

611 ACADEMY ROAD – JULIA CLARK SCHOOL
J.B. Mitchell, 1918



Early Winnipeg lacked many types of health and social services as it made the transition from a frontier community to an urban centre. Often it was through private rather than government initiative that help was first extended to people in need.

Such was the case with the Christian Women's Union of Winnipeg, a voluntary organization formed in March 1883 and incorporated the following year. The group opened a shelter in Point Douglas for women who had left their homes to work in Winnipeg. When the service was moved to other premises, its former facility was turned into a maternity hospital for rural migrants and destitute mothers. An adjacent building was converted in January 1885 into a home for babies born at the hospital.

The home was soon taking in other children who had been abused, neglected or abandoned. So rapid was its growth over the next 18 months that the operation had to relocate twice to larger buildings. In June 1887, it became a separate agency, the Children's Home of Winnipeg (CHW), with a legislative mandate to provide direct care and supervise adoptions.

From 1888 onward, the CHW occupied an ever-expanding complex built with public donations on River Avenue, including a school room established in 1891. To address the constant challenge of overcrowding, the CHW bought a large parcel of land on Academy Road in Tuxedo in 1909. It was another six years, however, before sufficient funds were raised for construction of two buildings, a boys' dormitory and a facility to house girls, infants, toddlers, and offices.

In response to the agency's appeal for educational assistance, the provincial government in 1918 committed \$25,000 for an on-site school and the Winnipeg School District agreed to cover annual operating costs. The task of drawing up the physical plan fell to the District's long-time commissioner of school buildings, James Bertram Mitchell (1852-1945).

Mitchell had joined the District as a trustee in 1888 and later became its building and supply agent. In that post, he gradually assumed responsibility for school design as well as construction. His work was noted for innovations in building forms and features to make schools safer, healthier and more efficient.

Mitchell's plan for the CHW entailed a simplified version of a rectangular, two-storey model with modest classical detailing that he had developed for District schools a decade earlier.

Erected for \$19,400, the building has solid, cream-coloured brick walls that extend from a raised concrete foundation to a hip roof plainly finished with wooden fascia boards and modest eaves. The two bays of the asymmetrical front (south) façade are separated by a slightly off-centre entrance pavilion. Above the latter's double doors are found a rough-cut stone lintel, stylized date stone and large arched window with a stone keystone. These elements are topped by a dentilled cornice and brick parapet.

The wall to the east of the entrance has large double-hung windows set in singles and pairs between brick pilasters, while the wall to the west has two bays of thin windows framing an unlit centre section. Other front detailing is provided by a rough-cut limestone finish on the high basement.

The side and rear elevations display different patterns of fenestration between brick pilasters. All windows have rough-cut stone lug sills. Some openings, including doors, were added to the school's rear and east sides after the original plans were drawn.

The interior was divided into four classrooms, two on each floor along with a central hallway and washroom. The basement held play rooms for girls and boys, plus washrooms, a furnace, and fuel and storage space. Finishes emphasized functionality and durability.

The school was named after Julia (Murray) Clark, a descendant of Selkirk settlers who was born in Kildonan and married to William Clark, the last chief factor for the Hudson's Bay Company in Winnipeg. Before her death in 1919, Mrs. Clark served as a CHW director and president.

In succeeding decades, the provincial government assumed more direct responsibility for child welfare services, including adoptions. The CHW continued to provide interim shelter and protection to children, but a revised mandate also took it into the field of community-based remedial and therapeutic care. The agency today is known as New Directions for Children, Youth and Families.

CHW sold and left its Academy Road complex in 1944-45. The new owner, the national Department of Veterans Affairs, used the site as an annex to the Deer Lodge Veterans' Convalescent Hospital. The Assiniboine Residential School for Indian Children followed (1950s to 1972), as did Parks Canada (to 1993). A connected one-storey gymnasium and chapel were added to the site in 1965. The former CHW dormitories were demolished in the early 1980s to make way for a Royal Canadian Mounted Police forensic laboratory.

As of the summer of 1997, the school was being restored for training and administrative use by the staff of a call centre to be located in the adjacent gym and chapel.