



730 ABERDEEN AVENUE

ISAAC NEWTON SCHOOL

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – FEBRUARY 2009



730 ABERDEEN AVENUE ISAAC NEWTON SCHOOL

Date of Construction: 1921

Building Permit: 783 and 1282/1921

Architect: Semmens, John N.

Contractor: Claydon Company

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

This large brick and stone school was built after World War I as the demand for modern educational facilities rose.

The dark brick front (east) façade features a long central section flanked by projecting wings at either end. Two projecting stone entrances are located in the central area, further embellished with detailing around the gable end. The projecting wings hold two-storey bay windows and gable ends with finials. Windows throughout the façade are large and plentiful and highlighted by ornate stone surrounds. The north and south façades continue the fenestration of the front elevation. The rear, to which a large addition was completed in 1963, still displays the ornamented gable ends similar to those on the projecting wings of the front, without the bay windows.



Northeast corner detail, 2009

Cost of construction in 1921 was nearly \$200,000.¹ The building stands on its original site, appears to be in good structural condition and has not suffered major exterior alteration except for the rear façade.

The school is one of Winnipeg's best examples of the Collegiate Gothic style. This style rose in popularity after 1900 as a reaction to the highly ornamented buildings of the earlier Gothic Revival style. The newer version opted for much simpler silhouettes and subdued ornamentation, in the words of one author, "a calm, disciplined monumentality."²

Flat surfaces were preferred; buildings were often long, low symmetrical masses embellished with crenellated towers and the distinctive pointed arch of the Gothic style. Construction material was monochromatic, usually brick or stone, again a departure from the multi-hued façades of the Gothic Revival style. Inspiration for the detailing of the new style was found in the English Perpendicular Gothic design of the 15th century. Because it found widespread expression on the campuses of many North American universities and then in the public school system, it became known as Collegiate Gothic.³

Architect Colonel John N. Semmens was born in Toronto, Ontario in 1880, the son of a pioneer Methodist minister. He graduated from Wesley College and received his architectural degree from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1910, he moved west to Winnipeg, opened a practice, and soon became associated with the prominent New York firm of McKim, Mead and White. While in its employ, Semmens served as local supervising architect for the Bank of Montreal project at the southeast corner of Portage Avenue and Main Street. During his career, he was twice president of the Manitoba Association of Architects, 1921 and 1941.⁴



Rear (west) and south façades, 2009

In 1920 he was hired as a consultant for the Winnipeg School Division by J. B. Mitchell. In that role (which was expanded as Mitchell approached retirement in 1928), Semmens designed a great number of Winnipeg schools and supervised the planning of others. During World War II, Semmens organized the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadiers, but did not go overseas. He spent the remainder of the war as Commandant at Camp Shilo.⁵

In 1958 he moved to Victoria, B.C. and died three years later. A list of Semmens's major work in Winnipeg includes: Bank of Montreal, 335 Portage Avenue, (1911-13, Grade II, local supervising architect for McKim, Mead and White); Turner-Walker Block, 425 Henry Avenue (1912, Grade III); R.R. Scott House, 29 Ruskin Row (1914, Grade II); Sir Sam Steele, 15 Chester Street (1921, Grade III); and Wolseley, 511 Clifton Street South (1921, Grade III). He has been given 10 points by the Historical Buildings Committee.

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

Named after scientist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), it was the first facility in Winnipeg built specifically as a junior high school. Its first principal was William James Sisler (1870-1956), author of Peaceful Invasion and a leading proponent of using the public school system to “Canadianize” the children of foreigners. Sisler High School is named in his honour.⁶



Rear (west) and north façades, 2009

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

Under the Historical Buildings By-law, this building meets a number of important criteria:

- its historical importance- an excellent example of a post-World War I school designed and built by the Winnipeg School Division;
- its associations- its long-term connections to Winnipeg School Division No. 1;
- its design- an excellent example of the Collegiate Gothic style;
- its architect- J.N. Semmens was a respected and important practitioner;
- its location- defines an important intersection and contributes greatly to its historic streetscape and its neighbourhood; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display many of their original elements and design.



Front (east) façade, 1986

ENDNOTES:

- 1 City of Winnipeg Building Permit, #783 and 1282/1921
- 2 L. Maitland et al., A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles (Peterborough: Broadview Press Ltd., 1992), p. 166.
- 3 Ibid., p. 166; and Identifying Architectural Styles in Manitoba (Winnipeg: Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, Historic Resources Branch, 1991), p. 20.
- 4 Information courtesy of the Manitoba Association of Architects, Winnipeg.
- 5 Winnipeg Free Press, November 5, 1961; and J. N. Semmens, "Typical Schools of Western Canada" in The Journal, The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Vol. IV, No. 11 (November 1927), pp. 401-406.
- 6 G. Bugailisikis, "School Buildings of the Winnipeg School Division No. 1: An Inventory of Extant School Buildings to 1940" report for the City of Winnipeg Department of Environmental Planning, 1986, p. 41.