

500 SALTER STREET – WINNIPEG PUBLIC LIBRARY – ST. JOHN’S BRANCH
John N. Semmens, 1914-1915



Winnipeg's first public library, on William Avenue, was opened in 1905 with funds from Andrew Carnegie, an American industrialist who donated large sums of money across North America for library development. In early 1913, Winnipeg City Council decided to approach the Carnegie Corporation again, this time to finance two branch libraries. By December 1913, Council had submitted its formal request to the Corporation for \$35,000 for each of the libraries and agreed to an annual grant of \$8,000 to each for books and staffing. One branch was completed on Cornish Avenue (20 West Gate, designated Grade II, 1993) in the heart of one of Winnipeg's most exclusive residential neighbourhoods, Armstrong's Point.

The other was built in the immigrant populated North End, as an acknowledgement of the city's responsibility to provide modern services, like sewer and water, electricity, fire protection and police, to the newly arrived citizenry of the area. The new library, known as the St. John's Branch,

was opened to the public in an official ceremony on June 2, 1915 with an orchestra, dozens of local dignitaries, and hundreds of citizens attending.

The St. John's Branch sits on the northwest corner of Salter Street and Machray Avenue, the solid brick superstructure resting on a raised concrete foundation, interrupted by square-headed windows. The front (east) façade is symmetrically designed with a centrally located entrance accessed by a two-sided stone staircase. The arched entrance is set in a classically detailed frame that includes unfluted columns supporting a pediment, fan light, metal overhead light fixture and a double set of wood doors. On either side of the entrance are arched recesses that hold two inscribed tablets with information about Andrew Carnegie and the building itself. Above the tablets are two circular windows with ornamental muntins and limestone keystones at the four points of the compass. The remainder of the front façade includes large, square headed windows with stone keystones, radiating brick heads and stone lug sills. The top of the building is embellished with geometric panels of coloured tile set in the wall below the heavy cornice. The hipped gable roof includes a front-facing gable dormer with circular window similar to those found on the front elevation. The remainder of the building is a continuation of the materials, design and ornamentation of the front façade.

On the interior, the visitor can take the central stairs up into the main library or take one of the two staircases on either side to access the basement. The north side of the basement was originally designated as a "Work and Staff Room" and the boiler room with coal room. It is known, however, that the former space was used as the Juvenile Section, an important area of the library. Today, this space is used as originally planned – a staff room and for storage. Small storage closets are found under the stairs and a walk in vault is also present. The south end is occupied by the lecture room which was renovated in 2009 and a metal staircase and dumbwaiter (no longer operational) are located just north of the lecture room.

The main floor of the library features a central staff area and counter flanked by two wings that hold the bookcases as well as dark wood fireplaces and study tables. A small, inaccessible mezzanine with wood balustrade is located above the main entrance with its broken pediment.

Although several rooms in this facility have been modified as the role of and activities in the library have changed over time, much of the original finish, especially the dark wood accents and general layout, have remained unaltered and in their original state.

John N. Semmens, an Ontario-born and American-trained architect who came to Winnipeg in 1910 is the designer of this library building. Semmens enjoyed a long career in the city and was the designer of many fine buildings.

It would be almost 50 years before other branch libraries were built in the City. Today there are 20 library buildings serving all parts of the city and its two oldest buildings, the 1915 branches, are nearing 100 years of continuous service.

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

Exterior:

- The east-facing one-storey structure on the northwest corner of Salter Street and Machray Avenue surrounded by a metal fence
- Boxy, rectangular plan featuring a raised stone foundation interrupted by square openings and a brick superstructure
- Centrally located arched entrance accessed by two sets of stone stairs and including unfluted columns, pediment, fan light and metal overhead light fixture
- Two inscribed tablets set in arched recessed frames located on either side of the main entrance
- Two circular windows with ornamental muntins and limestone keystones framing the entrance and one in the front facing gable dormer
- Large rectangular windows with stone lug sills and stone and brick radiating arches
- Coloured geometric tile shapes and ornamental brickwork located below the overhanging cornice on all four façades

Interior:

- Volume of space on the main floor and the two fireplaces, original wood shelving, wood finishes and mezzanine
- Metal staircase and dumbwaiter in the staff area
- Wood finishes on the basement staircases and landing area as well as the vault and small storage closets under the staircases