

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (1)

I. Name of Building or Site

(1) Common

"Thorstrand"

(2) Historic (if applicable)

Magnus Swenson Estate

II. Location

(1) Street Address

1-2 Thorstrand Road

(2) Ward (available @ City Clerk)

Twenty-First

III. Classification

(1) Type of Property (building, monument, park, etc.)

Buildings

(2) Zoning District

R-1

(3) Present Use

Residential and Park

IV. Current Owner of Property (available at City Assessor's office)

(1) Name(s) Ms. Mary North O'Hare (1 Thorstrand Road)
Mr. and Mrs. Larry Lichte (2 Thorstrand Road)
City of Madison Parks Department (all land)

(2) Parks Dept. - 704 E. Gorham St.
Street Address
O'Hare - 1410 E. Skyline Drive
Lichte - 2 Thorstrand Road

(3) Lichte: 271-0709
Telephone Number
O'Hare: 238-8881
Parks Dept.: 266-4711

V. Legal Description (available at City Assessor's office)

(1) Parcel Number

(2) Legal Description

Lots 3 and 4, certified survey #3631.

VI. Condition of Property

(1) Physical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins)

good

(2) Altered or Unaltered?

Altered

(3) Moved or Original Site?

original site

(4) Wall Construction

frame and stucco

(5) On a separate sheet of paper, describe the present and original physical construction and appearance (limit 500 words).

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (2)

VI.(5) Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance:

Thorstrand - the Magnus Swenson Estate consists of 15.29 acres of mostly wooded land and five buildings -- the Swenson House, the Mary North House, both built in 1922, two detached garages, one in ruinous condition, and a small, concrete block cottage. For the purposes of nomination, only the two large houses will be considered. The land around the houses has been purchased by the City to preserve it as a passive recreation area. The possible preservation of the houses within the park is currently being explored.

The Swenson House

The Swenson house is a two story mansion in the Mediterranean Revival style. It is constructed of stuccoed wood frame. Its plan is rambling, with asymmetrically arranged pavilions crowned by low, hipped roof of red tile with projecting beam ends. The three-story tower, with its band of windows at the third level, dominates the composition.

To the right of the tower is the entrance pavilion which features a shallowly traced arch enclosing the main doorway. The doorway is capped by a carved wooden pediment with console supports. Between the entrance and the large service wing, which forms an "el", is a one-story arcade composed of three stained glass windows set within shallow stuccoed arches. These windows were crafted by Magnus Swenson and represent a Viking ship, the State Capitol (symbolizing Swenson's membership in the Capitol Building Commission), and a steam ship of his Norwegian-American line.

Attached to the service wing is a one-story garage. It was added in the 1950s and is not significant to the character of the house. Porches project from the northeast and southwest sides of the house. Originally open between the classical wooden columns, they have since been enclosed. Windows on the house are either double hung with small panes in the top halves only, or many-paned casements. A beltcourse separates the stories and serves as the sill for the windows above. The Parks Department has temporarily stabilized the deteriorating condition of the exterior surfaces.

The first floor plan of the Swenson house includes a kitchen (10 x 12), two pantries, dining room (17 x 14), living room (16 x 30), library (14 x 19), lavatory, phone booth, servants room (10 x 13), coat room, sun room and enclosed veranda. A wide staircase adorns the entrance hall, where the three stained glass windows are located. The living room has a beamed ceiling with a large working fireplace. The second floor includes six bedrooms and four full bathrooms. Woodwork throughout the house is painted with stained wood doors. Floors are exposed hardwood. The kitchen, butler's pantry and bathrooms have been somewhat altered, but the rest of the interior detail appears to be original.

The North House

The Mary North house was built by Swenson for his daughter and is separated from the Swenson house by the main drive and is located closer to Lake Mendota. It is constructed of similar materials in a very restrained version of the Mediterranean Revival. Its exterior design is more formal, with two projecting pavilions symmetrically framing the main central doorway. A heavy cornice and decoratively carved panels embellish the entablature of the flat roof. Projecting from the roof are two tall stuccoed chimneys flanking a cupola with a red-tile roof. Double hung

Description, continued

windows with small panes in the top sash rest on a projecting beltcourse. On the first floor shallow round-arched reveals enclosed double hung and casement windows. The central door is decorated with classical columns and crowned by an iron balustrade. The North house is in excellent condition.

The first floor plan of the Mary North house includes a kitchen (10 x 20), butler's pantry, dining room (16 x 15), breakfast porch (11 x 13), living room (13 x 26), library (12 x 14), enclosed veranda (13 x 15), servants room (8 x 12), lavatory, and coat room. The second floor includes eight bedrooms, three full baths, a sewing room, and a large linen closet. The basement contains a large finished game room. Woodwork and floors are the same as in the Swenson house, but the original fixtures and cabinets in the kitchen, butler's pantry and some of the bathrooms are also intact. There are three large fireplaces in the house, located in the living room, library and game room.

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (3)

VII. Significance

(1) Original Owner

Magnus Swenson and Mary North

(2) Original Use

residences

(3) Architect or Builder

Law and Law

(4) Architectural Style

Mediterranean Revival

(5) Date of Construction

1922

(6) Indigenous Materials Used

none

(7) On a separate sheet of paper, describe the significance of the nominated property and its conformance to the designation criteria of the Landmarks Commission Ordinance (33.01), limit of 500 words.

VIII. List of Bibliographical References Used

1. Interviews with Dixie Curkeet and Polly North O'Hare, granddaughters of Magnus Swenson, conducted by Lance Neckar and Tim Heggland, 1978 and 1979.
2. Haugen, Olaf, "Among the Foremost", Wisconsin State Journal, April 5, 1936.
3. Haugen, Olaf, "Magnus Swenson, Inventor and Chemical Engineer", Norwegian-American Studies and Records, v. 10, 1938, pp. 152-175.
4. "Magnus Swenson, Madison Capitalist and Builder, Dies", Wisconsin State Journal, March 30, 1936, p. 1.
5. "Swenson Helped Lay Foundation of Ag School Fame, Dean Recalls", Wisconsin State Journal, March 30, 1936.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

IX. Form Prepared By:

(1) Name and Title

Katherine H. Rankin, Secretary

(2) Organization Represented (if any)

Madison Landmarks Commission

(3) Address

215 Monona Avenue, 53710

(4) Telephone Number

266-6552

(5) Date Nomination Form Was Prepared

December 17, 1979

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (4)

VII.(7) Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria:

The Magnus Swenson house and the Mary North house are significant primarily for their association with Magnus Swenson, a nationally significant Norwegian-American figure, and "one of Wisconsin's most versatile and colorful citizens". 1

Magnus Swenson (1852-1936) emigrated from Norway to Janesville, Wisconsin in 1867 at the age of fourteen. According to his obituary in the Wisconsin State Journal, "his was the Horatio Alger life of an immigrant boy who worked his way to become a chemist, inventor, administrator, capitalist and builder". ² He first became well known in Madison through the presentation of his University of Wisconsin thesis "The Chemical Analysis of Madison Well Waters," in which he contended that 96% of Madison's well water was contaminated and unfit to drink. The Common Council asked Swenson to set up a small testing station on the university campus to monitor the quality of the city's well water (this station has since been replaced by the State Laboratory of Hygiene). After he graduated in 1880 with a degree in engineering, Dean Henry of the Department of Agriculture appointed him the second faculty member of that new department. In that position, he began to study the refinery of sugar from sorghum, a study which attracted national attention because of the scarcity and high cost of sugars imported from the Phillipines and Cuba.

As a result of his work, he was asked to manage a large sugar refinery in Texas and spent the next several years as a consultant in sugar refining throughout the South. In Fort Scott, Kansas he worked out a special chemical process which made the refining of sugar from sorghum so successful that he was hailed throughout the nation as "Eli Whitney of sugar". He won international attention when the U.S. government tried to prohibit him from patenting the process because he was employed by the government for a short time. After a lengthy dispute which was battled even on the floors of Congress, Swenson won his right to patent his invention.

Swenson then founded the Fort Scott Foundry and Machine Works (later the Walburn-Swenson Company) to research, develop and manufacture multiple-effect evaporators and other machines for the sugar industry. In the 1880s he branched out to developing an ore concentrator for the mining industry, and machines for the processing of salt, caustic soda, paper pulp, glue and fertilizers among others. He developed a round cotton baler, a feat which had been attempted unsuccessfully for 50 years before. During this period he patented over 200 machines and processes, including such basic equipment as the surface condenser, spray separator, heat interchanges and centrifuges. His combination of mechanical ability, chemical knowledge, and practicality (his motto was "Save the Waste"), insured him of an almost instant fortune, so that by the year 1900 he could retire from the industry and return to Madison a rich man.

In Madison, he began a series of exciting capital investments. He built the hydroelectric power dams on the Wisconsin River at Kilborn and Prairie du Sac, the first great hydroelectric developments west of Niagara Falls, an enterprise which earned him another nickname -- "the Electricity King". He was one of the organizers and later the American president of the Norwegian-American Steamship Lines. In Madison, he founded and became president of the U.S. Sugar Beet Company on the east side (now Garver Feed and Supply) and was for a long time on the Board of Directors of the First National Bank.

Significance, continued

He was active not only in business, but in humanitarian endeavors, also. During WWI he served as the federal food administrator for the state and as the chairman for the Wisconsin Council for Defense. After the war, Herbert Hoover sent him to Europe as the post-war director of food supplies in northern Europe. He was one of the promoters of a chemical engineering department at the University of Wisconsin and served as chairman of the Board of Regents for ten years. He also was an active promoter of the first University Extension system in the United States, a progressive concept embodied in the slogan "the boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state". He served as chairman of the building commission for the new state capitol and was for many years the president of the national Norwegian-American Association. In 1918 Woodrow Wilson selected Swenson to visit Mount Vernon as the representative of Norwegians of American birth.

According to one commemorative article, Magnus Swenson had a dream from the time he was a student at the University to build a home on the shores of Lake Mendota.³ When he was living in Chicago in the 1890s he bought fifty acres of cornfield on the lake which was to later become his estate. Through the years the family planted thousands of trees on "the Farm" so that today it is a mature woodlot. In 1922 he commissioned the Madison architectural firm of Law and Law to design two large houses for his estate. James and Edward Law's firm was the most active architectural firm in Madison in the 1920s. The firm was know for its residential designs in traditional modes. Drawing heavily from European forms of ornament for the exterior detail, their domestic designs were often set out on a modern, open interior plan. The firm was also known for its commercial design work, including the Tenney Building, the Wisconsin Power and Light Building, and collaborative work on the Harry S. Manchester Department Store.

1. Wisconsin State Journal, March 30, 1936, p.1.
2. I bid.
3. Wisconsin State Journal, March 30, 1936.