

216 NOTRE DAME AVENUE – OXFORD HOTEL
Henry Sandham Griffith, 1905



In the early years of the 20th century, Winnipeg's downtown was modernizing and evolving. Many new buildings were constructed along its streets, looking to supply the demand for commercial, residential, office and storage space. One area that saw tremendous growth was the hotel industry, taking advantage of the rapidly growing local population, as well as the greatly increased visitor sector. Business people flooded into the city to work and to lay the groundwork for future industry.

In 1905, local hotelman John Macdonald built a new hotel, the Oxford, on one of downtown's premier thoroughfares, Notre Dame Avenue just off of Portage Avenue, the new commercial/retail centre of Winnipeg.

The solid, clay brick building rises three and four storeys above grade. While the ground floor of the main (north) façade has been redesigned and reclad, the upper floors still feature original elements like brick walls, square headed openings with wide stone heads and stone lugs sills on the second floor and arched openings with radiating brick heads and stone lugs sills on the upper two floors. The flat roof, once adorned with an ornate cornice, is now plain.

The northeast corner angles and holds the main entrance; the east side facing the back lane includes arched openings on all floors and a metal fire escape. The south and west façades are party walls.

The original interior held 52 upper floor suites; it is unknown what the present condition of the interior is.

British born and trained architect H.S. Griffith (1865-1943) designed the Oxford Hotel. Griffith arrived in Winnipeg in 1887 and worked in the city until a move further west in 1907. His list of local commissions is long and includes: Leckie Building, 216 McDermot Avenue, built 1900 (List of Historical Resources); Baker Block (Birt's Saddlery), 468 Main Street, built 1901 (Grade III); St. Boniface Normal School, 210 rue Masson, built 1902 (Grade II); Criterion Hotel, 214 McDermot Avenue, built 1903 (Grade II); and Mount Royal (Wolseley) Hotel, 186 Higgins Avenue, built 1904.

Local contractor Aaron Grey (1865-1962) built the hotel; Grey was responsible for the construction of several fine local buildings including the Manitoba Club, 194 Broadway (1913) and All Souls Unitarian Church, 103 Furby Street (1913).

The original owner, John Macdonald sold the property a month after it was open to Frank Lindsay (1854-1940), developer and owner of several local hotels. Lindsay sold the hotel in 1923 to James A. Richardson, president of James Richardson and Sons Limited, grain exporters, who maintained ownership into the 1940s.

One interesting aside to the Oxford Hotel's history was its use during the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. The Labor Café was organized and run by Helen Armstrong, a vocal labour leader and president of the Hotel and Household Workers' Union. This food kitchen served hundreds of free meals a day to strikers and their families but was forced to move out of the Strathcona Hotel, 567 Main Street on June 14, 1919 when the owner was pressured by anti-union leaders. The Labor Café closed when the strike came to an end.

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

Exterior-

- The three- and four-storey brick building with its main (north) facade facing Notre Dame Avenue, the east facade facing a side lane and the north and west facades party walls with neighbouring buildings;
- The main (north) facade with its angled northeast corner, second floor with windows in rectilinear openings with stone heads and lug sills, arched window openings on the upper two floors with stone sills and radiating brick heads, projecting brick pilasters and flat roofline; and
- The east facade which lowers to three storeys at the rear (west), windows in arched openings on all upper floors and a flat roofline.

Interior-

- None.