



311 ALEXANDER AVENUE
BEMIS BAG COMPANY BUILDING

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – JANUARY 2007



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Date of Construction: 1906

Building Permit: 423/1906

Architect: Lester, W.H.

Contractor: Lester, W.H.

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

Although not a visually attractive or inspiring structure, this five-storey warehouse and factory on the northeast corner of Stanley Street has the distinction of being one of the city's earliest reinforced concrete structures, a new construction method that would allow for the construction of one of the most familiar urban landmarks – the skyscraper.

But prior to its widespread use on tall buildings, the technique helped support large factories and warehouses where sturdiness, strength and fire resistance were most important. While window closures and other alterations have affected the appearance (see page 2 image from 1978), the basic design, a grid-like pattern of unadorned, square-headed windows, is still evident today and is the structure's most unique exterior feature.



311 Alexander Avenue, 1978

The main façades (west and south) both feature a number of paired and single windows of various widths, although the openings on the south side are far more matched and present a more balanced visage than the west side. Most of the window units are multi-paned and appear to be original. Small, plain entrances are found on both these façades. Small basement windows interrupt the base of the building and the top floor features shorter windows to act as an attic storey. The flat roofline is unadorned.

The east façade is designed in a similar fashion to the two main elevations, square-headed, multi-paned industrial type windows and flat roof. There is also a long one storey enclosed loading dock that runs along the entire east side and wraps around the northeast corner of the building. The rear (north) façade is nearly windowless.

The building rests on a 48.3-centimetre (19-inch) concrete foundation with upper floor concrete walls ranging from 25.4-48.3 centimetres (10-19 inches) thick. Concrete slabs are used for floors throughout the building and range in thickness from 10.2 centimetres (4 inches) on the ground floor to 15.2 centimetres (6 inches) on the upper floors to 17.8 centimetres (7 inches) in the basement and on the mezzanine.¹ An enclosed loading dock was added to the north side of the building in 1974. Original cost of construction was \$60,000.²

The building is on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. Some alterations to the exterior have occurred but the basic design and many architectural elements of the main façades are still present.

The building was designed and built by W.H. Lester. Nothing is known at this time about Lester, it is likely that he was not a local practitioner. According the City of Winnipeg



Front (south) and east façades, 2006

Building Permit Ledger Books, this warehouse was his only contract in the city between 1899 and 1913.

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

The original and long-time owner/occupant of this factory/warehouse was the Bemis Brothers Bag Company, makers of canvas and cotton bags, tents, etc.³ The company was founded by Judson Moss Bemis in St. Louis, Missouri in 1858 with six sewing machines and contracts to produce shipping bags for several local milling companies. It was incorporated as the Bemis Brothers Bag Company in 1885 when brother Stephen joined the venture.⁴ Today, the company operates worldwide, most of its packaging and labelling used in the food industry.

Locally, the plant on Alexander Avenue was transferred to Bonar and Bemis Limited, another American company created in the early 1940s through a partnership between Bemis Bag Co. and Thomas Bonar and Company (Canada) Limited, a firm that had been manufacturing various bags and packaging since the early 1900s. As the partnership between the two companies flourished, it was decided to move its headquarters from Montreal to Winnipeg and the Alexander Avenue structure. The company moved into plastics in the 1950s and 1960s and in 1972 its headquarters were moved from Winnipeg to Burlington, Ontario, although it maintained its use of this warehouse into the 1990s.⁵



Rear (north) and east façades, 2006

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

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

- its historical importance- a 100-year-old Exchange District warehouse that is illustrative of the expansion of business that occurred in the City and especially in the Exchange District throughout much of the pre-World War I era;
- its associations- its long-term connections to early and influential North American manufacturer Bemis Brothers Bag Company;
- its design- an excellent and very early example of the reinforced concrete construction method;
- its architect/contractor- the only local work of architect/contractor W.H. Lester;
- its location- contributes greatly to its historic streetscape just north of the Exchange District National Historic Site boundary; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display many of their original elements and design.



Rear (north) and west façades (left) and rear (north) façade (right), 2006

ENDNOTES:

- 1 City of Winnipeg Assessment Record, Roll No. 13-081538000.
- 2 City of Winnipeg Building Permit, #423/1906.
- 3 City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 815380-12-2 (below as ARo), 1900-1950; and Henderson's Directory, 1900-1950.
- 4 Corporate history from <http://www.bemis.com/overview/>, 2007.
- 5 Information from www.hoodpkg.com/about_Hood.asp, no date; ARo, 1950-1990; and Henderson's Directory, 1950-1990.