

# Designation Statements

96 Robinson Street, St. Marys, Ontario  
*Lot 10, Block L, Plan 216*



*96 Robinson Street, September 2016*

Prepared by Heritage St. Marys  
for St. Marys Town Council  
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## Identification of Property

This property is situated at 96 Robinson Street (Lot 10, Block L, Plan 216.) The house on the property is a storey-and-a-half white brick villa, built in 1875 as the home of Leon and Eunice Clench and their two daughters, Mary and Nora. Clench would have selected and adapted the design and, as a gifted woodworker, taken an active part in the construction of this home for his family.

From the high west bank of the Thames River, the property looks eastward over the north and south wards of St. Marys. When the house was built, it was one of only a handful in this section of the west ward. To the north and west was undeveloped countryside. The design of the house and its location near the end of Robinson Street immediately made it a landmark, a distinction it has retained to this day.

## Cultural Heritage Value

Criteria for determining cultural heritage value or interest according to *Ontario Regulation 9/06* are:

The property has **design value or physical value;**

The property has **historic value or associative value;**

The property has **contextual value.**

## Design or Physical Value

The house at 96 Robinson Street, as originally built, was an excellent example of an L-shaped Ontario house from the mid-Victorian period. Examples of floor plans and elevations for this popular and versatile style of house can be found in reference material at the St. Marys Museum.

Leon Clench adapted basic pattern book designs to suit himself and his family. He placed a doorway from the second storey leading out onto a balcony over the front entrance – in effect, creating a two level veranda. His windows to the south and east all had shutters. The shutters on the south side were split into upper and lower sections so that they could be



opened and closed in a variety of combinations to keep the house warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer.

Even the earliest photographs of the house taken from the south show that there was also a small storey-and-a-half portion to the rear with brick walls and a shed roof sloping to the west. This held the kitchen on the main floor and a box room upstairs.

*Clench house, ca 1880*



With the passage of years and with changes in ownership, some of the house's original features have been lost or altered. The surviving features of heritage value are identified:

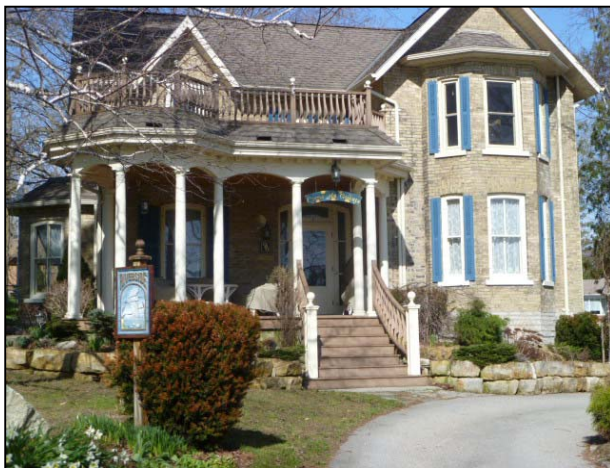
- The Clench house remains a good example of L-shape design. The north portion of the house runs full length from east to west with gable ends.
- The east façade includes bay windows on both lower and upper storeys.
- The portion that makes it L-shaped is built to the south and also has a bay window.



- An alcove in the southeast corner is designed to accommodate a veranda that shelters the front door.
  - The front door has a cambered top, echoing the windows, with a transom, sidelights, and door fitted into an elaborate frame.
  - A door from the second storey that opens onto the upper level of the veranda remains.
  - The veranda, although a recent addition, has been architecturally designed and is listed. (See note below.)
- The second level of the house is built into the slope of the gabled roofline; therefore it is officially a storey-and-a-half rather than a two-storey house. To maximize space, the second storey goes up as far as possible under the gables.
  - All the window openings on the east and south facades retain their original appearance with cambered lintels; some have the original two-over-two lights although some of the upstairs glass has been changed from two-over-two to single pane.
  - Some of the original functional shutters remain (and are listed) while others do not. Overall, the fenestration does remain consistent with Clench's design.



In the years following the death of Eunice Clench, who survived her husband, subsequent owners modified the veranda and then removed it. The current owners have recreated a sympathetic, contemporary version of the original veranda that provides additional outdoor living space during warm weather. Although a recent feature, it deserves to be listed along with the original features.



For their Bed and Breakfast business, in 2015 the current owners added a spacious wing to the northwest, designed with an accessible entrance from Ontario Street. This addition has been placed so as not to affect the historic view of the house from Robinson Street.

*96 Robinson Street, current views*



## Historic Value or Associative Value

Few properties in St. Marys have a stronger historic/associative value than 96 Robinson Street. Leon Clench (1830-1883) was, by profession, a barrister and solicitor. Relocating from nearby London to St. Marys in the mid-1850s, he was the first lawyer to practise in the village. He was also a talented musician and established the first town band. He had a creative mind that teemed with many ideas, projects and enthusiasms.

Among his many talents he was a skilled woodworker, his projects ranging from violins to fine cabinetry to entire houses. And he was an inventor. In a work shed behind his home on Robinson Street he drafted plans and constructed prototypes. His projects included a telescopic sight for rifles, a vacuum pump and a silent, oscillating feed attachment for sewing machines. Clench filed a number of patent applications but never achieved the financial rewards he hoped might come from these endeavours.



He had highest hopes for an invention he called the Atmospheric Car Brake – the way to use compressed air to slow or stop a train of railway cars safely. However, this important invention was patented in 1872 by the dynamic American, George Westinghouse. The Clench family always believed that Leon's idea had been stolen.

Clench was something of a showman and promoter. He heard about work being done in Europe to produce a pedal-operated wheeled vehicle and according to the St. Marys Argus, February 19, 1869, "...hundreds of curious townspeople visited the Miller Carriage Factory to see a velocipede constructed from a photograph by our ingenious and versatile Mr. Leon M. Clench."

In 1857, he married Eunice Cruttenden, a daughter of Lauriston Cruttenden, one of the earliest settlers and a man whose interests in milling, property development and municipal affairs helped shape the community. Arriving in the early 1840s, Cruttenden established himself in St. Marys and then brought his family from Oxford County in 1855 to his new brick home on Ontario Street. He owned considerable property in the West Ward and transferred the deed to nearby 96 Robinson Street to his daughter, Eunice Clench, in 1862.

Leon and Eunice Clench had two daughters: Mary born in 1859 and Leonora (Nora), born in 1867. Both were musical: Mary was an accomplished pianist but Nora was a prodigy. Leon Clench was first to identify his daughter's musical gift. He was her first teacher and the maker of her first violin. He did everything he could to support and further her career.

With her family's support, Nora began performing on stage as a young child. She went on to study music at academies in Ontario and then in Leipzig, Germany, and in her early 20s had won recognition internationally as a concert violinist. At the beginning of the 20th century, she was the most famous person to have been born in St. Marys.



The property's association with the Cruttenden and Clench families, especially Nora Clench, gives 96 Robinson Street a unique place in the history of this community.



## Contextual Value

The Clench house is an essential part of the Robinson Street neighbourhood, overlooking the Thames River. One of a handful of properties facing this portion of the street (a cul de sac,) it currently provides the main reason for travellers to take this road – many looking for their Bed and Breakfast destination.

But long before that, the Clench house was a gathering place. It was visited by Leon's associates, by Mary and Nora's friends as they were growing up and above all by members of the extended Cruttenden family. Eunice Clench (1838-1923) was a steady centre at the sometimes turbulent lives of her brothers and sisters and her nieces and nephews.

Closer to Queen along Robinson Street are a number of other houses identified as having been designed and built by Leon Clench. They exhibit his versatility and skill and provide additional context to appreciate and understand the house he built for his family – 96 Robinson Street.

## Recommendation

The design, historic / associative and contextual values of the property identified as 96 Robinson Street, St. Marys, Ontario, have been assessed by Heritage St. Marys. This property's cultural heritage value is high for all three criteria. Designation is recommended for the entire property. The original features, noted with bullets in the Design/Physical Value section of these statements, are specifically protected by this designation.

## Background Documentation

On file in the archives of the St. Marys Museum:

- Complete history of the ownership of this property with information from sources that include: the land registry abstract, municipal assessment rolls, census documents and contemporary newspaper articles. This record expands on the historical and cultural significance to St. Marys of this property and of its owners.
- Cruttenden / Clench fonds: An extensive collection (photographs, letters, programs, art work, diaries, newspaper clippings, music, ephemera) is held in the R. Lorne Eedy Archives at the St. Marys Museum. There are several files relating to Leon Clench.
- The collection includes an unpublished history of the Cruttenden / Clench family by a neighbour and local historian Burnie McLay.
- Early St. Marys (1979), by L. W. Wilson and L. R. Pfaff, provides a useful summary of the activities of these two families.
- Architectural books and periodicals in the reference section of the St. Marys Museum contain drawings, elevations and floor plans that explain the L-shaped house.

