

**515 PORTAGE AVENUE – WESLEY COLLEGE
(WESLEY HALL, UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG)**
George Browne and S.F. Peters, 1894-95



The development of advanced education in Manitoba was spearheaded by church institutions. Earliest among them were St. Boniface College (Roman Catholic, 1818), St. John's College (Anglican, 1866), and Manitoba College (Presbyterian, 1871). When the University of Manitoba was established in 1877, it became the provincial examining authority, but teaching remained the prerogative of the affiliated denominational colleges.

The year 1877 also saw the incorporation of two new bodies, Wesley College (Wesleyan Methodist) and Trinity College (Methodist Episcopal). The Wesleyan Methodists had previously (1873-77) operated an educational institute to fill a void in Winnipeg's public school system. That experience did not translate, however, into the immediate implementation of Wesley

College's charter. Instead, it took about a decade before the college was in a position to offer post-secondary courses in theology and the liberal arts. During that time, the Wesleyan and Episcopal Methodists were united into one church, the college's charter was revised, funds were raised to hire staff, affiliation with the University of Manitoba was approved, and Reverend J.W. Sparling of Kingston, Ontario, was appointed principal.

The first classes opened in the fall of 1888 in Grace Church on Notre Dame Avenue. As enrolment expanded, the college moved to rented facilities on Albert Street, then in 1890 to a converted house at Broadway and Edmonton Street. Steps also were taken to assemble the land and money needed for a permanent building. The chosen site was in West Winnipeg on the Spence Estate near Manitoba College. It encompassed about two hectares (five acres) of largely undeveloped land between Portage and Nellie (Ellice) avenues and Balmoral and Carey (Spence) streets. By March 1894, construction was underway on a combined classroom, office and dormitory building designed by local architects George Browne and Samuel Frank Peters. Students first occupied the facility in January 1896. A formal opening ceremony followed in June.

Browne and Peters maintained separate practices and did not commonly collaborate on major projects.

Browne (1852-1919) was the son of George Browne Sr., a notable Montréal architect. He studied with Russell Sturgis in New York City and at the South Kensington School of Art in England before returning to Montréal to practise architecture from 1877 to 1879. He subsequently moved to Manitoba and homesteaded south of Holland before establishing an office in Winnipeg. From the mid-1880s to early 1900s, he obtained many commissions to design buildings of all types across the Prairies. Among his surviving local projects are the Massey Building (1885), Masonic Temple (1895), Gault Building (1899), and modified YMCA (Birks) Building (1900). Browne relocated to Nyack, New York, in c.1910.

The English-born Peters (1847-1926) also was the son of an architect, Samuel Peters. After coming to Canada with his family, he studied at Hellmuth College in London, Ontario, and at the

University of Toronto. He returned to London in 1872 to practise with his father and later with Peters, Jones and McBride. In 1885, he was introduced to the West through military service during the North-West Rebellion. He moved to Winnipeg seven years later and began to plan numerous warehouses, commercial buildings, and facilities such as the Manitoba College of Pharmacy (1899), Manitoba Club (1903), and Cornish Library (1914).

Location, scale, and design gave Wesley College an immediate landmark status that has not diminished over its century-plus existence.

The four-storey building, which is set well back from its Portage Avenue frontage, has a raised limestone foundation, load-bearing brick walls, and an interior wood and brick superstructure. Original plans called for exterior facings of Manitoba limestone. However, it was decided to hire the lowest bidder, James G. McCallum of Calgary, Alberta, as the project's general contractor, stonemason, and supplier of yellow sandstone from a quarry on the Elbow River. Wesley College thus became the only known building in Winnipeg to be clad entirely by Calgary sandstone. Also unusual was the use of interior brick partitions to enhance structural stability and fire protection.

The college displays the Richardsonian Romanesque style of architecture, an approach to institutional design that was favoured in the Victorian era because it conveyed strong visual images of solidity and permanency. The style is expressed through the structure's rusticated stonework, corner towers, parapet gables, large dormers, symmetrically arranged windows with flat and round-arched heads, and broad-arched main entrance. Ornamental highlights include a dentilled cornice, smooth-cut stone bands and sills, pinnacles, and decorative stonework in the dormer heads.

Dominating the 37.8-metre (124-foot) front (south) façade are two towers that give the building a castle-like appearance. At the east end is a large octagonal tower with a steep roof. Latin crosses mark the window openings in the tower's gable ends. To the west is a smaller round tower, also with a steep roof. Yet smaller again is an octagonal third tower at the rear northwest corner.

The college's original interior finishes were more functional than decorative. The main floor was divided into classrooms, students' parlour, rooms for professors, and principal's office. The second level held more classrooms, the female students' parlour, and a chapel with a gallery (Convocation Hall). Dormitories were on the upper levels. Gymnasium equipment and a handball court were installed in the basement in 1897.

The building, later renamed Wesley Hall, continued in mixed classroom and dormitory use until the mid-1960s when a new men's residence was opened. In the intervening decades, investments were made in plumbing, electrical, and fire safety upgrades (1917 and the 1950s) and three additions were attached to the rear of the structure – a reinforced concrete boiler house (1927), a two-storey, brick-on-concrete library wing (1934), and a small brick caretaker's suite (1938).

During the renovations of the 1950s, some original interior finishes were covered or replaced. Those changes were reversed in the 1960s and 1970s when the former dormitories were converted into classrooms, offices, and a faculty club; Convocation Hall was physically reinforced and upgraded; oak panelling was reinstalled; and the main staircase, rotunda, and other interior elements were restored. Subsequent work included further improvements to Convocation Hall and renovations to Tony's Canteen, an historic campus meeting-place. Most recently, a public appeal has been made for funds to assist in the preservation of building's disintegrating sandstone exterior.

As an institution, Wesley College progressively built on its small 1888 nucleus of staff and students to develop a solid academic reputation. Over the decades, its programs expanded to include the sciences, education, and theatrical studies as well as theology and the arts. The institution also maintained a preparatory (secondary school) program that became known as the Collegiate Division. Funding and staff crises arose periodically. So too did tensions over the college's relationship with the University of Manitoba as the latter increasingly took on a direct teaching role. Still, Wesley College's influence grew in the community through its graduates, its role as a centre of the social reform movement in the early 1900s, and its contributions in concert with Manitoba College to the 1925 unification of Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists in the United Church of Canada. Relations between Wesley and Manitoba

colleges were not always smooth, but the two eventually amalgamated into United College in 1938. Some three decades later (1967), the college was accorded independent degree-granting status as the University of Winnipeg.

One persistent challenge faced by the institution was the question of whether it should remain on its downtown campus or relocate to a new site. The issue arose in the early 1910s, delaying development of the Annex or Matriculation Building (1912; now Sparling Hall). It re-emerged in the latter 1940s when enrolment pressures were forcing the college to rent space in nearby buildings and the City of Winnipeg began expressing interest in the campus as the site for a new city hall. The Board of Regents chose to remain downtown and build Bryce Hall (1950-51) rather than move elsewhere in Winnipeg or to the Fort Garry campus of the University of Manitoba. Similar pressures continued through the 1950s into the 1960s, but the board ultimately reconfirmed its commitment to the downtown. That decision was reinforced by the development of Ashdown, Manitoba, Riddell, Graham, Lockhart, and Centennial halls. As well, proposals to replace Wesley Hall and to build upon the Portage Avenue green space were resisted. Instead, Wesley Hall has been maintained as an integral part and symbol of the institution, while campus expansion has been directed to the west side of Spence Street (Duckworth Centre and MacNamara Hall) and east side of Colony Street (T-21 Building, formerly the Salvation Army Citadel).