



**SAINT BONIFACE FIRE HALL NO. 1
212 RUE DUMOULIN**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

27 April 1987

SAINT BONIFACE FIRE HALL NO. 1
212 RUE DUMOULIN

It was a tremendous spectacle, the smoke billowing from the immense boiler, the clanging of the bell and the majestic horses straining in their harnesses.

Reminiscences of Vince Leah, Main Street,
Winnipeg. c.1915¹

Nothing new could ever compete with the excitement of seeing a steam pumper racing down the street behind a team of magnificent Percherons, with one of the firemen busily stoking the boiler so that there would be a good head of steam when they arrived at the fire.²

Romance, excitement, function; by-words of fire fighting in early twentieth century Winnipeg! Symbolic of that time are the old fire halls which dot the Winnipeg architectural landscape. Not the least of these is Fire Hall No. 1 at 212 rue Dumoulin, St. Boniface. Built in 1907, No. 1 Fire Hall shared in that romance and excitement of "steamers", "horse power", and "twenty-four hour" firemen until its closure in 1969.

Today it stands as a reminder to us of those heady days of fire protection in a milieu of rapidly expanding urban and suburban development. No. 1 was built at the time of the "boom" in population and economic growth with people and businesses spilling into the suburban districts. Construction of the fire hall corresponded directly with the "building up" of the Franco Manitoban town as a viable Winnipeg suburb. From 1904 to 1910 the town gained stature with the construction of the St. Boniface Basilica (1904-1906), the Hotel de Ville (1906), and substantial extensions to the St. Boniface Hospital (1904-1906) and St. Boniface College (1904-1906).³ With this expansion, by 1907, the demand for a new fire hall was apparent. The result at 212 rue Dumoulin not only satisfied this contemporary need; but it left to us the legacy of a unique example of fire hall architectural design in Winnipeg and in the province.

Drawn by Winnipeg architect Victor Horwood, who later became Provincial Architect, this fire hall is singular in its exterior design elements and in its interior organization.⁴ David Spector, writing in 1981, commends the architect's creativity by saying,

Resplendent with its twin towers, Horwood's fire hall stands as perhaps the most original design of its type within Winnipeg's present boundaries.⁵

212 rue Dumoulin is unequalled because it was Horwood's only Winnipeg fire hall and because the other fire halls built in the city at that time conformed to a particular plan. That plan, which came to be known as the "Melville Fire Hall", was developed by local architects and engineers William N. and Alexander R. Melville. From 1903 to 1914 over ten fire halls were built according to Melville design. Therefore Horwood's fire hall stood apart as one with particular characteristics and as one not having come off the Melville drawing board.⁶

The prototype for the "Melville design" was a fire hall constructed at 110 Albert Street in 1899. In 1903, the first "Melville Hall" was built following the same basic design and organizing elements. The Melville halls were constructed wherever possible on a corner site and offered the structural design of a two and one half storey building with a tower and attached stable. Exterior decorative elements such as gables, dormers and stone facing distinguished one Melville hall from another. Following the original design the halls were built with a stone foundation supporting a masonry shell, with concrete floors in the basements and main floors. Ceilings were metallic. The buildings were arranged so that the main floor was designated as the working floor with the truck (engine) room connected to the stable. The second floors were used as the firemen's quarters, often with five two-man bedrooms, a lavatory, and sitting room. The third floors were kept for storage or they remained unfinished. The key to the Melville design was an emphasis on the importance of "practicality" and "convenience".⁷

Victor Horwood's plan for No. 1 at 212 rue Dumoulin followed many of the same precepts established by the Melvilles, but with some important structural and design changes. The Horwood

fire hall is notable, at first glance with its two towers, a bell tower and a larger hose drying tower. Furthermore the exterior of Horwood's building is distinctive in its stark simplistic Romanesque style with crenellated towers, reminiscent of a medieval fortress. The flat wall surfaces are broken only by round headed windows and arched doorway.⁸ The interior of the building differs from the "Melville Plan" by its masonry and stone foundation, pressed tin ceilings on every floor, and corrugated metal roof.⁹ Finally, Horwood responded to municipal needs by providing office space on the second floor of the fire hall and then fully developing his third floor as living space for the firemen. Although diverging in these details of structure and organizational design, Horwood, like the Melvilles, followed the rubric of function, practicality, and convenience.¹⁰

The Horwood fire hall was constructed on the site of an earlier St. Boniface fire hall. The fire hall was considered out of date by 1904 so plans were drawn for a building to be erected on the same site by Cecil Goddard, St. Boniface Town Engineer. The Goddard structure, subsequently, became incorporated into Horwood's design in 1907.¹¹ Conception of the fire hall complemented Victor Horwood's earlier development of plans for the St. Boniface Hotel de Ville which stands immediately behind the fire hall on Provencher Boulevard.

Victor Horwood's two and one half storey fire hall building with basement and attached two storey stable is characterized by its exterior simplicity. It is built in ordinary buff brick with only a modicum of decoration in its rough cut limestone tower base and limestone sills and keystones. Arched windows and doorways against flat wall spaces suggest a Romanesque impenetrability. Window fenestration is irregular with the exception of the north facing. The roof is corrugated metal resting on a metal cornice, which corresponds to the metal cornice surrounding the flat roof of the stable. The building is distinguished by its two towers. The smaller of the two is a bell tower; the larger, at 75', is a house tower which was an essential feature of fire halls before 1930. The tower equipped with winch and narrow wooden staircase to the top was used to hoist hundreds of feet of hose that it could hang and dry out, particularly in cold weather. The building was serviced by steam heat, electricity and sewer utilities.¹²

Entrance to the main floor of the fire hall was through three large Romanesque arched doorways

with swinging doors which also offered an easy exit for the horses and fire trucks. Smaller doors were situated at the base of each tower and on the east, west, and south sides of the building. The main floor of the fire station was designed to hold the fire fighting equipment with adjoining stable which contained the essential horsepower until 1920 when motorized vehicles came into vogue. In 1919 the St. Boniface Fire Atlas recorded that the main room of No. 1 at 212 rue Dumoulin held one steamer, one hose wagon, and one ladder truck and 5500' of 2" rubber lined hose.¹³ Behind the wheeled equipment was the stable area with its treasured horses, workshop and hay storage.

At the sound of alarm the horses would rapidly trot into their traces where they would be quickly harnessed. The trucks would then make an expeditious exit. The horses were a romantic but also an important aspect of early fire fighting. They were used to haul the steamers, hose wagons, ladder trucks and pumpers. During the First World War there was considerable debate surrounding "horse power" versus "mechanized power".¹⁴ One of the most convincing arguments in favour of horse power, however, writes Elizabeth Willmot, was that one could buy a good horse for \$100.00, 65 cents a day would keep him and twenty years later he would still be in harness.¹⁵ In addition to "durability" horse power was essential on early muddy, rutted and snow blocked streets. Under winter conditions wheels were replaced with sleigh runners so that fire fighting could continue. Despite their practicality, the debate over horses and vehicles persisted so that by the eve of the Second World War mechanized fire fighting had become the norm.¹⁶ Nevertheless, as Willmot suggests, "For generations of observers who had thrilled at the sight of fire engines and galloping horses, the drama was gone when the last horse retired in 1939."¹⁷ Memories of those times are preserved today in the minds of the firemen and in the fire halls of the period.

Design and structural features such as concrete floors, metallic ceilings and connecting stable are a testament to that history. Concrete was used as flooring by Horwood and the Melvilles because it was more sanitary than wood, not subject to seepage and easily washed down. It also provided the structural strength necessary for the heavy fire equipment.¹⁸ The use of metallic ceilings and pressed tin wall cladding and a metal roof point to Horwood's sensitivity to the need for fire protection with respect to the horses and the expensive fire equipment.¹⁹

The main floor of No. 1 also had a spiral metal staircase going to the basement and another one which led to the second floor. There was also a pole which reached to the third floor giving the firemen a rapid descent. The second floor of the Horwood fire hall was designed for offices, initially used by the St. Boniface municipal council. The walls were plaster, fir trimmed with larch, and there was a plaster ceiling. The floor was fir. The third floor of the hall was reserved for sleeping quarters for the firemen. It was reached by the narrow spiral staircase from the equipment room. The space was organized into a large open dormitory with one lavatory. Eleven closets for the firemen's possessions lined the walls which were painted plaster. The floor, again, was fir. The firemen could quickly leave the third floor by means of their pole down to the equipment room.²⁰

The firemen at 212 rue Dumoulin were "paid full time" workers, not the volunteer corps of the late nineteenth century. However, in the days before 1919 they were on 24 hour duty, living in the hall, with one afternoon and one evening off, and an hour for lunch. Their day was spent cleaning the hall, exercising the horses, and playing checkers and pitching horseshoes, when they were not responding to the call of alarm.²¹

The call of alarm announcing three major fires left a searing mark on the history of Horwood's No. 1 fire hall. The first, the St. Boniface College fire in November 1922, was one of the "most tragic fires in the history of suburban fire fighting", says Vince Leah. The death of one brother and nine students, in addition to charges that ladders were too short to reach to the fourth floor of the building, left the fire department accused of "cowardice and incompetence".²² Nonetheless many students were saved and the firemen put up a good fight against difficult odds, according to many contemporary accounts. A second fire of spectacular proportions was that of the Rat Portage Lumber Co. Inadequate water pressure and high heat compelled those from No. 1 to call for help from the Winnipeg Fire Department. Finally, the need for metropolitan support was manifest again in the St. Boniface Basilica fire of 22 July 1968, when the heat became so intense that the stone structure cracked when hit by streams of water.²³ These fires, because of their dramatic interest, are registered in the annals of history. The hundreds of others, well fought where lives and property

were saved, are only in the memories of the fire fighters themselves and in the buildings which served as their base.

Today 212 rue Dumoulin stands as it did with some modifications which have adapted it to contemporary conditions. The entranceway has been changed from three arched Romanesque doorways to rectangular openings which contain motorized doors. Access to the second floor offices has been provided with staircases and entrances on the east and west facings. Dormers were added to the third floor to let in more light.

Generally though, much of the building is intact. Little alteration has been made to the exterior design and, internally, pragmatic use has been made of Horwood's delegation of space. The basement, not changed over the years, has been recently painted, the stonework has been repointed and fluorescent lighting added to enhance the area as a workshop space for the St. Boniface Museum, present owners of the building.²⁴ The main floor equipment room and stable room is now used as a museum display area with three old fire trucks, photographs and other memorabilia, including the original bell from the bell tower. The spiral staircases are in place and the firemen's pole will be restored to its former position. Washroom facilities have been provided. The back area of the building is used for community service offices and the second floor continues as an office area.²⁵ The third floor dormitory, virtually untouched since the fire hall's early days, may become an interpretation centre for the St. Boniface Museum.

As the curators gather artifacts to show within the walls of No. 1, 212 rue Dumoulin, some of that magic, romance and excitement of those fire fighting days will come alive for the Winnipeg public. It seems fitting somehow that this unique fire hall designed by Victor Horwood should, therefore, become the display case for those memories of fire protection in an early suburban district.

FOOTNOTES

1. Vince Leah, Alarm of Fire: 100 Years of Firefighting in Winnipeg 1882-1982 (1982), 104.
2. Willmot, Elizabeth A., Where's the Fire? (1980) 62.
3. A.F.J. Artibise, Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth (1975) 170. David Spector, "Monuments of Finance" vol. II, Report of the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee 1982.
4. See biography of Victor Horwood and Appendices A(1910), B(1915), C(1920), D(1969) photographs of No. 1 Fire Hall, 212 rue Dumoulin can be found in the photographic collection of the P.A.M.
5. David Spector, "The Architecture of Functionality" (1981) 18.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 13-19.
8. Note Appendix A. (1910) photograph.
9. The foundation of Horwood's building is stone but he also made use of huge masonry (brick) supporting posts.
10. Spector, "Functionality", 13.
11. Ibid., 17.
12. Fire Insurance Plan of St. Boniface, vol. 19 (April 1919) 1903. The steam heat system is connected to that in the Town Hall.
13. Ibid.
14. "The City of Winnipeg Fire Department (1921)", The Winnipeg Firemen's Benefit Association, 6. In 1921 the Winnipeg Fire Department had 5 horse drawn chemical engines, 16 horse drawn hose wagons, 10 motorized hose wagons, 5 combination motorized hose wagons and pumpers, 2 horse drawn steam fire engines, 2 horse drawn aerial ladder trucks, cutters (for winter) and 6 chiefs' automobiles.
15. Willmot, 52.
16. "St. Boniface - Centennial Year 1967", 69. The automobile fire truck replaced the ladder

wagon, the hose tender and pumper units to combine all three in one "compact fire fighting unit".

17. Willmot, 62.
18. Note holes made in Horwood's concrete floor so that oil could be changed on the fire engines from the basement, the floor below the equipment room.
19. The walls on the main floor are clad in pressed tin and tongue and groove wainscotting.
20. The author would like to thank M. Prince of the St. Boniface Museum for his informative tour of the fire hall building.
21. Leah, 30. In 1919 the firemen went on a "two platoon" system whereby they worked a 10 hour and a 14 hour day with a "swing" shift of 24 hours on duty (84 hour week). They no longer lived on the job. In 1929 they were granted one day off in seven; in 1946 they went on to the "three Platoon" system (48 hour week); and in 1960 they were put on to a "four platoon" system (42 hour week). See also "City of Winnipeg Fire Department" - "ideal" fireman for recruitment was 21-30 years old, 5'8" or more and at least 150 lbs. and of "good character". Once accepted the recruit had to serve a 6 month probation period.
22. Leah, 37.
23. Ibid., 87.
24. To date the building has been open as a museum at the time of the Festival du Voyageur and during the summer season.
25. Henderson Directories, (1986), 115. The fire hall is recorded here as rental space to the St. Boniface Age and Opportunity Centre, St. Boniface Family Court and the St. Boniface North Senior Satellite Centre.

APPENDIX I

Victor William Horwood — 1878 - 1929)

Victor William Horwood was born in Frome, Somersetshire, England, on 27 February 1878. He came to Canada with his family in 1884 and was educated in Ottawa and, subsequently, in Minneapolis. In 1904 he arrived in Manitoba where he soon established an architectural practice. Two of his early buildings were the St. Boniface Hotel de Ville (1906) at 219 Boulevard Provencher and No. 1 Fire Hall at 212 rue Dumoulin.¹

Victor Horwood was appointed Provincial Architect in 1911 and in that capacity did design work at the Agricultural College, (University of Manitoba (1911-1912), the Law Courts Building (1911-1915), and the Central Power House at 219 Memorial Boulevard (1911-1915). As Provincial Architect, he became involved in the controversy which surrounded construction of the Legislative Buildings in 1915.²

Horwood's work spanned public building to housing and can be found from Fort William to Saskatchewan.³ While in architectural practice he served as first vice-president of the Manitoba Architectural Association. Moreover, throughout his career he lectured at the Y.M.C.A. on architectural subjects, wrote regularly for the "Western Home Monthly" and in the later years of his life wrote short stories on Manitoba which he illustrated with pen sketch drawings. He died in Winnipeg at age 61 in March 1939.⁴

1. F.H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba, vol. 3, (1913) 665-667.
2. Manitoba Free Press 01/11/1911.
3. Who's Who and Why 1919-1920. Horwood's buildings in Winnipeg included St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Moxam Court, McMillan Court; the Ivan, Van Sittart, Waldron and Moore Buildings and residences. In Ontario and Saskatchewan Horwood designed schools and residential buildings. See Jill Wade, Manitoba Architecture to 1940 (1976) for references to a number of articles on Horwood's house design.
4. Winnipeg Tribune, "Obituary" 15/03/39.

212 RUE DUMOULIN – ST. BONIFACE FIRE STATION NO. 1

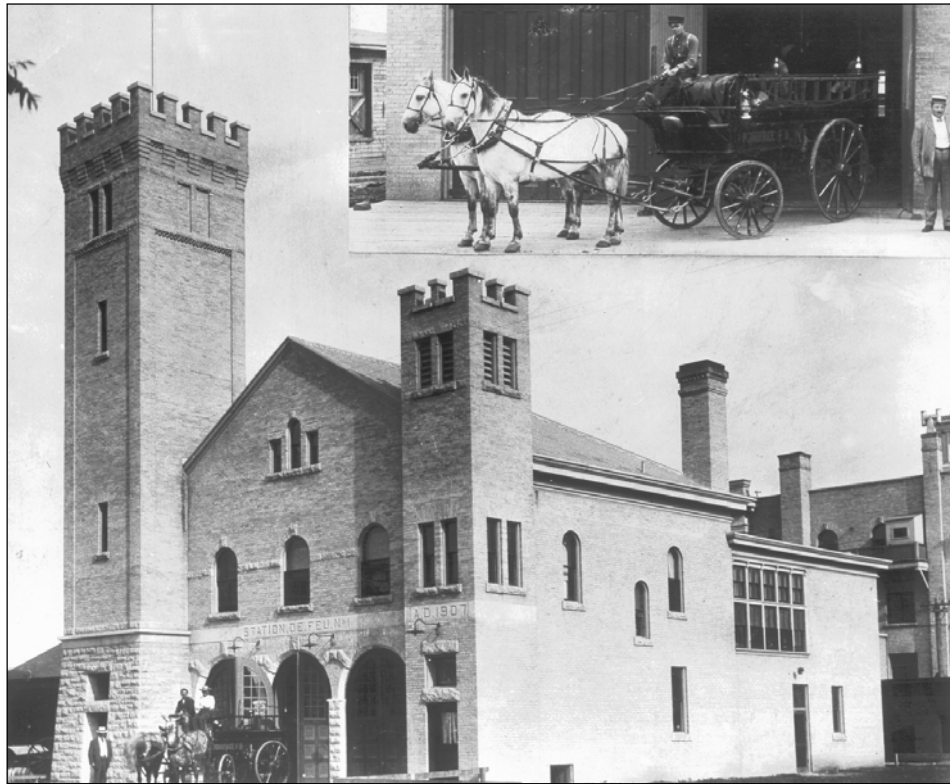


Plate 1 – View of St. Boniface Fire Station No. 1, 212 rue Dumoulin, ca.1910. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

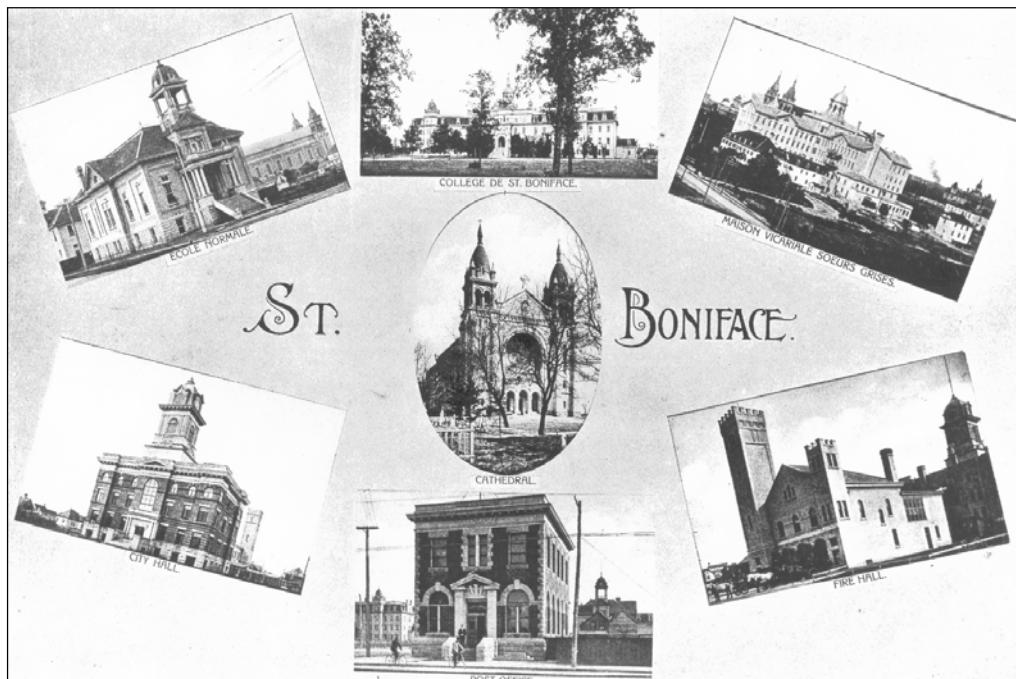


Plate 2 – Important buildings in St. Boniface, including Fire Station No. 1, ca.1915. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N9206.)

212 RUE DUMOULIN – ST. BONIFACE FIRE STATION NO. 1

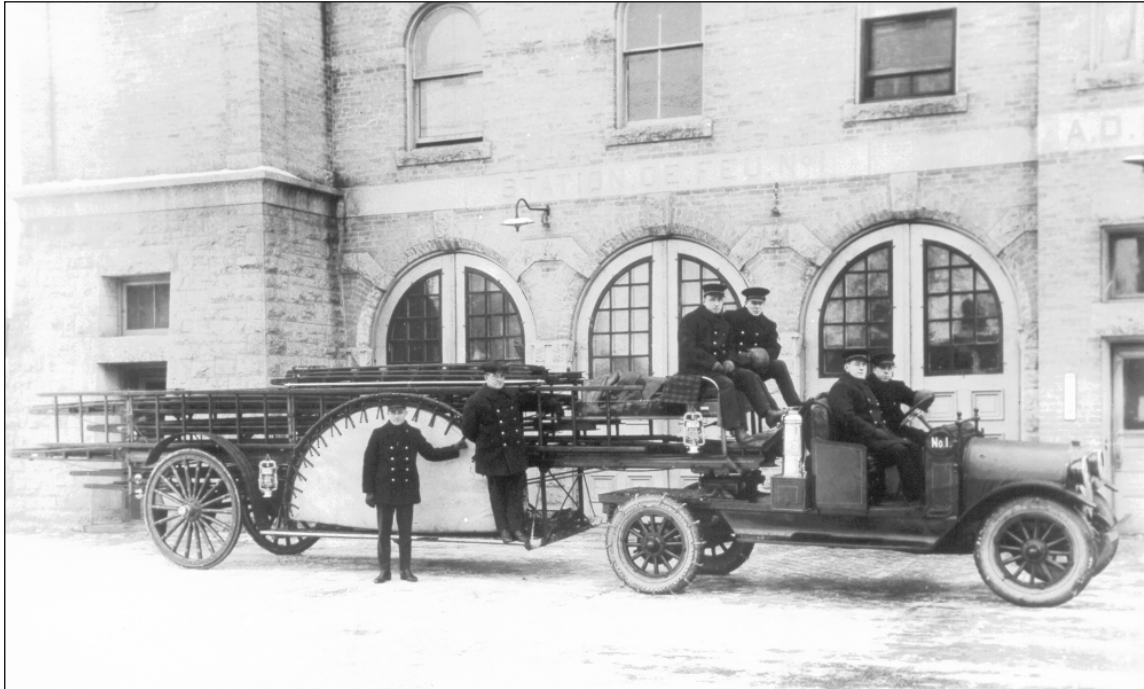


Plate 3 – Ladder truck and fire brigade in front of St. Boniface Fire Station No. 1, ca.1920. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Platre 4 – St. Boniface Fire Hall, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

212 RUE DUMOULIN – ST. BONIFACE FIRE STATION NO. 1



Plate 5 – Victor William Horwood, Provincial Architect, no date. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)