdivision was recorded in June of 1885. The subdivision was bounded by Downer Avenue to the east, E. Bradford Avenue to the south, and N. Prospect Avenue to the west. The north boundary fell halfway through the blocks lying between E. Webster Place and E. Bellevue Place. Downer Avenue evolved from an unpaved dirt road named Glen Avenue into a thriving commercial district due to the development of a street railway line as well as unique garages that were built to house retail businesses as well as store the automobiles of the adjacent, densely built up residential blocks. These blocks west of Downer Avenue were initially built with a mix of single family and duplex residences but apartment buildings also began to appear by 1910. The lots in these residential blocks were traded by investors over a period of ten to fifteen years and typically increased in value from \$1400 to over \$4000 by the latter 1890's when actual house construction began. Interestingly, most of the generous sized lots in Burke's Subdivision were split into two parcels and the resulting development took on the dense urban character that can be seen today.

The property at 2570 N. Stowell went through four changes in ownership before August P. Conrad acquired the premises on April 14, 1900. Conrad and his brother Ernst ran a real estate and loan business in the Pabst Building downtown known as A. & E. Conrad and they purchased the south 30 feet of Lot 6 for an investment. They commissioned local architect Fred Graf to design a fine residence in the Colonial Revival style. The permit for the 24-foot by 40-foot frame dwelling was taken out on April 26, 1900 and the building cost \$3500. The Conrads had previously commissioned Graf to design four investment properties in the 2100 block of East Kenilworth Place and would later employ him on other east side projects located on Maryland and Farwell Avenues.

Mary C. Higby purchased the newly completed house from August Conrad in December that same year. She apparently rented out the premises and never lived there. The second owners consisted of members of the Tighe family. The matriarch of the family, Catherine A. Tighe, purchased the house on November 1, 1913 and lived here with her children Allan (special agent for Northwestern Mutual), Michael and Oliver. Other children included Joseph M., Lucy Louise, Margery J. and Aimee Katherine Minoque, some of whom may have also spent time on the premises.

Catherine Tighe died at age 58 on May 21, 1916. Her children subsequently sold the house to Siebrandus and Sophia Warmolts in October 1919. Warmolts, a building superintendent, lived here only briefly and sold the building to Loretto Foley in October 1921. Loretto's son, attorney James D. Foley, occupied the house for four years and built a garage at the rear in 1923.

Foley sold the house to Jessie Garner in 1926. Jessie and her husband John L. would live here for 40 years until 1966. John had been the proprietor of the Garner

XI. REFERENCES

Milwaukee City Directories

City of Milwaukee Building Permit files

City of Milwaukee Intensive Survey Inventory

Milwaukee County Register of Deeds

Milwaukee Journal, various dates.

Milwaukee Sentinel, various dates

of the building. Existing aluminum trim does not need to be removed. The installation of vinyl trim or siding is not allowed.

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 window panes or sash.
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 of the original window sash or doors. Avoid filling-in or covering up openings with incompatible materials such as concrete or glass block. Avoid the installation of modern window units with glazing configurations that are incompatible with the style of the building (i.e., installing simple double hung windows in place of original Colonial style sash)

D. Trim and Ornamentation

Existing trim or ornamentation should not be changed except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design and appearance, but not necessarily in material.

E. Additions

Additions are permitted with the approval of the Historic Preservation Commission. Ideally an addition should either compliment or have a neutral effect upon the historic character of the building. The commission will review the compatibility of the addition with the historic building and may consider the following details: Window size and placement, scale, design, materials, roof configuration, height and the degree to which the addition impacts the principal elevation(s) of the building.

F. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the architectural character of the building. Translucent plastic signboards that are illuminated from behind and mounted in a metal box will generally not be approved.

G. Site features

New plant materials, fencing, paving and lighting fixtures should respect and enhance the historic architectural character of the building.

H. Guidelines for New Construction

It is important that new construction be designed so as to be as sympathetic as possible with the character of the house.

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 original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.