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311 Dennis Street: More Squares than Foursquare

During the early 1900's, the city of Adrian, Michigan, was flourishing. New businesses, agriculture, and technological developments were increasing the city's population and employment rate to increase. Automotive, electrical, fencing, and lumber companies were sprouting throughout Lenawee County, resulting in a rather economically sound community (Lindquist, 141-146).

One entrepreneur, Archimedes Stevenson, was enjoying this economical boom. After coming to Adrian, already a wealthy man, Stevenson established a lumber and coal business near the corner of Michigan and Division streets in

1873 that serviced Lenawee County and the surrounding areas. Stevenson's Lumber Company prospered making Stevenson more wealthy. With his money, Stevenson began to buy property near his business including five houses on Michigan and Erie streets. Several years later, in 1882, he built an Italianate-style home within walking distance of his business, on the corner of Dennis and Union, where he lived until his death on October 17, 1908 (Knapp, 261-263).

Five years after Archimedes' death, his son Frank A. Stevenson built another home at 311 Dennis Street, next to his father's house, and presented it to his own son, William Herbert Stevenson. Ann Wassink Flansburg, a descendent of the Stevenson family remembers the event this way:

311 Dennis Street was built in 1913 by Frank A. Stevenson (Archimedes' son) as a home for his son William Herbert Stevenson, his daughter-in-law Dean Cherry Stevenson and their daughter Mary Elizabeth who was born in the Choate House on August 31, 1913. William and Dean had no idea why Frank was building the house [for them] until its completion when he walked across the street, knocked on their door and handed them the key to the house and the payment schedule – of course payments were to be made to Frank each month. William and Dean lived in the house until 1939 when they built their home at Deer Park (555 Budlong St). They then turned the house into two apartments and rented it until it was sold in 1970s.¹

The house located at 311 Dennis Street can be classified architecturally as an elaborate Foursquare form with Neoclassical decoration. W. H. Schroeder created the first Foursquare type homes in the early 1900's (Reiff, 168). Many types of architecture borrow ideas from previous styles making it harder to categorize a home into a specific architectural style; the Foursquare type falls in this category because it borrows from cubic houses from both colonial forms and Italianate architecture. The typical plan for a Foursquare

¹ Email message from Anne Wassink Flansburg to Peter Barr dated 4/17/07, now deposited at the Lenawee County Historical Society.

house is basic. Its exterior is square in shape, and is two and a half stories high with a four room floor plan. The roof is generally low and hipped with deep overhangs and a large centrally placed dormer. The front porch typically spans the entire façade and has wide steps leading up to the entrance. The exterior of the home is generally finished with one of the following: brick, stone, or wood siding (Craven, 1).

Builders could construct Foursquare homes from mail-order plans or new kits that could be purchased from companies that provided all the necessary building materials. For example, the Sears catalog offered Foursquare homes for less than two thousand dollars (Craven, 1). These catalog companies offered several plain examples, but consumers like Stevenson preferred their homes to be embellished them with details borrowed from styles popular during the first third of the twentieth century: Craftsman, Prairie, Colonial Revival, and Neoclassical architecture. The latter two styles are evident on the Stevenson Home, which was probably built from a mail-order plan rather than a kit.

Foursquare homes often acquired many features attributed to the Neoclassical style of architecture, which has long been a staple of American architecture. This style first emerged in the late 18th century and lasted until the early 19th century throughout the West. Johann Winckelmann, one of the most influential persons with knowledge of classical art said, “There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean, by imitating the ancients” (Howe, 29). Thomas Jefferson, another advocate for this style, was the first to build a home in America in the neoclassical style, and despised everything

that did not follow this design (Howe, 29). A typical Neoclassical home prides itself on the demonstration of classical symmetry. These homes are also adorned with porches that reach the full height of the façade with columns reaching the same distance, giving neoclassical homes the look of an ancient temple. Classical ornamentation is also found on the exterior of these homes; in a sense, this style is a revival of the Greek Revival that occurred in America during the mid-1800s (Paradis, 2).

At the end of the nineteenth century neoclassical architecture became especially popular in the United States following Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The preparation for this exposition took three years and more than twenty-eight million dollars to complete. Exposition organizers required each building to be erected with classical architectural elements despite the protests of many architects (*The World's Columbian Exposition*, 3). For example, Louis Sullivan, an architect chosen to help design the exposition, not only disagreed with the decision to follow classical elements, but also said, "the damage wrought by the World's Fair will last for half a century from this date, if not longer" ("The World's Columbian Exposition", 2). Sullivan was right, the amount of influence this fair had on American architecture is evident when looking at both private and public architecture during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The Stevenson home at 311 Dennis Street is not a typical Foursquare home. Some exterior characteristics that are atypical of a Foursquare include the steeply pitched roof with side gables, much like the Georgian style; six Ionic

columns support the porch, instead of the typical four, with the overhang containing slender mutules that resemble dentils; light clapboard that is accented with a dark trim; the Palladian windows in the dormer; and the single chimney located on the side of the house. While these are not typical of Foursquare homes, which are often quite plain, they are frequently found on Colonial Revival and Neoclassical structures.

The interior of the house is, however, more typical of a Foursquare home than the exterior is. As you enter through the centrally placed door, you step into a foyer, which contains the staircase leading to the second level. To the left of the foyer is the parlor, which is connected to the dining room. To the right of the foyer is the living room, which is blocked in by the staircase. On the backside of the staircase is the kitchen with a separate “recreational” room conjoined. While walking through the kitchen, you enter a “garden room” that opens to the back porch. The upper portion of the house consists of four bedrooms and closets echoing the first level’s design. Because this homes is based on a completely square floor plan it becomes quite practical to utilize literally every square inch of the home.

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Interior, entrance/foyer/parlor

living room

Exterior

kitchen

