



245 MAIN STREET

BREEN MOTORS BUILDING

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – FEBRUARY 2007



245 MAIN STREET BREEN MOTORS BUILDING

Date of Construction: 1922

Building Permit: 2503/1922

Architect: Pratt and Ross

Contractor: Sigurdson, H.

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

This large, four-storey brick and reinforced concrete structure with stone accents has been an important part of the south Main Street streetscape since its construction in 1922.

The front (west) façade is divided into five bays, each holding large window openings (the present windows are replacement units), embellished with stone lug sills. The ground floor features large display windows and this level is visually separated from the upper floors by a stone belt course. The roofline is highlighted by a stone capped parapet, raised and rounded at the north and south ends of the façade. The north side, facing Wesley Street, continues the design and layout of the front façade in its eight bays. The south side includes a one-storey addition completed in 1925,¹ the upper storeys of the original building feature banks of newer windows and is clad, like the south wall of the 1925



Front (west) and north façades, 2006

addition, in stucco. The rear of the building is unornamented, the brick walls interrupted by regularly spaced banks of window openings. The building is attractive and well-built with only modest ornamentation – built to be sturdy and useful rather than decorative.

The original building measured approximately 30.8 x 36.6 metres (101 x 120 feet) and cost \$120,000 to complete in 1922.² The building stands on its original location and appears to be in good structural condition. The complete replacement of the windows with newer units has negatively affected the appearance of the building from street level.

The building was designed by the well-known local firm of Pratt and Ross. Ralph Benjamin Pratt (1872-1950) was born and trained in London, England and after completing his education, he emigrated to Canada and by 1892 was working in Winnipeg. Within the year he became an architect for the Canadian Pacific Railway, then in 1901 became a top architect for the fledgling Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR). In this capacity, Pratt designed many stations and shops for the growing venture that ultimately became a transcontinental line. The Neepawa station, built in 1902, is an extant example of Pratt's railway work. It was at the CNoR that Pratt met Winnipegger Donald A. Ross and formed a business partnership.³ Pratt was president of the Manitoba Association of Architects in 1917-19. He died in Winnipeg on March 14, 1950.⁴

Donald Aynsley Ross was born in Winnipeg in 1878. He attended Upper Canada College in Toronto and the University of Toronto, graduating from the latter with his Bachelor of Arts in 1898. He received his engineering degree from the School of Practical Science in Toronto, then became a mining engineer in British Columbia. In 1901 he became locating engineer for the CNoR and by 1905 was terminal engineer for the line. As such, Ross oversaw



Front (west) and south façades, 2006

construction of the Pinawa Channel Dam on the Winnipeg River and Winnipeg's Union Station, 123 Main Street, finished in 1912.⁵

Ross was also involved in real estate and during his career was president or director of a number of local and regional realty companies, including the Hugo Ross Realty Company and the Western Canadian City and Town Lands Corporation. He also served chairman of the Aesthetic Development Committee of the Winnipeg Town Planning Commission and vice-president of the Manitoba Association of Architects.⁶

After Pratt and Ross started their practice in 1906, they continued to design for the railway as well as working for private individuals and companies across Western Canada. A list of their major local works would include: Garry Block (Belgica Block), 290 Garry Street (1911, Grade III); Electric Railway Chambers, 213 Notre Dame Avenue (1913, Grade II); Breen Motor Company Building, 245 Main Street (1922-23 and 1925 addition); Polo Park Race Track structures, Portage Avenue (1925, demolished); Northern Electric Building (with J.O. Despatie of Montreal), 65 Rorie Street (1928, Grade III); and the Power Building, 428 Portage Ave. (1928-29).⁷ They have been given 20 points by the Historical Buildings Committee.

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

This structure represents a significant expansion of local facilities for a long-time Winnipeg automobile dealer Thomas G. Breen and the company occupied the building for several decades. The Breen Motor Company was organized in 1910, operating out of a small building on Portage Avenue.⁸ A year later they held the first Auto Show in Manitoba. In



Rear (east) façade, 2006

1911, they hired local architect J.N. Semmens to design a modern garage on the south side of Broadway between Sherbrook and Maryland streets (702-710 Broadway). Expansion of business necessitated the construction of a new showroom in 1916 at 391 Portage Avenue (north side where Portage Place now stands).⁹ The company handled a number of American- and Canadian-built automobiles including Cole, Brockville Atlas, Studebaker and Flanders models. Studebaker actually arranged for its own service department at the Breen garage.

In 1916, the Chevrolet Motor Company of Canada sent a five-passenger car equipped with electric self-starter and electric lights to Breen's in Winnipeg and using it as a demonstrator the company sold 600 cars in six weeks. Breen's new car business, now in full swing, meant that the company was also selling used cars and it located this department in the Board of Trade Building. The following spring, a trainload of 300 new Chevrolet automobiles, valued at over \$200,000, was delivered to Breen's in Winnipeg.¹⁰

By the early 1920s, the Breen Motor Company's business continued to expand, putting a strain on their facilities – the head office, service department, showrooms and warehouse – that were all located in different buildings. This was rectified by the construction of the new headquarters on Main Street in 1922, which combined all the company's activities under one roof.

Breen Motors was active on the Winnipeg scene into the 1950s and in 1953 it was purchased by Wallace Powell and renamed Century Motors Limited.¹¹ This venture (which became Century Dodge Chrysler Limited) continued to operate out of the Main Street facility until the 1980s when the building was renovated and became the Winnipeg home of the National Film Board of Canada.¹²



Rear (east) and south façades, 2006

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

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

- its historical importance- one of the oldest extant automobile showroom/garages in downtown Winnipeg;
- its associations- its long-term connections to early and influential automobile dealership Breen Motors;
- its design- an attractive, well-built, modestly ornamented mixed-use block;
- its architects- Pratt and Ross were a respected and important architectural partnership in Western Canada;
- its location- defines an important intersection and contributes greatly to the historic streetscape of Main Street; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display many of their original elements and design.



Northeast corner detail, 2006

ENDNOTES:

- 1 City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #2651/1925. Designed by Pratt and Ross, the addition cost \$10,000 to complete.
- 2 BP #2503/1922.
- 3 Winnipeg Telegram, September 12, 1906, p. 53.
- 4 Neepawa, An Architectural Walking Tour (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Historic Resources Branch, 1987), n.p. Below as Neepawa.
- 5 F.H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba (Winnipeg: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1913), Vol. III, pp. 538-41; and Neepawa, n.p.
- 6 F.H. Schofield, op. cit., Vol. III, pp. 580-83.
- 7 Compiled from Neepawa, n.p.; F.H. Schofield, op. cit., Vol. III, pp. 538-41, 580-83; and Jill Wade, Manitoba Architecture to 1940 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1978).
- 8 Company information found in Canadian Automotive Trade, March 1923 edition cited in David O. Hayward, "General Motors in Canada: The Early Years to 1919" found at <http://clubs.hemmings.com/clubsites/chevytalk/GMhistory/earlygmcanadhistory.htm>.
- 9 BP #983/1916.
- 10 D.O. Hayward, op. cit.
- 11 Information from http://www.obituariestoday.com/Obituaries/ObitShow.cfm?Obituary_ID=32442
- 12 City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 12-091861000, 1925-1990; and Henderson's Directory, 1925-1990.