

## The Lion House

The Lion House, located at 1241 North Franklin Place, is considered by the Historic American Buildings survey as “the finest surviving pre-Civil War home in Milwaukee.” The Lion House anchors the historic First Ward Triangle which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on March 19, 1987.

The story of the house begins with a man named Edward Diederichs who immigrated to Milwaukee in 1849. In 1852 he purchased Block 196, Lot 2 in Milwaukee from George C. Wood of Kentucky. Diederichs hired Mygatt and Schmidtner, one of Milwaukee’s most noted architectural firms, to design and draw plans for the building. The house was built from 1852-1855 and as the work progressed, land adjacent to the original lot was bought and used for both the building and the surrounding grounds. From the very beginning, the Lion House was, and was meant to be, a magnificent structure.

Diederichs had brought to Milwaukee drawings of a villa he had seen in Russia. These he shared with the architects as a guide to his vision of an American dream. When the Lion House was nearly complete in 1855, the firm gave the job of drawing the crouching lions (*Panthera Leo*) which gave the house its nickname to a young draftsman by the name of Henry C. Koch. Koch went on to become one of Milwaukee’s foremost architects, designing such landmarks as City Hall, the Pfister Hotel, Calvary Church and the Wells Building. Koch recalled that the lions were carved by ornamental woodcarver, Richard H. White. They are made of all-clear, white pine taken from an old mast, the reason they did not decay for many decades.

The architecture of the street façade has been variously described as “the classic style of the French Renaissance,” “Greek Revival” and “Roman temple style”. The porch columns are clearly derived from the Tuscan order as described by 16<sup>th</sup> century Italians, Palladio and Scamozzi. The entablature (the horizontal member which is supported by the columns) is Roman Mutular Doric, a very similar example of which can be seen in the ancient Theater of marcellus in Rome. This fine classically-inspired design has no peers in Wisconsin.

The Diederichs home was sold to Henry Mann in 1861 and he owned the home for almost 40 years. He preserved the Lion House, sharing the original owner’s vision.

John Johnston, Alexander Mitchell’s nephew, was the next owner beginning in 1895. During the Johnston years, a second story was added to the residence and several changes were made to the interior of the house. Architect Harland Russell was called upon to draw the plans for the second story which is viewed as a very successful and aesthetically compatible addition to the house. Observers noted, however, that the brick of the second story did not match the original brick of the first. For this reason, the masonry was painted for the first time in 1895. Many changes occurred on the inside of the house as well, including the addition of a stairway leading to the newly built second story. Two fireplaces, one from the dining room and one from the northwest corner of the building, were removed. A third pair of columns was added to the two on the porch, all in 1895. In 1925 the widow Johnston added a \$3000 garage to the lot.

In 1943, prominent businessman Eliot Grant Fitch purchased the Lion House and lived there with his family until the 1970’s. The Fitches made some enhancements to the interior of the house, and on May 10, 1944, Fitch removed the wooden lions which had finally decayed. The lions were not restored

to their proper place until the mid-1980's under the ownership of James Hummert who bought the house in 1981. Hummert engaged H. Russell Zimmermann in 1986 to superintend a historic restoration of the building.

The restored lions were created by Al Felch, a wood carver from Racine, Wisconsin. The sculptor chiseled for over a year to carve the almost life-sized lions from a 550-pound mass of Honduran mahogany glued-up to form a block. He made them as a symmetrically opposed pair facing slightly outward in opposite directions. The blocks were cut in Sheboygan and assembled at MIAD before being transported to the site. At the center of each lion is a hollow space to facilitate the circulation of air, a technique that allows for the expansion and contraction of the mahogany as the weather changes, ensuring longer durability. The lions sit on rubber washers as further insurance against the effects of our harsh and variable climate. Great care was taken to achieve the proper proportional relationship with the house. The plinths, which had been re-built with two steps after the original lions were removed, had to be replaced. A new high one-level plinth, with molded trim, was carefully scaled from old photographs. Several lions of different sizes were drawn on cardboard, cut out, and set on new plinths. By photographing these from different angles and comparing the with the old pictures a size was set and a large clay model was produced for approval. After a hiatus of 42 years, the never-forgotten nickname can be correctly used. The lions had finally returned to the "Lion House."

The renovation of the Lion House by the Hummerts included the restoration of the then 120-year-old building's original surface. Microscopic analysis of the accumulated paint buildup showed that on certain areas, such as the front door woodwork, there were up to 29 coats of paint. After chemically stripping the building it was discovered that while the sides and back of the mansion were built with "common brick", the east (front) façade was made of the "preferred", or pressed, variety. On this side only the more precise brick was laid with tighter joints and the mortar was dyed a bright orange. The surprise was that these original orange lines were not visible from a distance, but they served to warm up the slightly greenish-yellow of Milwaukee's famous "cream city" brick. The 1895 paint used to disguise the less-than-perfect match of materials and colors when the second floor was added was, when removed, used as a guide for the light cream color which has been re-applied to the wood trim. The large plate glass windows, added in the 1895 project, were removed and replaced with original design double-hung small-pane sash. The wrought iron porch railings were added later in a Greek honeysuckle design.

In June 1995, Milwaukee's Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation purchased the Lion House to serve as its headquarters. Like the Diederichs, Johnston's and Hummerts, the Foundation was prepared to invest in renovation, upkeep and expansion. A century after Johnston's addition of a second story, the Foundation expanded in another direction. To provide usable office space without contorting the residential nature of the original design, an extension to the rear of the structure was required. With plans from Uihlein Architects Inc., approved by Milwaukee's Historic Preservation Commission, renovation remained the primary objective of the work so that the four-office expansion would be consistent with the design of the Lion House in brick and detail. The interior was restored to look much as it did in the 1860's with the stylish plaster wreaths that decorate the house's entry and stairway walls, guiding the development of a Federal style décor.

The Bradley Foundation sold the Lion House to the current owners, Wisconsin Securities Partners LLC in 2019. The investment firm serves as a good steward of this historic mansion with strong ties to Milwaukee's history. The family still owns and maintains the neighboring 1887 mansion at 1060 East Juneau Avenue, the only home of this kind to be continuously owned by the same family.