

THE WILSON-VAN RIPER-BROCK HOUSE¹

Paul P. Van Riper and Deborah L. Brock
January 31, 1985

The structure that is the subject of this application is the Wilson-Van Riper-Brock House located at 712 E. 30th St., Bryan, Texas, in the center of Bryan's recently created East Side Historical District. This large Queen Anne style frame house, built in 1904 by George W. McMichael, has been best known as the residence of the Alfred F. Wilson family for nearly sixty years. To follow is, first, a chronological survey of the ownership of the house; second, a review of its modifications through time; and, third, descriptions of architectural and other features, both exterior and interior.

Builders and Owners

George Washington McMichael (Mar. 6, 1854 – Oct. 5, 1904) occasioned the building of the house.² McMichael was the eighth child of Richard M. McMichael, a farmer near Millican, Texas, who had come to Brazos County from Georgia via Alabama. George was the only one of the children born in Texas.³ Brought up in the area, he became a successful lumberman.⁴ He married Lula Cooper, daughter of James Cooper, a wealthy land owner near Rock Prairie. There were two children, George and Kathleen; there is one direct descendant, of the latter, Mrs. Kathleen Pennebaker, who now lives in County Wicklow, Ireland. In 1896 McMichael was elected Clerk of Brazos County on the Democratic ticket. He was reelected three more times and announced for a fifth term in April 1904. However, he became ill during the summer and died Oct. 5 in Rochester, Minn., at the age of 49 and only a short time after he and his family had moved into their

¹ The marker was approved with the title, "McMichael-Wilson House."

² Letter from Mrs. Ruth Bryan (Mrs. Travis, Sr.) to Dr. Van Riper, item "A" in the Appendix. The letter itself has no date, but the envelope is postmarked Feb. 27, 1980. At that time Mrs. Bryan, born Sept. 20, 1896 was 83. Mrs. Bryan's husband was the son of the founder of Bryan, Texas, and the one for whom the city was named. Mrs. Bryan's childhood and present residence is 615 E. 30th St., Bryan, across the street and just a block from the McMichael house.

³ From the U.S. Census of 1860 for Brazos County, Texas, p. 100, precinct 2, Post Office of Boonville, August 4, 1860, dwelling #745 and family #745, as reproduced in the *Brazos Genealogical Advertiser*, vol. IV (Jan. – Feb., 1983), p. 94.

⁴ Letter from Mrs. Alice R. Whitson to Mr. Van Riper, item "B" in the Appendix, p. 2. The letter is dated June 30, 1980.

new home. McMichael was a member of the Elks and the Knights of Pythias; he is buried in the Bryan City Cemetery.⁵

McMichael bought the land on which his house stands—lot 4, block 11, Phillips addition—on Dec. 4, 1900 for \$700.⁶ The lot is from land granted by the Mexican government to Stephen F. Austin and the deeds still describe lot boundaries in Spanish “varas,” each approximately equal to a yard. The immediate area around the lot and extending a block or so south constitutes the highest point in Bryan-College Station and within a radius of nearly ten miles. It is not absolutely certain, but the house was probably designed and built by Charles Eric and/or George Washington Jenkins, Jr., local architect-builders of some distinction.⁷

After McMichael’s death, Mrs. McMichael and the children lived in the home until about 1907, when the house was rented to the Allister M. Waldrop, Sr., family.⁸ Waldrop was a leading men’s clothier and former president of the Bryan Chamber of Commerce, the Texas Retail Clothier and Furnisher Association, and the Bryan School Board. About 1911 the Waldrops moved to a new home nearby which they had been building on E. 29th St., Bryan.

Mrs. McMichael and the two children, as joint heirs, then sold the property on March 26, 1912 to Alfred Flournoy Wilson, a prominent planter, for \$6,000. Wilson promptly deeded the property to his wife, Mrs. Sammie Gleaves Wilson (Sept. 4, 1856—Feb. 9, 1959) on April 13, 1912.⁹ As a granddaughter, Mrs. Alice W. Whitson of Trinity, Texas,

⁵ From brief obituary in the *Bryan Eagle*, Oct. 13, 1904.

⁶ See vol. 19, p. 421, of the deed records of Brazos County. Copies of the relevant deed records or segments thereof are assembled in item “D” in the Appendix.

⁷ Letter from Mrs. Bessie S. Benbow (Mrs. A.) to Dr. Van Riper, item “C” in the Appendix. The letter is dated March 7, 1980. Mrs. Benbow is a lifelong resident of Bryan, Texas, and was 88 at the time of writing. See also certificate by Mrs. Judie Graham Bobbitt, dated Feb. 2, 1980, item “C” in the Appendix. Mrs. Bobbitt is C.E. Jenkins’ granddaughter; she was born June 3, 1911. Among the Bryan buildings for which C.E. Jenkins and his brother were responsible are the St. Andrews Episcopal Church, the parsonage of the First Methodist Church, the First Methodist Church preceding the present one, and the homes of Holland Porter, J.M. Gordon, E.J. Jenkins, and W.B. Roman, among others.

⁸ Allister M. Waldrop, Jr., to Paul P. Van Riper, June 25, 1980; see also the Texas Historical Marker application for the Waldrop—Bowser House as approved by the Brazos County Historical Commission during 1984. Allister M. Waldrop, Jr., was born May 11, 1907 and the Waldrop family moved into the McMichael house shortly thereafter.

⁹ For the transfer from Mrs. McMichael see vol. 35, p. 438 of the deed records of Brazos County; vol. 35, p. 548 shows the transfer from Alfred Wilson to his wife.

recently wrote: “My grandparents (the A.F. Wilsons) lived on a 1,200 acre cotton plantation in the Brazos bottoms out from Hearne, near Mumford, Texas. My grandmother wanted to move to town and build a new home—she had plans drawn and they were in the attic. Instead they bought this house...built by a wealthy lumberman...”¹⁰ There were three Wilson children, Thomas Decatur (known as T.D., died 1975), Alice Rae (Mrs. Whitson’s mother, died 1964) and Mae Herbert (1888-Apr. 11, 1969). After Alfred’s death in 1917, Mrs. Sammie Wilson continued to live in the house with her unmarried daughter Mae. She also took in three of the four children of Alice Rae to raise.¹¹ Mrs. Wilson willed the house to her daughter Mae, who lived there alone until her death in 1969. Mae Wilson willed the house to her niece Susan Evelyn, only child of Thomas Decatur Wilson.¹²

However, Susan never lived in the house and sold it on June 30, 1970 to Paul P. and Dorothy Van Riper. Dr. Van Riper has been head of the Department of Political Science at Texas A&M University and is a founding member and former president of Brazos County’s Citizens for Historic Preservation. Upon his retirement in 1981, the property was sold to James W. and Deborah Brock, formerly of Kerrville, Texas. Mr. Brock has been in the oil business.¹³

Within the last decade or so the house has been on the House and Garden Tour of the Bryan Women’s Club and three times on the annual historical tour of the Citizens for Historic Preservation.

Modifications

The structure of 1904 is still clearly evident, though some important modifications were made in 1912-13 by the Wilsons. They changed the front porch by removing small pillars on brick pedestals and replaced them with much larger, more neo-classical cypress pillars.¹⁴ There was also a major addition to the rear, which has been described by the granddaughter, Alice Whitson: “...there was a small one story room at the back of the

¹⁰ Whitson letter, cited in note 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For the wills of Mrs. Wilson and Miss Mae Wilson, see the Brazos County probate records, numbers 2854 and 3964 respectively.

¹³ For the transfer from Susan E. Wilson to Paul P. and Dorothy Van Riper, see vol. 287, p. 105 of the deed records of Brazos County; vol. ____, p. ____ shows the transfer from the Van Ripers to the Brocks, Oct. 1, 1981.

¹⁴ To see the different pillar treatments, compare photographs 1 and 2 with 3 and 4, item “E” in the Appendix. For some comparative views of the rear of the house see photographs 2 and 7, item “E” in the Appendix.

house and that was the kitchen. This was torn down and (we built) a large bedroom, 2 closets, bathroom, staircase up to the attic, and a staircase going down to the kitchen upstairs, and a large pantry, kitchen, bath, hall, large latticed porch downstairs.”¹⁵ The Wilson’s were also responsible for the painted canvas wall-coverings still in the living and dining rooms.¹⁶

There has been little further modification. The Van Ripers concentrated on basic restoration of the property, which had been somewhat neglected during the 1960s. They installed central heat and air-conditioning downstairs in 1970, the pier and beam construction lending itself to placement of the heating unit and the duct work beneath the house. They also provided storm windows and vinyl siding with insulation, but these were made compatible with the original frame construction and no special architectural features were removed, covered or obstructed.¹⁷ Their only addition to the structure was the enclosure of a six foot section of the back porch to create a small butler’s pantry behind the dining room. Two small colored (stained) glass windows were added in this room, and a large colored glass window was installed in the front bedroom to replace a clear glass window. The Brocks have continued the renovation and have re-roofed the house, repaired the outer brick foundations, restored the rear latticework, and authorized the inclusion of the house within the boundaries of Bryan’s East Side Historical District, established in 1982. Every effort has been made in recent years to see that any modifications were in keeping with the original structure as it was developed between 1904 and 1913.

Exterior Characteristics¹⁸

The house is of the Queen Anne Victorian style with the typical asymmetrical composition and considerable ornamentation. The structural system of the house is pier and beam with wood frame walls and an exterior cladding of horizontal cypress wood siding, now covered with matching vinyl siding. Most windows visible from the streets have operable external storm shutters, also of cypress and original to the house. The house has always been painted white, but the shutters and some trim have at various times been black or green as well as the present blue.

The southern façade displays a protruding octagonal turret with a shingle tent roof and finial which rise three and a half stories above the ground-nearly fifty-five feet. This tower has five double hung 1/1 wood sash windows with counterweight on its third level facets, with three at the second level. At the first level the three tower windows are

¹⁵ Whitson letter, cited in note 3.

¹⁶ Thomas Decatur Wilson to Paul P. Van Riper, July 21, 1970.

¹⁷ Compare photographs 1,2 and 3 with those following, item “E” in the Appendix.

¹⁸ Based on a technical description of the house prepared by Michele C. Molnar, graduate student in Architecture and Historic Preservation, Texas A&M University, May 1984.

composed of colored plate glass panels with a fleur de lis pattern. The turret bay is enclosed on this level by an encircling porch with full length round columns and a machine turned balustrade of cypress.

The front entry vestibule on the southern façade is centrally located and is reached by a four step stair and capped with a triangular pediment which is supported by two pairs of composite cypress columns. A sawn wood panel in a curvilinear design motif is displayed in the triangular pediment. The entry door, made of beveled plate glass cased in heart of pine (as are three of the other four outer doors), is recessed within the covered entry vestibule. The entry door is complemented by an excentrically placed elliptical colored glass window with a fleur de lis design, which is located to the left of the main entry door. Directly above the entry vestibule is a recessed second story porch (one of three second story porches, but the only one with its own roof) framed in wood with horizontal siding above and shingles below. The porch encloses a viewing balcony with a flat arched opening accessed by a wood door.

To the right of the entry vestibule is a projecting circular verandah, forming a semi-detached gazebo, topped with a conical roof and finial, supported by the full length columns and balustrade, and rising one and a half stories in height. The verandah encircles a three bay volume with 1/1 wood sash double hung windows flanked by cypress storm shutters. This three bay volume is repeated on the second level. The upper third of the central window at the first level is a colored glass panel whose design apparently provided the pattern for the garlands painted on the pink canvas of the parlor. The entire central window panel on the second level is made of richly colored glass in a highly decorative pattern; this window, from an old church in Waco, was added to the house by the Van Rippers. The corner bays are accented with carved wood brackets supporting an overhanging third floor gable roof. Within the gable is a small transom window set in horizontal clapboards and trimmed with recessed verge boards.

The east façade is enclosed by the verandah porch and a flat roof on the first level. A second entry door is located adjacent to a three bay volume with three full 1/1 double hung sash windows and a small colored glass window in the central bay on the first level. The three bay volume rises two and a half stories and is topped with a protruding gable roof with carved wood brackets at the gable ends. The flat porch roof contains the second of the three second story porches, this one above the lower entry door. The porch is enclosed at the second level with an open machine turned balustrade and encompasses two full length (down to the floor) 1/1 sash windows with operable storm shutters, both of which act as a full door to gain access to the porch. On the first level, at the point where the bay volume reaches the main façade plane, a small, enclosed pantry and enclosed lattice porch reveal a rear entry door. The pantry incorporates two small colored glass windows. On the flat roof of the pantry, the third second floor porch is enclosed with an open balustrade and accessible through another full length window/door. This window/door as well as another double hung window are flanked with cypress shutters. Two smaller 1/1 wood sash windows are also visible on the second level just above and slightly outside the porch area. The rest of this two story volume

viewed from the northern facade reveals two windows on both the upper and lower levels, which remain simple and free of any ornamentation.

The west façade further reflects the two story mass with four double hung 1/1 sash windows, two upper and two lower. Immediately adjacent to this volume a one bay projecting space with a single large 1/1 sash window flanked by cypress storm windows is located on each level. A broken gable roof caps this volume with a rectangular attic transom vent appearing in the triangular gable. The remainder of the west façade is encompassed by the encircling porch which wraps around the tower mass, with a fourth entry door at the extreme north end of this porch.

The main body of the house is covered with a large peaked pyramidal roof while the rear two story volume carries a smaller hipped roof. The entire roof system is covered with shingles, wood on the first (porch) level and composition on the upper levels. Two large red brick chimneys with an ornamental crown mould rise above the main roof, serving the four working fireplaces below. The original rain gutter system is used along the lines of the roof, lying on top of the roof itself while being attached to the wood beneath. There is a total of forty-four windows. All of the operable windows are 1/1 wood sash, double hung with counter weights. Each of these windows is fitted with an original wood framed, copper wire screen (patent 1902) which fits inside the window plane on the interior of the room and slides up and down to allow access to the window itself.

Two outbuildings are located to the north of the house. The first is as old or older than the main house and has served as a one room work shop and tool house. The second, more distant house was moved onto the property from a neighboring lot by the Van Rippers in 1971 to serve as a small three room residence for their son. It was built in the 1940s to help provide housing for soldiers stationed at the then-functioning Bryan Air Field (194-57) a few miles outside the city.

Interior Features¹⁹

The house contains twelve rooms, three large halls and two pantries, plus several good-sized closets not always found in homes of this vintage. The interior has approximately 4,300 square feet of floor space, not counting porches and attic.

All but one of the interior rooms have more than four side walls. The walls and ceilings are of solid wood, laid horizontally and, for all but three rooms and part of the upstairs bath, covered with tacked-on cheese-cloth which, in turn, is covered with wallpaper or, in the case of the parlor and dining room, painted canvas. The parlor walls are done in the form of pink panels with flower garlands and ribbons at the top of each panel. These panels are outlined in gilt moulding and framed in green painted canvas, with the general effect of what has been termed a "French parlor." The dining room walls are a stippled orange brown with a stenciled border topped by a silver gilt moulding.

¹⁹ See the scale drawings of the house, item "F" in the Appendix.

Except for the fireplaces, which are oak, the interior woodwork and doors are heart of pine, as are the floors. Most of the woodwork is painted ivory, but in the downstairs entry and bed-sitting room the woodwork has been stained darkish brown and varnished. In all rooms every floor board runs the full length of the room; there is no piecing except in the very long main halls, both of which run over forty feet. There are no carpets and the old flooring, up and down, retains its antique pine patina. Only in the two baths, the kitchen and one pantry are there modern vinyl floor coverings.

There is vertical wainscoting with horizontal mouldings of moderate complexity throughout the lower entry, the lower halls and the dining room.²⁰ A neo-classical archway with half pillars separates the lower entry from the main hall. French doors divide the lower halls and form an entry into the upper hall. There are large sliding doors between the first floor entry and the parlor and between the parlor and the dining room. All exterior and most single interior doors have movable transoms consisting of a wood framed pane of glass, the movement controlled by a metal fixture easily reached about chest high.

The floor of the first level of the tower is raised two steps to accent the beginning of the “L” shaped, unusually wide stairway. Above the corner turn of the stairs is a large colored glass window. Under the lower section of the stairs is a closet for the bed-sitting room. In an unusual arrangement the flue for the entry hall fireplace runs under the upper section of the stairs to join the main chimney above the bed-sitting room fireplace. The space above the stairs is open to permit a viewing gallery from the sitting room above. As a whole, the stairway system is especially decorative and pleasing. There is a back as well as front stairway. The stairway to the attic leads to a very large open space, twenty feet high at the peak of the roof. Flooring for most of the attic was not provided until the early 1970s.

Upstairs and down the ceilings are eleven and a half feet high. There are ten colored (stained) glass windows, seven of which are original to the house; all are in excellent condition. A majority of the bathroom fixtures, including two clawfoot bathtubs, are original. The light fixtures are original except in the kitchen and back porch. Light fixtures are mainly brass with various types of globes, but the “fishbowl” fixtures, each with four attached lights, in the entry and the dining room, and the several prism ornamented fixtures in the parlor are especially decorative. Both the parlor and the dining room have an unusual curved cornice bounded by gilt mouldings.

That is, the interior as well as the exterior of the home are still largely as the McMichaels and Wilsons had them designed and built in the years between 1904 and 1913. The result is an unusually authentic and harmonious structure which has been widely admired.

²⁰ For current views of the entry hall, parlor, dining room and the stairway, see the color photographs of item “G” in the Appendix.

Bibliography

Brazos Genealogical Advertiser, vol. IV, Bryan Public Library.

Bryan Eagle, weekly newspaper, microfilm file, Bryan Public Library.

Clerk of Brazos County, deed records and probate records.

Texas Historical Marker application for the Waldrop-Bowser House, from files of the Brazos County Historical Commission.

Pictorial Archive, Citizens for Historical Preservation, Brazos County, Rand B. Evans, custodian.

(Editor's note: These photographs are now located at the Carnegie Center of Brazos Valley History, 111 South Main St., Bryan, TX.)

Appendix²¹

Items

- A Letter from Mrs. Ruth Bryan
- B Letter from Mrs. Alice R. Whitson
- C Letters from Mrs. Bessie S. Benbow and Mrs. Judie Graham Bobbitt
- D Deed records (or portions thereof)
 - Purchase of land by McMichael
 - Transfer from Mrs. McMichael to A.F. Wilson
 - From A.F. Wilson to Mrs. Sammie Wilson
 - From Susan Wilson to the Van Ripers
 - From the Van Ripers to the Brocks
- E Photographs of the house, old and current
 - 1. The house shortly after it was built
 - 2. About 1910
 - 3. In the late 1950s
 - 4. Front view, 1984
 - 5. Southeast corner view, 1984
 - 6. Southwest corner, 1984
 - 7. East side and rear, 1984
- F Scale drawings of the house
 - 1. First floor
 - 2. Second floor
- G Interior views of the house in color
 - 1. Front door to base of tower
 - 2. Front door to stair and fireplace
 - 3. Front door to arch in hall
 - 4. Parlor panels and fireplace
 - 5. Dining room features

²¹ Editor's Note: A few, but not all, of these items are located in the Van Riper Collection located at the Carnegie History Center. There are additional supplemental materials in that collection as well.