



POSTAL STATION "B"

1048 MAIN STREET

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee
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1048 MAIN STREET – NORTH END POSTAL STATION “B”

Before 1853, mail service to the North West, that vast territory west of the Great Lakes, occurred only three times a year. The tiny Red River Settlement received two of these deliveries from Montreal via Lake Superior, the other from London and York Factory.¹ In 1853 a monthly service was introduced between the Settlement and Minnesota, then increased in four short years to a fortnightly service via a post office at Pembina. Between 1862 and 1871, mail from Pembina, whether carried by horseback in summer or dogsled in winter, was transported in “a very moderate sized bag.”² So dependent was the Settlement on the United States system, U.S. stamps were available at Fort Garry.

The first local post office, Ross House, was more than adequate to meet the needs of the community and the small sub-post offices along the Red and Assiniboine rivers. In 1871, the year after the entire North West was added to the Dominion of Canada, 21 post offices were established in the region. Daily service, still from Pembina, was offered in 1875. After a railway connection was completed in 1879 between Pembina and St. Boniface, delivery of a letter from Montreal to Winnipeg took 3½ days, whereas less than thirty years earlier the letter would not have arrived for 40 days.³

As population and the demand for postal services grew, expansion of Winnipeg’s facilities became central to western Canada’s delivery system. The Winnipeg Post Office was moved to quarters in the Commercial Hotel on Lombard Avenue in 1871, then again moved to a new structure on the corner of Owen Street (now McDermot Avenue) and Main Street (Plate 1). In 1883 and for the following three years, the services were housed in temporary quarters until a new Post Office and

¹ Report of W.W. McLeod, Post Office Inspector, dated December 16, 1882 and quoted in its entirety in W.S. Boggs, The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Canada (Lawrence, Mass.: Quarterman Publications, Incorporated, Second Edition, 1975), p. 689.

² Ibid., p. 689.

³ Ibid., pp. 689-90.

Federal Customs Building was completed at Main and McDermot (Plate 2).⁴

These facilities were sufficient until the turn of the century, when expansion became necessary. In 1908 the Post Office moved into its grand new headquarters on Portage Avenue, its official address for the next 50 years (Plate 3). In 1958 the final move of the main Post Office to Graham Avenue was completed.⁵

The main Post Office, however, was not the only building in the system. Early in the new century the spatial expansion of the boundaries of the City of Winnipeg, and development of satellite communities such as St. Boniface, West Kildonan and St. Vital, necessitated the creation of sub-stations which could handle the delivery of local mail. In 1907 tenders were called for the construction of two sub-stations, one in St. Boniface and the other for the growing community north of the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks known as the North End. The latter, called Postal Station “B,” was built on Main Street in the middle of this developing area.

STYLE

Postal Station “B” is designed in a classical revival style. Popular in North America from 1900-30, the style ranged from simple, small-scale neo-classical structures, such as this building, to Beaux-Arts Classicism with its grand scale and heavy ornamentation, for example the Legislative Building.⁶ Elements of the classical revival style include columns, pediments, flat, unadorned roof lines, symmetrical facades, and Greek or Roman orders. Door and window openings are often lintelled rather than arched, although both spanning methods can be present.⁷

The use of classical elements, especially for public buildings, became a popular ornamental device

⁴ D. Fraser, "Winnipeg's Post Offices" in Manitoba Pageant, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Spring 1974, pp. 12-14.

⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

⁶ Identifying Architectural Styles in Manitoba (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, Historic Resources Branch, n.d.), p. 18.

⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

for banks, other financial institutions, railway stations, commercial buildings and office blocks. Because of Winnipeg's importance in the early growth of western Canada's economy, the city became the headquarters of many firms doing business throughout the West. These firms often chose classically-inspired ornamentation to portray an image of respectability and stability. Many excellent examples of the style, representing both early and late phases of its popularity, adorn a wide range of structures.

Of Winnipeg's extant neighbourhood post offices, the St. Boniface station and Station "B" are the only two dating from the pre-World War I era, and both utilize neo-classical elements.

CONSTRUCTION

Postal Station "B" is built on a framework of 38.1 cm. (15") iron girders. The 76.2 cm. (30") thick stone foundation walls rest on concrete footings. The superstructure, measuring approximately 19.5 m. (64') by 22.6 m. (74') by 9.8 m. (32') high, provides almost 5,000 cu. m. (151,552 cubic feet) of interior office space. The superstructure is comprised of rough- and smooth-cut stone (20 cords) and brick (240 thousand), as well as 178.8 cu. m. (234 cu. yards) of concrete and 2,087.5 superficial sq. m. (2,500 sq. yards) of plaster. The roof is flat and made of tar and gravel.⁸

DESIGN

The two most public facades, on the south facing Magnus Avenue and on the east facing Main Street, are heavily ornamented, reflecting the highly public nature of the building (Plate 4). The rusticated stone wall rises the entire height of the first floor on both facades. A string course accentuates the division between this floor and the one above. Windows and doors on the first level are arched and recessed, with radiating voussoirs forming the arches above the openings.

The main entrance was originally placed at the corner of the south and east facades, topped by a

⁸ City of Winnipeg Building Permit, #1111/1907.

stone panel reading “Postal Station B.” This entrance has been closed and replaced by metal grating protecting an air conditioning unit. Two other entrances, at the extremities of both main facades, are topped with panels marked “Postal Station B.” The southwest door leads to the second floor stairway. A handicap entrance is located on the north facade.

While the second floor is finished in red brick, the stone composition of the main floor is continued through a number of accents. The rectangular windows exhibit rough-cut stone lug sills and smooth-cut keystones, while stone quoins extend above the entrances. The metal entablature, including heavy metal cornice, is topped by a brick parapet with stone coping, including a date stone in the section above the original main entrance.

The west facade, built of common brick, utilizes radiating brick arches and rough-cut stone keystones, as does the north elevation. The former contains the loading dock. Smooth-cut stone coping runs along the roof line of both facades.

Taken in total, the design produces a compact, visually pleasing structure which furnishes the pedestrian or driver with an attractive structure, not ornamentally overwhelming to its neighbouring buildings.

INTERIOR

The original interior was intended solely for the use of the Post Office. This soon changed, however, since the second floor was converted to offices as early as 1917. This level has been home to the Departments of Fisheries, Health, and Agriculture.⁹

The basement, which contains a lunch room and locker room facilities, has retained little of its original fabric, save for the large, round concrete pillars and the staircase.

⁹ Public Works Canada, Heritage Structures Manitoba (Ottawa: Public Works Canada, 1984), p. 16. Below as HSM.

The original first floor (Plate 5) has been renovated on several occasions (see Appendix I for a list of City of Winnipeg Building Permits) and much of the original fabric has been removed or hidden by drop ceilings, linoleum floors and new wall coverings. The only original area is at the rear loading dock. Wooden wainscoting, high ceilings and wooden trim around doors make an attractive rear entrance.

The recently painted second floor is partitioned into offices used by the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre of Winnipeg, Incorporated. Original columns not covered by the drop ceiling and the wooden stairway are the two most obvious examples of this level's original fabric.

INTEGRITY

The station occupies its original site (see Appendix II for legal and physical descriptions) and is in good structural condition. It has suffered some alteration to exterior elements, however these have not had a serious aesthetic effect.

STREETSCAPE

Postal Station “B” is located on a corner, surrounded by several blocks of small-scale commercial development. Few of these structures are of a similar age, but the restrained design of the Post Office allows it to maintain a visual consistency with its neighbours. It helps define the historical make-up of the area.

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTOR

The supervising architect was David Ewart (1841-1921), Chief Architect of the Engineering Branch of the Department of Public Works (Plate 6). The Branch was formed in 1871 for the “acquisition,

design, construction, alteration, maintenance and repairs of...public buildings.”¹⁰ Ewart was formally trained at the Edinburgh School of Art and was hired in 1871. He took on a number of different tasks as assistant chief architect and was called “a man of great ability” and “the mainstay of the chief architect's office” by the deputy minister of Public Works.¹¹

In 1897 Ewart was appointed chief architect, a position he held until his retirement in 1914. During his tenure, Ewart was responsible for increasing Branch staff from 18 to 41, its use of departmental standardized plans and an “almost exclusive reliance on his architectural staff for designs on projects involving new construction as well as alterations and repairs.”¹² As such, it is difficult to determine which of the hundreds of federally-owned buildings were designed to Ewart's personal specifications during his career. Buildings that were constructed during this period include: the Emerson, Manitoba Post Office (1908), the St. Boniface Post Office, 1907 (Plate 7), the Customs Examining Warehouse (1909), 145 McDermot Avenue (Plate 8),¹³ the Canadian Agricultural Hall at the 1878 Paris Universal Exhibition and the Canadian Building at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.¹⁴ This is the first Ewart structure before the Historical Buildings Committee.

Contractor for the building was the local firm, J. McDiarmid Company. James McDiarmid (1855-1934) began building and designing structures in Winnipeg in the 1890s, and throughout western Canada in the 20th century. The firm's work included Pantages (Playhouse) Theatre (1913), St. Stephen's Church (now Elim Chapel) (1902), William Avenue Library (1905), and the Science Building, University of Manitoba (1931).¹⁵

¹⁰ M. Archibald, By Federal Design: The Chief Architect's Branch of the Department of Public Works 1881-1914 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1983), p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 8, 23-4.

¹² Ibid., p. 6.

¹³ HSM, pp. 5, 20, and 36.

¹⁴ M. Archibald, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁵ R.R. Rostecki, "St. John's Telephone Exchange, 405 Burrows Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba." Report for the Historical Buildings Committee, August 1991, pp. 22-3.

INSTITUTION

The post office has always held an important position in the daily functioning of any community, as a conveyor of information and means of communication. It was no coincidence that one of the first facilities created in most new communities in western Canada was the post office. The modern mail system in Canada, like many other institutions, borrowed heavily from the British example.

Mail service in Great Britain came under government control after 1635. Until the early 19th century, this service was unorganized and poorly developed. It was also an important revenue generator for the government and therefore carried a high premium. In fact, the rates “discouraged the average citizen from using the government mail service.”¹⁶ By the 1830s this lack of support had put pressure on the government to change the system and in 1840, under the stewardship of Rowland Hill, reforms were adopted.

Firstly, postage rates dropped significantly, making the service more accessible to the general public. Other reforms included the collection of postage from the sender rather than the addressee, a uniform rate was based on weight rather than distance or number of sheets, and the availability of prepaid envelopes. If the customer preferred personal stationery over the prepaid items, Hill proposed the selling of “a bit of paper just large enough to bear the stamp,”¹⁷ thus inventing the postage stamp.

These reforms, especially the adhesive postage stamps, had an immediate worldwide effect. Brazil's government issued stamps in 1843, the United States reformed its rate system in 1845, issuing stamps in 1847, and Canada and France reformed their rates in 1849.¹⁸

Later advances in technology increased the scope and delivery power of national postal services, making national and international mail delivery faster and more reliable. Canada's postal service,

¹⁶ C.H. Scheele, A Short History of the Mail Service (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970), p. 32.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 34-5.

like the transcontinental railways, highways and the telephone, has increased the ability of citizens to communicate with all parts of the country.

EVENT

There is no known significant event connected with the building.

CONTEXT

This structure can be placed both in the context of the development of a modern postal system and in a local context, that of the development of Winnipeg and specifically the North End. The population and spatial growth of Winnipeg necessarily meant an increase in the amount of mail handled by the Post Office, and the distances within the city it had to travel. What was once handled by a central station had to be taken further into the newly developing suburbs. A number of new satellite postal facilities were constructed to bring the increasingly large amounts of mail closer to the addressees.

One such satellite station was built in the North End, which was becoming heavily populated after 1900. It became a predominantly foreign and labour community, creating a diverse and colourful ethnic backdrop. It also developed a healthy commercial district along its principal route, Main Street, and along several intersecting thoroughfares such as Mountain and Selkirk avenues.

The construction of the new Post Office gave to the area a sense of permanency and status, much like railway stations in rural communities. It was a physical presence, and became one of the neighbourhood's most important public structures.

LANDMARK

Postal Station “B” is very conspicuous due to the important public role it has served in the

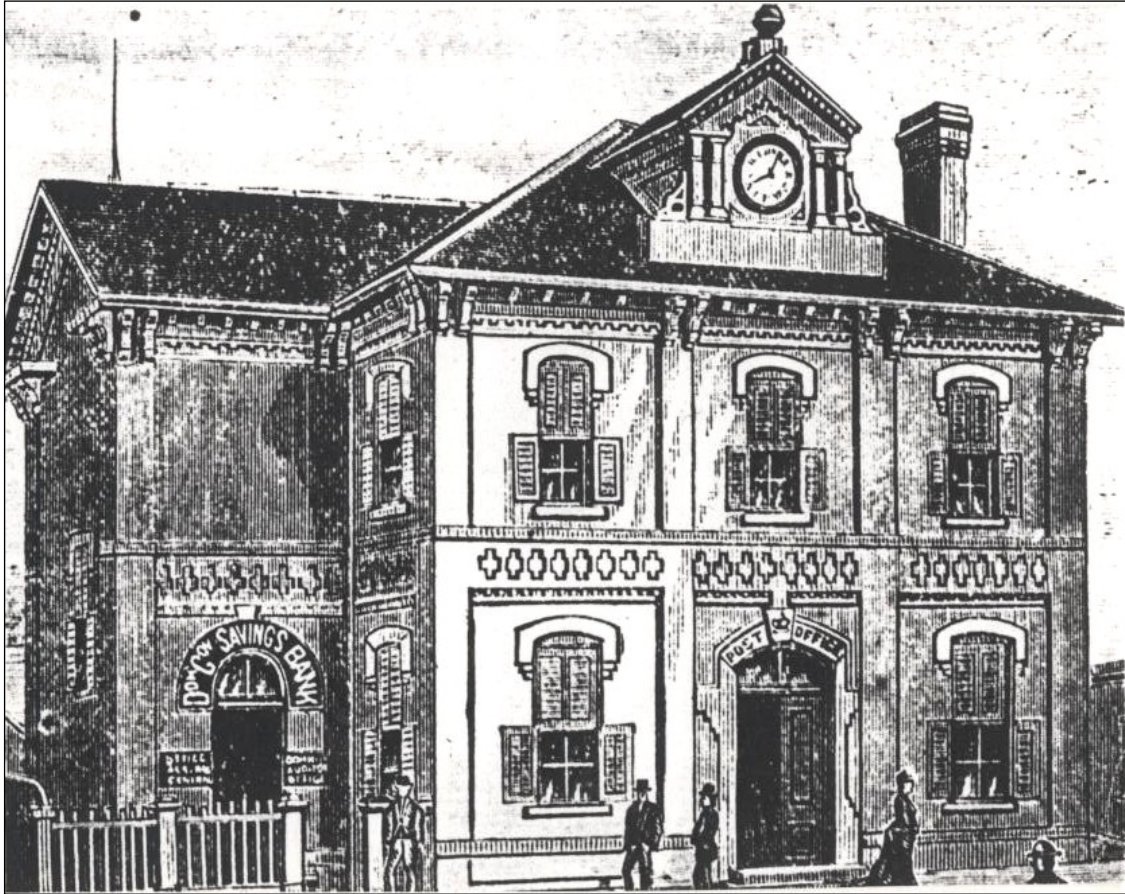
neighbourhood for over 80 years, its unique architectural and structural composition, and because of its location at the intersection of two main traffic arteries of the area.

The Department of Public Works studied a number of its structures in 1984 to determine their heritage status. Postal Station “B” was graded on a number of criteria including architecture, history, environment and integrity. Two categories, classified and recognized, determine the Department's action when faced with proposed alterations, demolitions or sales. The former assures any of the above changes will be met with “firm direction [from the Department] to ensure conservation.” The recognized category is similar, however the Department advises rather than firmly directs.¹⁹ It was in this second category that Postal Station “B” was placed.²⁰

¹⁹ HSM, p. IV.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

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- 1 Winnipeg's third Post Office (1876 to 1883), corner Owen Street (now McDermot Avenue) and Main Street. (Reproduced from D. Fraser, "Winnipeg's Post Offices" in Manitoba Pageant, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Spring 1974, Winnipeg, p. 13.)

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2 Winnipeg Post Office (1886 to 1908), Main Street at McDermot Avenue, n.d. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative #240-7683.)

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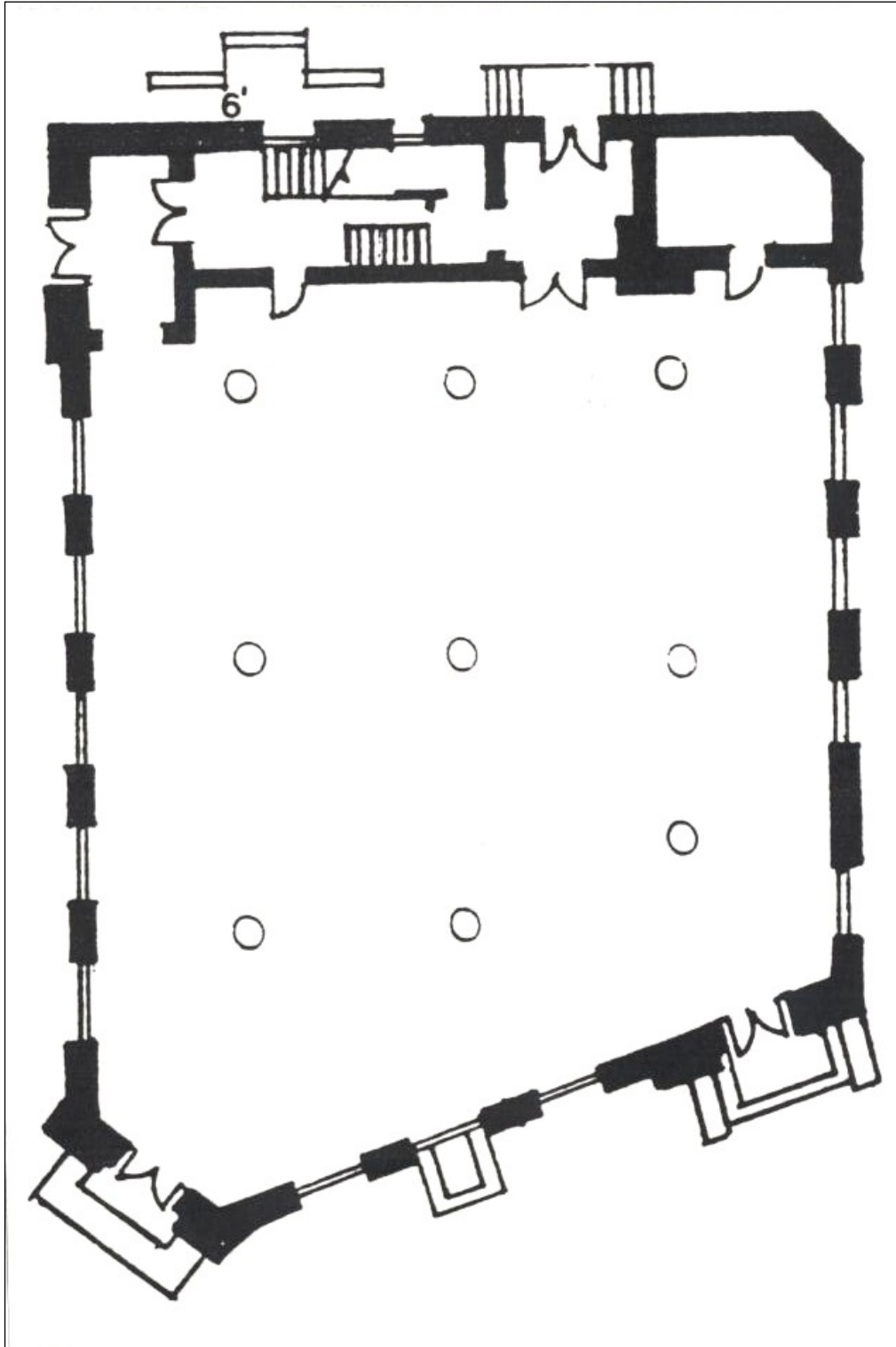
3 Winnipeg Post Office (1908 to 1958), Portage Avenue (between Fort and Garry streets), n.d. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative #257-8218.)

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4 Postal Station "B", 1048 Main Street; built 1907, chief architect D. Ewart, contractor J. McDiarmid Company; south and east facades. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

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5 Interior plan of Postal Station "B," 1048 Main Street. (Reproduced from Public Works Canada, Heritage Structures Manitoba, Ottawa, 1984, p. 20.)

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- 6 David Ewart (1841-1951), chief Architect, Department of Public Works from 1897-1914. (Photo reproduced from M. Archibald, By Federal Design: The Chief Architect's Branch of the Department of Public Works 1881-1914, Ottawa, 1983, p. 9.)

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- 7 St. Boniface Postal Station, 208 Provencher Boulevard; built 1907, chief architect D. Ewart, contractor J. McDiarmid Company; front (north) and east facades. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

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- 8 Customs Examining Warehouse, 145 McDermot Avenue; built 1909, chief architect D. Ewart, contractor J. McDiarmid Company; front (west) and south facades. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)