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David Jones
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Re: 134 Victoria Street, Niagara-in-the-Lake

Dear Sir:

Further to our site visit to 134 Victoria Street with you in January 2024, and our review of the report on the foundation by Nassar Engineering and your preliminary plans for an addition and alterations to the dwelling, we have the following brief report for you. We have assumed that Victoria Street runs north-south and the house faces west on the east side of the street.

According to notes from the Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum, 134 Victoria, which they refer to as the Winterbottom-Gullion House, is hard to date and Land Registry records are not complete, but based on references to the property in historical documents they put a date of construction of circa 1835 on the residence. The physical evidence of the house supports this age as a reasonable approximation for a portion of the building. The front 1 ½ storey section is the heritage building, the rear single-storey lean-to addition and the shed dormer on the second floor of the main house are modern alterations.

There is evidence that indicates that the heritage portion was built in two stages. The original circa 1835 section appears to be the north half of the building. This was a very diminutive cottage of approximately 16' X 20', which was extended to approximately 16' X 40' still in the nineteenth century. The present fenestration in the front or west wall of the house is irregular, but the spacing of the two northern-most windows and some tell-tale signs in the interior plaster indicate that the original house likely was of three bays, with the windows symmetrically placed and an entrance door centred between them. The addition to the south essentially mirrored the original building, with two more windows and a centrally placed door. Whether the original door was removed when the addition was constructed or was removed later can only be left to conjecture, but the present configuration of five windows and an off-centre door has been in place for a long time.

The location of the stairs is logical but slightly odd and could only have been done when the addition was built. The stairs are in approximately the centre of the floor plan, but they are very narrow and they land very close to the front wall, between the southern-most original window and the northern-most window of the addition. They would not likely have been in this location when the original house was built.

There are brick chimneys in each end of the house, internally on the south end and externally on the north end. A house of this age would almost certainly have had woodstoves, not fireplaces, and an exterior fireplace and chimney would not have been original even if there had been a fireplace. The modern brick and the style of masonry reinforce the fact that it is not original.

The wide clapboard siding, plain square-edged fascia, and rudimentary frieze all indicate 20th century replacements of the original exterior finishes. The four windows in the front elevation appear to be original, but the Victorian screen door is new and the entrance door itself does not appear to be original. All of the rear windows and the windows in the second storey are vinyl replacements.

The Nassar Engineering report describes the foundation and the basement of the house. The report's author does not appear to be very experienced with heritage buildings or historic building practices, but his description of the condition and function of the foundation is accurate. The original foundation would have been all of stone, but there are presently sections of stone, brick, concrete block, concrete, and even some wood sleepers. There are also areas of vertically excavated and unsupported soil. The foundation is unacceptable, but the small size of the house means that it would be a relatively simple matter to lift it and construct a new basement beneath it.

Unfortunately, the foundation problems are only one element of the deficiencies at 134 Victoria. What was not mentioned by Nassar but is very obvious in the basement is that essentially all of the original timber joists have failed. A combination of rot and insect infestation, probably powder post beetle, have worked to remove all structural integrity from the joists. Several new pressure-treated 6X6 timbers have been inserted between the existing joists, and these are resting for the most part on pressure-treated wood blocking on soil. There are also some newer spruce lumber joists that have been installed, with and without adequate support. The floors are significantly out of level as a result of the poor foundation and the failure of numerous joists, and would have to be corrected in a renovation project. The poor condition of the floor structure adds to the complexity of lifting the building to construct a new basement, but does not make it impossible to do.

The joists can be replaced with new material after the house is lifted and placed on a new basement, but this would necessitate either lifting and relaying the floor, or shimming and fastening it to the new joists without completely lifting it. At present much of the floor is loose, and refastening it will create out-of-level conditions locally. This will place greater stress on the tongue and groove joints of the floor, which are already in poor condition. The floor has been refinished multiple times over its lifespan, which has reduced the thickness of the grooves to the point that many of them have split off, and many more are at the point of doing so. This condition is present on both the ground floor and the second floor. Several areas have had strips filled in to repair

split out grooves prior to the last refinishing project, which is serviceable but not ideal. The flooring will not take another refinishing project.

A significant drawback of the house at 134 Victoria are the ceiling heights. The original house had a downstairs ceiling height of barely 7 feet, and the early addition increased its ceiling height by only about 6 inches. While leaving the downstairs less than satisfactory, this created the additional hazard of a single 6 inch riser at the entrance to the south half of the second storey where the stairs land at the original second floor height. Modifying the house to eliminate this step is prohibitively difficult and disruptive, but leaving it maintains a hazard at the top of the stairs.

Removing the second floor completely would be a more satisfactory arrangement and would result in higher ceilings and a more pleasing space in the original house, but without stripping out the interior finishes to allow review of the framing it is difficult to say what structural challenges this would entail. Second floor joists are frequently integral to the structural integrity of a building, particularly in Niagara-in-the-Lake where the joists are often mortised and tenoned into individual posts rather than sitting on structural girts as is common elsewhere.

Given the numerous problems and advanced deterioration of much of the extant original heritage building fabric at 134 Victoria, it would be reasonable to demolish the building, salvage the usable heritage elements for reuse, and replace the structure with a new one replicating the size and style of the heritage dwelling. This would more easily permit the construction of a new basement under the existing building and the proposed new footprint, and would enable the necessary upgrading of the numerous deficient structural and building envelope elements for a modern residence, while respecting the heritage conservation district's purpose and constraints. The house has connections to some fairly significant figures from Niagara-on-the-Lake, but these connections can be maintained with appropriate commemorative elements.

We trust that this is satisfactory, please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Mark Shoalts, P.Eng., CAHP