WAYNE VALUES HISTORIC HOMES
At a time when historic buildings such as Hudson's are being eradicated, four architectural gems sit on the Wayne State University campus, still treasured for their representation of a bygone era.

By Joanne M. Hildebrandt

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Few college campuses can boast the contrast of architecture which is found on the Wayne State University campus. Some might consider it a hodgepodge, but closer investigation reveals little-known secrets which entice further scrutiny. Against the backdrop of modern academic structures exist four uniquely historic houses which beckon us back to the days before the automobile.

The Linsell House

The Linsell House was built at a cost of $9,000 in 1904. Today, at 94 years old, it sits near the modern biology, chemistry and engineering buildings. Dwarfed by the new gigantic David Adamany Undergraduate Library, the Linsell House is in direct contrast with these modern university buildings.

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The Linsell House (Continued)

Architect John C. Stahl Jr. designed and built this Federal Revival Style house for Frederick and Rosa Linsell. Stahl was only 28 years old at the time and went on to distinguish himself in Detroit with many fine Church designs. While there’s nothing church-like about the Linsell House, it does have a formal look. The eye is immediately drawn to the typically Georgian hip roof with bric-a-brac detailing, making the house look very tall.

Frederick Linsell was 57 years old at the time this two-story yellow brick house with stable was built at the corner of Second and Putnam. Some distinguishing Greek architectural features include: an odd number of gabled dormers; and a fanlighted Palladian window directly over the front portico which is supported by two fluted Doric columns.

As a wealthy furniture company official, Linsell appreciated fine wood. He built a 13-room home with beautiful paneling (wainscoting) and interior oak woodwork which remains unpainted (rare for Georgian homes) and still looks new. Even the dark mahogany venetian blinds may not sound attractive but actually blend nicely with the other wood treatments. Unusual for a home of this type, the floor plan is deeper than wide, but the 38’ X 62’ lot probably explains why.

From 1904-1930, only three families occupied the house. The Linsells lived there for ten years. In 1914, the Caskey family purchased the house. Two generations resided there until the 1930s when the house was taken over for public use and first served as the Women’s Student Building at Wayne. Other university departments which have occupied the house are: the WSU School of Business Administration and the biology department.
The Linsell House (Continued)

As one stands in front of the new library and bookstore looking at the front of the Linsell House, it is hard to imagine a stable and horses in front of State Hall, but they were a fact of life at the Linsell House in the early 1900s. The house address was originally 950 Second Avenue; then, in the ’20s, changed to 5014 Second. Now, it is 5014 Gullen Mall and houses the Dean’s Office for the College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts.

The Dean’s employees scurry up and down the back staircase between the kitchen and the upstairs bedrooms (now offices) with little thought to the servants and former occupants who once frequented them.

Two tidbits about the Linsell house appeared in a January 26, 1993 South End article by Julie M. Stephens. Included in her article was information about a secret panel in one wall of the mahogany-paneled dining room along with a butler’s bell on the floor.

The Max Jacob House

Another interesting house sits across from the Community Arts Building at what used to be 451 W. Kirby. The Max Jacob House, constructed in 1915 for $20,000 by builder Martin N. Burkheiser, is the largest of these four houses, with fancier architectural detailing. A two-story yellow brick Italian villa, it is reported in recent promotional literature, to be “one of the last surviving Detroit homes in this style.” Archival records indicate that Max Jacob spared no expense in building this home, adding many decorative architectural touches to the exterior. He even had his initials, MJ, emblazoned in black on the east chimney.
The Max Jacob House (Continued)

The National Register of Historic Places lists this description: “The Mediterranean character of the former residence is enhanced by the hipped tile roof and the widely overhanging but unbracketed eaves. An open veranda flairs across the entire front facade.” Most noticeable are the black wrought iron railings which connect the piers of the veranda and add an ornamental touch to two pretend balconies above. With the large veranda and imaginary balconies, one might envision the house on the banks of Venice, with special places to see and be seen.

According to university archives, Max Jacob was a Lithuanian immigrant who came to this country in 1882, when he was only 18 years old. He became a junk dealer. Three years later, at 21, he started M. Jacob and Sons bottle distribution company. One of the largest of its kind in the United States, the company celebrated its 100th-year anniversary in 1985.

At 51, Jacob built this luxury Mediterranean-style home in 1915, but only lived there nine years. In 1944, the house was acquired for use by the university. Until recently, it housed the slide library for the Art History department and some of their offices.

At this writing, the windows in the house are covered with stickers, indicating their shiny newness -- part of the renovation the house is undergoing in order to be a proper residence for President Irvin D. Reid and his family. Amy Flatt, media relations coordinator for LovioGeorgeInc., recently reported that the house will be restored to its original configuration and will be over 8,000 square feet in useable space. First-floor plans call for vestibule, foyer, parlor (with piano), library, powder room, dining room, kitchen and breakfast nook. The second floor will house bedrooms and private quarters. An exercise room, laundry room and additional bedroom are planned for the lower level.
In the promotional literature prepared by LovioGeorgeInc., it is reported that the Jacob House is a place where the university will "keep the lights on at all hours, showing visibility and access to the president."

This will probably not be the first time lights will burn at the Jacob House. Records show that after Max left the house in 1924, John J. Ryan, a famous Detroit gambling figure, owned the house. While Ryan may have burned the midnight oil, he probably had to compete for noise level with another house close by.

The Herman Strasburg House (The Music Annex)

According to university archives, the Herman Strasburg house at 5415 Cass Ave. is so steeped in musical tradition that musical notes should probably be seen rising from all four chimneys. Herman Strasburg Jr. built the 2 1/2-story Tudor cottage-style house in 1915 to accommodate the Strasburg Dance Academy which was originally founded by his father. Herman Jr. was manager of the leading dance teacher’s academy before his famous father died in 1883. So, the dance academy had a renowned 35-year history before Herman Jr. built what is not called the Music Annex and moved the dance academy there in 1915.

The architect for the Strasburg House was also a prominent Detroiter named Marcus P. Burrowes. He had been a member of the Stratton-Baldwin firm -- a firm involved with the local Arts and Crafts Society. The National Register of Historic Places states, "Stratton and Baldwin became among the first Detroit architects to respond to the trend emphasizing cottage-style English domestic architecture." Burrowes designed this house immediately after the breakup of this firm, but obviously felt their influence. Stratton had designed the Pewabic Pottery on Jefferson Avenue for his future wife Mary Chase Perry -- in almost the same identical Tudor cottage style.

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The exterior is done in brown brick which ends at the second floor where cream colored stucco accentuated by brown timbering strips gives the house that informal English countryside cottage look. Pendant decorations hang from each peak of the four gables. The chimneys have decorative brickwork. With white fluffy frosting on the roof and candy canes and hard candy attached, the Music Annex could definitely double for a gingerbread house.

Inside, while students practice piano and other instruments, Jacobean carvings on the staircase and oak woodwork and paneling lend an authentic old-world flavor to the music being played.

In the family tradition, Herman Jr.'s son Paul took over the dance school in 1918, upon his father's death after only three years in the house. University archives indicate that, under Paul's direction, the academy became a leading dance school in Detroit.

From 1925 to 1931, two different owners of the house at 5415 Cass Avenue provided lodging for college students.

But music came back into the house when Bendetson Netzorg, his sister and parents moved in. A talented musician of violin and piano from the age of 6, 43-year-old Netzorg acquired the house in 1931 and taught music there until 1944, when it became a university building.

Music Department Chair Professor Dennis J. Tini reported that his old office was formerly in the Music Annex. He stated, "I heard a rumor that Ossip Gabrilowitsch, former Detroit Symphony conductor (1918-1936), might have once lived in the house."

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The Herman Strasburg House (The Music Annex) (Continued)

Fine, Performing and Communication Arts Associate Dean Richard Bilaitis refutes this, however, by saying, "I did some research on this and Gabriowitsch's address actually comes up somewhere across the street." Even so, this area of Detroit seems to have been a popular one for musical types.

The Mackenzie House

Three blocks away, in a similar artistic setting, next to Hilberry Theatre, sits the Mackenzie House. Older than the other three, this house marked one century three years ago -- currently making it 103 years old. It came within an inch of not achieving this milestone. At one point, in 1977, the Wayne State Board of Governors voted, unanimously, for demolition; then, later reversed itself. Preservation Wayne's efforts on behalf of Mackenzie House throughout the years are well documented in *South End* clippings. The reason for such perseverance has to do with the historic university significance of the house.

Founder and first Wayne State University President David Mackenzie lived there from 1906 until his death in 1926. Probably the foremost educator in this state, he is the man responsible for inventing the junior college in Michigan. In 1915, he formed a junior college at Central High School (Old Main) while he was principal there. He did so to provide a college education for 30 high school graduates who could not afford to go away to school. In the '20s, it became City College which evolved into Wayne University, now called Wayne State University.

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The Mackenzie House (Continued)

Mackenzie House was originally built for Frank Blackman, a Detroit banker. Malcolmson & Higgenbotham, the same architects who designed Old Main, gave the house its Queen Anne style. The exterior is of red-tinted masonry and red sandstone blocks from the Upper Peninsula.

The third-floor turret with circular windows looks like a place from which Rapunzel could let down her hair. The balustraded front porch was replaced and repaired in 1992. In addition to four tiled fireplaces, the interior has an attractive staircase, beamed ceilings, hardwood floors and wood paneling and trim -- even curly maple in two front bedrooms.

Appropriately, Preservation Wayne currently occupies Mackenzie House, but it has had many other university dwellers. The Association for Women Students rented the house from 1935-39, when they moved to the Linsell House. Then, College of Education faculty offices were there until 1946, when a family by the name of Gibson bought the house. Beattie Gibson was a university janitor and operated 4735 Cass as a rooming house until the mid-sixties when it actually became university property. The theatre promotional department and theatre staff have resided there. According to old South End articles from 1977, Mackenzie House had gone into disrepair and was relegated into serving as a place where second-hand items were sold. Ironically, the place housing The Campus Treasure Shop would eventually become just that. Mackenzie House is even listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

If only Hudson’s Department Store had received that same type of reprieve.

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Conclusion

When Hudson’s opened in 1911, the Mackenzies and Linsells probably rode the two miles down Woodward Avenue to shop at Hudson’s in horse-drawn carriages. By the time the Jacobs and the Strasburgs arrived on the scene in 1915, most of them were probably traveling by horseless carriages.

While the horses and early horseless carriages are gone, along with historic Hudson’s, four well-preserved architectural gems are still considered treasures on the Wayne State University campus. In the years to come when the memories of Hudson’s have faded, the University will still have wonderful tangible evidence of a bygone era. Though some may think Detroit doesn’t value its architectural history, Wayne surely does.

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