

# 364 DIVISION

Romanesque Revival  
Built 1887



This grande dame of a Victorian-era mansion was originally built for Alfred B. Church, stepson to Gail Borden of the Borden Dairy fame. An Elgin Daily Courier, December 24, 1886 article praised the house (then under construction): "The finest new house which the year has produced ... is an elegant structure of pressed brick and brown stone, and built in the latest and most approved style of architecture. It is heated throughout with steam and fitted with all modern improvements. The building presents a very fine appearance, and the interior finish is a marvel of beauty and elegance. The cost of the building is \$12,000, and Andrew Magnus the erector thereof. The house will cost half as much more to complete."

The illustrious Mr. Church was a banker and real estate developer who partnered with former Elgin Mayor William Grote in the Elgin Improvement


Company. The two men recruited many businesses to Elgin, among them: D.C. Cook Publishing, Illinois Watch Case Company, a shoe factory, a shirt factory, the Brethren Publishing Company and the Seybold Piano and Organ Company. Church was a civic leader as well and served on several boards and charities. Fred Church moved to New York City in 1902. The following July, Thomas Loucks bought the property for \$28,000. He owned a successful coal business. Mrs. Loucks resided in the house until 1920. In 1922, the house became the home of Emil P. Johnson, a piano manufacturer who had purchased the Seybold Piano and Organ Co.

The Johnsons experienced financial trouble in the Great Depression. Lawsuits and back taxes ultimately forced a sheriff's sale. Henry Muntz purchased the property for \$5,700 and in 1937 Mrs. Johnson, who had become a widow, moved out.

Hard economic times meant hard times for many beautiful homes.

Muntz sold in 1938 to Lawrence O'Connor. The house sat vacant until 1939, when Mr. O'Connor converted the first floor to a funeral home business and the upper two floors into apartments for his family and his brother's. The home has been a funeral parlor since. In 1961, the east-facing porch was replaced by a brick addition that still functions as a chapel.

364 Division passed into different hands in 1984 with its purchase by William and Mary Homeier. They lived there until 1999, although a funeral services subsidiary of Service Corporation International acquired the building in 1998. From 1999 until the current owners, Tom and Donna Leetz, moved into the house in 2003, the upper two floors sat vacant.


The Leetzes found the upper floors to be in a shambles. So, they put on their superhero capes and began restoring this monumental property — or this grande dame with “beautiful bones,” as Donna put it. With no occupants, there were water leaks and other problems had gone undetected. From installing new plumbing and electrical wiring inside, to exterior renovations, the Leetzes have poured their hearts into bringing this beauty back while also trying to operate their funeral home business. This home is this year's “work-in-progress.” 

### Architectural Notes

The exterior design of this massive home is predominately Romanesque Revival, a style associated with architect Henry H. Richardson and commonly employed for large public buildings such as courthouses, libraries, train stations, offices buildings and the like. Romanesque-influenced homes began

appearing in the 1880s. The structures were always masonry, large in size and often became local landmarks.

Typical to the style, the building sits on a rough-faced, or ashlar stone base. Not typical, however, is the extensive use of smooth brick and the red stone, used in narrow horizontal bands, provides a contrast in texture and color to the brick. These are elements of the Chateausque style. As part of their restoration, the owners stripped the paint that had been applied to the exterior, which hid this attractive detailing. Other Romanesque features are the prominent tower, large rectangular window openings with single panes of glass and occasionally used arched windows and openings. The porte-cochere is undergoing restoration. The large wooden columns you see today were once joined by decorative spindle-work friezes.



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