

308 FORT STREET – VENDOME HOTEL
Unknown, 1898; Henry S. Griffith, 1902 and 1904



Hotels, modest or luxurious, were an important part of Winnipeg’s downtown streetscape from the earliest times, initially along south Main Street close to Upper Fort Garry, then near the new Canadian Pacific Railway station at Higgins Avenue and finally throughout the rest of the growing downtown after 1900 – especially on or near Portage Avenue, which grew to become the city’s commercial centre.

The Vendome Hotel is located just south of Portage Avenue on Fort Street, originally built as a small, three-storey brick and stone structure in 1898. Four years later, a fourth floor was added and then in 1904, a large addition was built on the rear. This underlined the success of the business and the high demand for downtown residential space, as travelling salesmen, visiting businessmen and the like found lodging and “home-cooked” meals at the Vendome.

The hotel’s main (east) façade originally boasted shallow balconies, located between the middle windows on the second and third floors (now removed and the doors bricked in). When the

fourth floor was added to the building, it featured an ornate roofline (now simplified) and an overhanging metal cornice, arched in the middle with brackets (each holding a light bulb), dentils and festooned friezes (removed in 2015 because of structural issues).

Today, the front façade is divided into three vertical bays by pilasters (deeply grooved on the upper floors), interrupted by an overhanging canopy above arched openings of the ground floor. These openings include two entrances and the north window with their original leaded glass transoms. The original south window unit and transom have been replaced. The second and third floors hold small windows in rounded openings with raised brick keystones, connected by ornamental brick elements. Ornamental brickwork above the third storey windows marks the location of the original roof and the fourth floor includes a pair of small arched windows in the central portion framed by two windows in rectilinear openings and a flat roof with metal copping and a flagpole.

The changes to this façade have been severe, none more so than the removal of the metal cornice, which gave the façade its uniqueness and visibility on the street.

The remainder of the building's façades are completed in plain brick, with a light well in the south façade, patterned brickwork at the roofline of the south and west elevations and an open metal fire escape on the north elevation.

The original interior was laid out with restaurant and bar space on the ground floor and a wide, spacious main staircase up to the rooms. The 1904 addition added 40 rooms to the hotel, the small suites located on either side of the wide hallways along with shared washroom facilities. In the early 1910s, running water was brought to every room and some suites were given private baths. Little has changed in this interior layout although the fourth floor has been gutted.

The original architect is unknown, but British-born and –trained local designer H.S. Griffith (1865-1943) was responsible for the fourth floor and rear additions. Griffith came to the city in 1887 and opened his own office in 1892. After more than a decade of work, he moved to Saskatoon, SA in 1906 and Victoria, BC in 1907. He finally settled in Vancouver, BC where he worked until his death in 1943. Among his more notable local works would be: plans for St.

John's Park (Main Street), Assiniboine Park (River Avenue) and Victoria Park (Pacific Avenue) for City of Winnipeg Parks Board (1894); Ryan Block, 104 King Street (1895) – Grade III; Central Fire Hall, 110 Albert Street (1899) – demolished; St. Boniface Normal School, 210 rue Masson (1902) – Grade II; Criterion Hotel, 214 McDermot Avenue (1903) – Grade II; and the Oxford Hotel, 216 Notre Dame Avenue (1905).

The original owner of the Vendome was Toronto-born David Murray, who arrived in the city from Sault Ste. Marie and promptly announced he would be building a hotel. He passed ownership onto his sons William and Ira S. ca.1910, I.S. Murray maintaining the family's ownership until his death in 1945. The hotel ultimately became the property of Drewry's Brewery, a successful local company that purchased several downtown hotels in the 1950s, as did other Winnipeg brewers such as Shea's.

One of the hotel's most famous residents was Reginald Buller (1874-1944), an early University of Manitoba scientist (specializing in fungi) for whom the Buller Science Building, opened in 1932, was named.

Elements of the building that would require approval if alterations were planned are:

Exterior-

- Four-storey brick building with flat roof located on the west side of Fort Street, its main façade facing east onto Fort Street, its south façade partially hidden by neighbouring building, and its west and north façades facing the back lane; and
- The front (east) façade with ground floor openings with arched transoms with leaded glass, the upper floors with ornamental brickwork and windows in arched openings and flag pole.

Interior-

- Wood finishes of the main (south) staircase including the handrail on the north side.