

**Statement of Significance
Gertrude Lawson House
680 17th Street
West Vancouver, BC
May 2008**



Historic Place

The historic place is the Gertrude Lawson House at 680 17th Street, located across Esquimalt Avenue from the West Vancouver Municipal Hall. The historic place also includes the English Oak tree on the property, which is listed in the Heritage Landscape Inventory, and the landscaped rockery. It does not include the garage at the southeast corner of the property. The stone house, completed in 1940, has served as the West Vancouver Museum and Archives since 1994. It is owned by the District of West Vancouver and is a Designated Heritage Property.

Heritage Value

The house has historical, community, and architectural value. Its historical value is based on its associations with both Gertrude Lawson and the West Vancouver Historical Society – and by extension from both, with the larger community, thereby reflecting community values. Gertrude Lawson lived here from its completion in 1940 until her death in 1989 at the age of 96. The daughter of influential pioneer John Lawson, who is remembered at John Lawson Park, Gertrude Lawson spent part of her youth in West Vancouver and taught primary grades at Pauline Johnson and Hollyburn Schools from 1923 to 1952. This was the home of a professional woman in one of the few professions readily open to women. It provides an excellent opportunity to tell one woman's story and to link this to women's history more generally.

Lawson purchased the property in 1929, designed the house as her retirement home, and supervised its construction. It reflects her values, interests, and personal obligations. It also reveals a great deal about her and, by extension, the opportunities, limitations, and expectations middle class women faced in the early and mid-twentieth century. Lawson recruited two other single female teachers to participate in the house-building project and arranged with her artist friend Bessie Adelaide Symons (Fry) to build a studio for her in the house.

Lawson designed the house to be shared with her parents, an aunt, and boarders. Her strategy reflected the marginal financial situation of female teachers at the time, which was exacerbated at retirement by a meagre pension payments, as well the unspoken assumption that as an unmarried daughter she would care for her parents in their old age. Not only did Lawson pool resources with others in order to build the house, but she is also believed to be one of the first women in British Columbia to take out a mortgage.

Lawson had a keen interest in the arts, including music, Scottish dancing, and visual art. When she planned the house she included a large living room that could accommodate four quadrilles, and for many years she hosted the Ladies' Scottish Dance Society at her home. Lawson was also active in a number of other community groups, including the IODE. These activities reflected her belief that as a teacher she had a role to play as a community leader. For stimulation and variety she focussed this part of her life on activities that brought her in contact with adults rather than children. The Scottish dancing was also an expression of her cultural identity.

The District of West Vancouver purchased the house from Lawson's family, who made a substantial contribution to the cost of adapting the house to use as a museum. The historic place opened as a community museum in 1994. It houses a museum, archives, and the offices of the West Vancouver Historical Society. The change in ownership and stewardship reflects, in part, the evolving role of local government, as it took on increasing responsibilities related to protecting

the community's built and intangible heritage. The protection of the house by heritage designation in 1990 reflects this same emerging value.

The house also has architectural value for representing the persistence of traditional house design in the 1940s, with particular reference to the Colonial Revival style and the traditional Scottish manor. The house was designed by Lawson to resemble a Scottish castle or country manor, and is believed to have been inspired by a trip Lawson took with her parents to their homeland, Scotland. It therefore is an expression of Lawson's cultural roots and, by extension, the roots of many early West Vancouver residents. The interior arrangement (before the alterations to create the museum and archives) reflected Lawson's ideas about family and community and how she put those into action.

Character-Defining Elements

- Setting at the corner of 17th Street and Esquimalt Avenue
- Mature plantings, English oak, holly hedge, lawn, and rockery
- Stone terraces and steps
- Features that relate to the Colonial Revival style, including the medium-pitch gable roof, the small gable over the entrance bay, the projecting entrance, and the tall chimney
- Use of random stone as the exterior building material
- Rusticated, cut stone lintels
- Wood casement windows, with leaded glass in places
- Interior features including the living room with its platform, high ceiling, and granite fireplace
- Tradition of public use and access in Lawson's day, especially on the main floor; and of public use as a Museum and Archives since 1994

Sources

West Vancouver Museum and Archives, Lawson family fonds, Gertrude Lawson Papers, Rupert Harrison Fonds, Noteworthy People, 'L', Information Files – Lawson Family; West Vancouver Heritage Inventory, updated to 2003; West Vancouver Heritage Landscape Inventory, 1988; West Vancouver Heritage Inventory Worksheets and Evaluation Sheet; Vancouver Public Library, Fine Arts, VF – Bessie Adelaide Symons (spelling varies); West Vancouver Museum and Archives, Destinations Time Walk, 'Gertrude Lawson House.' Other information provided by the District of West Vancouver.