

History of The Gennett Mansion

1829 East Main Street

Richmond Indiana 47374

**National Register of Historic Places
Home of Henry and Alice Gennett 1897-1936
Colonial Revival
John Hasecoaster, Architect**

The Henry and Alice Gennett Home is a large, Colonial Revival Style house located on the east side of Richmond, Indiana. Prominently situated at the corner of Main Street (U.S. 40) and 19th Street, the house is constructed of yellow ceramic brick and features a limestone foundation and a monumental, semi-circle, entry portico. Construction on the home began in 1897 for Henry Gennett, then vice-president of the Starr Piano Factory, and his family. The house was built on 2 city lots facing Main Street and the family took occupancy during 1898, the same year that Henry Gennett became president of the Starr Piano Company. The family lived in the house for the next 38 years.

The house was designed by John Hasecoaster who was the most significant local architect in Richmond at that time having designed many of the best-known buildings in the area: the Abram Gaar residence in 1876, Wernle Children's Home in 1893, Reid Memorial Hospital (the original building) in 1904 and St. John's Lutheran Church in 1908 to name a few.

Henry and Alice Gennett had four children: three sons, Harry, Clarence and Fred, and a daughter, Rose. Harry married Grace Robinson in 1898. The Robinson family owned the foundry in Richmond at that time and provided the "iron works" for the piano, the only part of the piano not built at the Starr Piano Factory. Harry and Grace had a son, Harry, Jr. who as a young man became instrumental in the sound recordings made on the Gennett label. Clarence Gennett married John Hasecoaster's daughter, Ruby, in 1905. The Hasecoaster family home is located 3 houses to the east of the Gennett on East Main Street. Fred married Hazel Reid in 1907. Rose married Thomas Campbell in 1913 at the Gennett Mansion that was

the social event of the season that year. Both Hazel and Thomas were part of the very large and prosperous Garr family of Richmond, Indiana. Thomas had been raised just east of the Gennett home at 2013 East Main Street, next to his Uncle and Aunts house at 2015. Several blocks of East Main Street are known as “Millionaires Row” as many of Richmond’s most prominent families had homes built there in the late 1880 -1890’s. There was a plethora of innovation and manufacturing in the county throughout the 1800’s because of its excellent location with the natural power resource of the White River along with the turnpike that became the National Road in the early 1800’s. At one time, 5 major railroad lines came through or to Richmond, Indiana. In the past decade, a number of these homes have been purchased and brought back by the loving and patient hands of their present owners. Each of them has unique architectural features and shows a level of craftsmanship that remains unsurpassed in our history.

The home is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for three reasons: it remains a fine example of Colonial Revival Architecture which was part of the Neo Classical movement of that time period; and, the prominence of the Gennett family to the industry and innovation history of the Richmond area and to the Gennett Recording legacy as part of early American music history.

As piano manufacturer’s, the Gennett family was in a unique position to usher in the era of recorded sound. Henry Gennett was a true entrepreneur and guided the company to explore new areas of business as technology and innovation flourished in the early days of the 1900’s. The production of pianos, player pianos, piano rolls and phonographs led to the making of recordings under the family name, Gennett. The first recordings were produced in 1917 utilizing the “vertical cut” with studios in Richmond, Indiana and New York City. However, after WWI, the more superior sounding “lateral cut” was employed at the Starr Piano factory and the Gennetts ended up in court with the mighty recording studios of Victor and Columbia who tried to monopolize the recording industry with their patents. Representing many smaller, independent labels across the country, the Gennetts won the lengthy and expensive court battle in 1922.

Located at the southern end of the massive Starr Piano complex in the White River Gorge Valley, the tiny studio by the railroad tracks produced thousands of acoustic and electric recordings between 1917 and 1934 documenting some of the most seminal moments in the evolution of jazz, blues, gospel, and early country music. The list of musicians who graced the recording studio in Indiana and made their first recordings ever is significant: Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, King Oliver, Hoagy Carmichael, Guy Lombardo, and Gene Autry, just to name a few.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed had a devastating effect on the piano and recording industry. In 1929, record sales were 75 million; by 1930 they had fallen to 18 million and in 1931, down to 5 million. Many record companies were ruined by the Great Depression and went out of business. Starr Piano continue to record for other labels and young Harry Gennett, Jr. continued to make sound effect specialty records, many of those used in the film industry.

In 1936, during the Great Depression, the widow of Henry Gennett, their daughter Rose and her family, relocated to Southern California. The house was sold at auction in 1938. Shortly after that, the house was converted into twelve apartments, four on each floor. In 1982, the house was purchased and renovated, removing most of the evidence of the former apartments, and changed into office use. The house changed owners once again in the late-nineties and continued to be used as commercial office space. In the fall of 2006, the present owners, Robert and Donna Geddes purchased the house and began a complete restoration that is ongoing at this time. The first floor has been 99% returned to its original design, as it was when it was built.

The main entrance to the house opens into a T-shaped, oak paneled hallway. At the juncture of the main and cross hallways is a stone fireplace. To the west of this fireplace is the staircase to the second floor. As the Gennett family built pianos and employed many fine craftsman, the interior of the house is embellished with oak, mahogany, sycamore and poplar treatments throughout, the finest cuts provided to them by many of their lumber suppliers at the time. One door on the second floor is constructed of a solid panel of oak backed by a solid panel of mahogany. The home features 8 fireplaces including the stone

hearth, there are 6 Italian ceramic fireplaces each of a different color: chocolate brown, dark cranberry, white, on the first floor, blue and white marbleized, green and white marbleized and raspberry on the second floor, and an enormous brick hearth in the conservatory. The Geddes installed two Italian crystal chandeliers dated from the late 1800's in the entry foyer and in the staircase leading to the second floor. There are solid oak floors throughout the first floor and there are motifs on the entryway door, on the built in mantels and dining room buffet that are the same trims seen on the finer pianos that Starr produced. As part of our restoration efforts, we have returned the first floor to 98% of the original footprint at the time that the home was built. For over 60 years the built-in buffet had been located in an added on bathroom wall that faced into the conservatory and had suffered sun and water damage and we knew it did not belong there. Through careful analysis of the oldest set of known blueprints and the very good fortune of meeting the last living Gennett who had been raised in the home until she was fourteen, the location was discovered and the dining buffet carefully relocated to its proper place in the original formal dining room of the house.

The third floor of the home has a long room the width of the house, east to west, that was originally used as a ballroom that connects in a T-shape at its center to another long room that projects out over the portico with 6 double sash windows in a semi-circle. This room offered such fine light that Rose Gennett used it for painting. Sometime prior to 1912, the third floor was where the orchestra rehearsed before the conservatory, known to the family as the "billiards room," was built.

Following is a more detailed description as to the architectural features that qualify the home to be of the Colonial Revival Style.

The home consists of a large, rectangular, hip-roofed central block with small projecting wings, or porches, on each façade. The symmetrical main (north) façade is three bays wide and is dominated by the two-story main entry portico, surmounted by a large, semi-circular bay. The portico consists of four fluted Ionic columns on a semi-circular platform, ringed by three steps of cut limestone. The main door is a single-leaf, glazed unit enhanced with decorative floral carving, and surmounted by a transom. This doorway is located in a recessed entryway that is flanked by two fixed-sash windows mounted in plain

surrounds on walls angled at 45 degrees to the main door architrave. A terra cotta strip molding enhances the plain brick surrounds of the first and second story windows in the main body of the house. The windows are double-hung sash units with single lights in the upper and lower sashes.

A second entrance and portico of somewhat smaller scale is located in the center of the east façade. This semi-circular portico is one-story high and was flanked by two screened porches on either side. These porches were later enclosed and refitted as bathrooms sometime after Henry Gennett's death in 1922.

Projecting from the west façade is the conservatory, a one-story wing with a semi-circular bay that was built circa 1912. The conservatory features a band of eleven, large, double-hung, one-over-one windows separated by brick piers treated as pilasters. This bay originally housed a grand piano manufactured by the owner's firm and a billiards table.

On the south rear wall of the house is a two-story enclosed staircase that leads to the offices on the second floor and the third floor apartment. Originally this was the site of a much smaller, two-story, enclosed screened porch. When the house was converted to apartments in 1940, the porch was extended 8' south and walled with plywood on the second floor and wood siding on the first floor. The porch foundation, which was originally limestone block, was extended with cinder block.

The over scaled entablature with modillions follows the second floor ceiling line of the house. The actual masonry wall area extends approximately 5' above this line to the cornice. Pediment dormers with Doric pilasters interrupt this cornice at irregular intervals; the windowsills of these units rest on the entablature. Truncated, hipped roofs are employed on the central block and the conservatory; the west wing and the east portico have flat, built-up roofs. A balustrade originally appeared on the east portico and the west wing roof, but this feature has been removed.

Five chimneys extend above the roof. They are of brick construction with four-step, corbelled molding above, which the shaft continues. Each chimney is finished with a narrow rimmed cap to form a crown on the shaft. The chimney located in the

southeast portion of the south wall is flush. The other four chimneys are located nearly equidistant from the east-west centerline of the house.

For more information or to schedule a tour, please contact Donna Geddes at 765-935-0055.
For more information on the Gennett Family, Gennett Records and the Starr Piano Company,
Visit the Starr-Gennett Foundation's Website: <http://www.starrgennett.org/>