

A Cobourg original



160 Chapel St - Reuben's house



Another Jackson 148 Chapel St

Cobourg's residential housing stock is a very rich one. From stately homes, that the rich Victorian middle class built for themselves, to the workers' cottages that we still see in the oldest part of Cobourg's Corktown. In this mix and usually standing in small groups we see a traditional Canadian design, the 'three up and three down'. This style of house is a one and one half storey 3 bedroom house with the stairs at one side of the house leading from the front door up to the second floor. The landing at the top of the stairs leads into each of the three bedrooms, usually on at the front and two at the back. The three piece bathroom is small and functional. This design can be found in every city in Canada and Cobourg is no exception.

But in Cobourg we have put a name to the design, they are called "Jackson" houses. Reuben Jackson, a Cobourg builder, erected many houses just past the turn of the Century. Locally successful Realtor David Lester has compiled a list of 58 identified houses.

"I went for a drive in the Spring of 2003 with Clare Wakeland, Reuben Jackson's son-in-law, who was 93 at the time and he showed me the houses that he knew as Jacksons" David Lester explained. All are located in the downtown of Cobourg. Some are left-handed, some are right-handed, some have pantry bumpouts and some don't, some have a parlour window some don't but the similarity in design is striking. A brick veneered woodframe house with the upper

bedrooms tucked into the roof line, with a utilitarian front verandah, that has lasted and is valued for its quality. The basic design is that all houses are about 1200 square feet in size, and have a standard ground floor layout: kitchen, dining room and front parlour. Some have a pantry off the kitchen that accounts for the “bumpout” in the front elevation, and consequently a bigger bedroom upstairs. The others follow traditional design and look ‘square’.

The differences in design are internal as well. Although the downstairs all have the same layout - three rooms, the doors into the front parlour may be different. Double French Doors may separate the parlour and the dining room, some also may have glass-framed doors from the side-hall into the parlour.



21 University Ave E - a JEX house

But were all “Jackson” houses really built by Reuben Jackson? A group of four houses, on the South side of University Ave East (between Division St. And John St.) appear to be of the Jackson design. Because one of them is where my family has lived for thirty years doing a title search was very interesting. It turned out that these houses were built, in 1908, by a Martin Jex, described as “a contractor” in newspapers of the day. Mr Jex went on to build bigger houses on College St. And elsewhere. He also contributed to brickworks at St. Peter’s church on King St. and the United church in Camborne. The largest group of Jackson houses is located on Chapel St. Records show that the first of this group was built in 1912 and the last in 1927. Originally costing seventeen hundred dollars they now routinely sell for over two hundred thousand. The question still remains why did Jackson faithfully follow the design of Jex. Perhaps he worked for Martin Jex and understood the design very well. Carol Fisher, a grand-daughter of Reuben Jackson and the daughter of Clarence (Clare) Wakeland (the man who identified fifty-eight Jacksons) told me that he emigrated from

Lancashire, England and shipping records indicate that he may have arrived in Canada in 1903, "I know two of his eleven children came with the family and the third was born in 1904, so he probably did come in 1903" she continued.

So much for the original design, or who built them - Jackson or Jex, and what has happened to them since they were built? Whilst all Jacksons/Jex look alike from the street, it is not true to say that when these house are approached from the rear. The Jacksons on Chapel St., where the largest contiguous number exist, on the North side, were built on deep lots and owners over the years have added much needed living space leading from the kitchen, through rear porches and into expanded family living rooms and decks.

Jackson didn't believe much in the way of luxury and that philosophy can be seen when one looks at the front porch verandahs each house had. Square columns and simple roof lines. This simple porch design has made it very easier for owners, usually in the 1950s, to close them in. The only exceptions appear to be: the only designated Jackson (done to be representative of all of them) at 132 Chapel St, and the two houses on Blake St, which are decorated with gingerbread design along the roof eave. Unfortunately the latest owner of 132 Chapel has removed the porch and his replacement plans are unknown at this time. Local lore says that this house was built for his daughter, and he wanted the house to be different! But that is subject to question; Carol Fisher said that the daughters, especially Lily Erskine lived in number 151, and elsewhere on Chapel St..

So how have the Jackson/Jex styles stood up to nearly a Century of use. Well mine has handled itself remarkably well. Spacious and graceful it does have its faults. For a renovator the house is a challenge. While Jex, when building mine, may well have enjoyed the use of full sized two by four studs in his wall construction his carpenters didn't always stick to the

convention of each stud being “sixteen inches on centre”. This makes carpentry renovations a challenge. The plaster and lath wall covering isn’t always true and the foundations have shifted ever so slightly to crack, and despite my efforts over the years I have never managed to cure the house of this bad habit. The original houses were heated by a big coalburning behemoth of a furnace and the unfinished basements that some Jacksons still have will show where the walls of the coal bunker stood - under one of the basement windows. This monstrous furnace had individual pipes leading to openings in the bottom of two unlined wall cavities between the wall studs, each leading to the Victorian wall vents that allowed hot air to flow upwards and heated both floors. With no thermostat the coal heated hot air rose to heat the house. When coal furnaces were replaced ductwork was installed from the newer oil furnaces and the hot air was pushed with a fan. So with few well designed heating ducts my Jex/Jackson leaves much to be desired in the winter. I have taken advantage of the original floor boards, when renovating the front bedroom, to install radiant radiant water heating in the floor, the thick floor-boards (one and a quarter inches thick) leave plenty of strength after routing the grooves. This new heat hasn’t been road-tested yet but installing the pipe directly in the floor was no problem.



Floor cut for heating pipe

Other inside renovations have included using the walk-in closet in the biggest back bedroom for a two piece shower bathroom and modernising the kitchen without compromising the original design. Some Jacksons have modernised kitchens with the sink moved from the original place, on the middle wall, to being placed under the window. The problem is that the window is longer than the height of the sink and some owners have replaced that window with a smaller one or just have the back of the sink showing through the window. Either way the original design is now just not the same. However considering that these houses are sought after as being well made and lasting, both Jackson and Jex should be proud.