

56 MAPLE STREET – FIRE HALL NO. 2 (FORMERLY NO. 3)
A.R. and W.N. Melville, 1904



Some two decades after its reorganization as a full-time, professional body, the Winnipeg Fire Department undertook a major upgrading of its facilities to accommodate the city's expanding needs and changes in fire-fighting technology.

The 1904 program included construction of five stations, the most costly and decorative of which was Firehall No. 3 (later redesignated as Firehall No. 2) on the west side of Maple Street between Higgins and Henry avenues. This facility was near the Main Street business district, the houses and industrial buildings of Point Douglas, and the Canadian Pacific Railway Station.

It was the first enlarged and adorned version of a design prepared by Alexander R. and William N. Melville as an economical, efficient, and adaptable model for Winnipeg's fire stations. As such, the building at 56 Maple was intended to symbolize the extent of the City's commitment to fire protection. The structure also replaced one of three stations built soon after City Council decided in 1882 to transform its volunteer fire brigade into a permanent force. These early halls

had been much criticized for unsanitary stable conditions and lack of interior amenities for live-in firemen.

The Melvilles' plan eventually was used for 14 of the City's fire stations. The brothers' firm, which functioned from c.1904 to c.1913, also designed several apartment blocks, theatres, and the Coliseum dance hall. Little is known about William Melville who was practicing as an architect in Winnipeg by 1903 but was no longer on the scene by 1915. The Scottish-born Alexander obtained architectural and civil engineering degrees in Aberdeen before joining his brother in Winnipeg. Alexander remained in private practice until the late 1940s and was a draughtsman for the provincial government prior to his death in 1949.

The two-storey Maple Street firehall is primarily a utilitarian structure, although both Classical and Romanesque elements adorn its facades. Built for \$22,000 by general contractors J.B. Flinders and Hugh Hudson, the station has a stone foundation, solid brick walls, stone accents, and a hip roof with gable ends and large, heavy eaves. The front (east) facing also features rusticated stone up to the second-storey windows. The roof is a plain version of the original which had cresting and two small pedimented gable dormers at the front.

Along the ground level of the main façade are four equipment doors and an ordinary entrance set in round-headed stone arches with raised keystones. An oriel window appears on the second storey with a smooth-cut stone base, rough stone lug sill, and single panes of leaded and beveled glass in its three openings. Above, the gable end contains a Palladian window with a continuous rough stone sill, radiating brick heads, and a keystone over its middle opening. Other windows along the second floor are rectangular with ornamental glass, stone sills, and lintels. Openings on the all-brick side and rear walls are similarly designed except that they have radiating brick heads.

The 27.4-metre, hose-drying tower is on the building's north side, its original castellation having been replaced with a plain top. By recessing the central portions of the tower's walls, the Melvilles created the illusion of giant order pilasters running up the corners of this element. Within these central areas the architects placed windows of varying styles, sizes, and finishes.

At the rear of the station is a one-storey extension that housed the stable and hayloft. This area originally had three entrances at grade and three into the loft, but now only the central doors to each level are present.

Much of the building's interior remains intact, attesting to its adaptability as the era of horse-drawn equipment gave way to motorized vehicles, high-pressure pumps and hoses, and other advanced fire-fighting technology, and as live-in firefighters were replaced in 1919 by a platoon system that allowed the men to work shifts and reside off-site.

The ground level, with its tin ceiling, cement floors and walls, initially held wagons and pumpers in the main hall and stalls for up to 12 horses at the rear. The stable subsequently was converted to washroom, kitchen, and storage facilities, while a portion of its ceiling was raised to accommodate aerial ladders and other large equipment. Round-headed doorways between the stable and front area also have been altered or enclosed.

The second floor originally had bedrooms, sitting rooms, and washrooms running off a central hallway. Some of the bedrooms remain, while others have been converted into office and storage space. Four strategically located poles are still used to carry firefighters to their equipment on the main floor when the alarm sounds. The attic, once a locker room and gymnasium, now provides storage space.

This station functioned for many years as the department's North End headquarters. It has a distinguished record. Two of its men were killed and four others injured during one of the city's worst pre-World War I fires – a 1912 blaze set by an arsonist at the Radford-Wright sash and door factory on Main north of Higgins. This hall also garnered a reputation as the “chief factory” since three of its alumni went on to serve as heads of the fire department.

The Maple Street building is to be replaced by a new station on Watt Street near Nairn Avenue; however, plans are in progress to convert the hall into a firefighters' museum