

364 SMITH STREET - WALKER THEATRE (ODEON THEATRE)
H.C. Stone, Montreal, 1906



Built expressly for quality live entertainment, the Walker is the oldest of Winnipeg's four surviving grand theatres and the only one of the group - including the Pantages (1914), Metropolitan (1919) and Capitol (1920) - that was developed by a resident owner.

The Walker officially opened in February 1907 and subsequently showcased some of the finest pre-World-War-I performers from American and British stages. Its success was the product of the theatrical and business acumen of Corliss Powers Walker (1853-1942) and his wife Harriet, who moved to Winnipeg from Fargo, North Dakota in 1896 to refurbish and operate the Winnipeg Theatre and Opera House, formerly Victoria Hall (1883), at Notre Dame Avenue and Adelaide Street.

This facility became part of Walker's Red River Valley circuit which was associated with the Theatre Syndicate of New York and included touring houses in Fargo, Grand Forks, Grafton and Fergus Falls. Walker also exerted significant control over booking and theatre management in western Canada and the northwestern United States well into the 1920s.

The son of a clergyman-teacher, Walker spent his early years in Vermont and Minnesota. He apprenticed as a printer, but soon moved into theatre management. Harriet (Anderson) Walker grew up in New York City and began performing with the Union Square company at age 13. She subsequently joined the Bride-Goreham comic opera troupe, then headed her own touring company and worked as a song and comedy skit writer. This background served her well as the Walker's publicist, a local music and drama critic, and eventually part owner of *Town Topics*, a weekly society paper.

Walker ran the Winnipeg Theatre until he secured sufficient capital to build a more modern, safe and imposing playhouse. He commissioned Howard C. Stone to design such a building for the west side of Smith Street between Ellice and Notre Dame avenues. Plans for a mixed-use development with hotel and office space went unfulfilled, but Walker's new theatre soon dominated the city's cultural scene and set the standard for like facilities in major centres across western Canada.

The fireproof, four-storey-plus, steel-cage-constructed building is clothed in what generally is described as Edwardian styling and decor. The smaller entrance-office portion is set at a right angle to the much larger auditorium at the rear. The steel framework rests on deep concrete foundations and is enclosed in concrete. Basement walls are of stone; the rest of the superstructure consists of clay brick with hollow air space between the inner and outer walls, concrete floors; and smooth cut stone finish on the front (east) facade.

The original main entrance featured a trio of double doors set in a three-storey arch with an elaborately carved keystone and large upper windows. An ornamental iron and glass marquee extended over the full width of the sidewalk. To the north was another set of doors leading to the theatre's gallery. A bracketed cornice separated the third and fourth floors, with additional stone detailing marking the top storey.

Much more striking was the original interior of the 1,800-seat theatre. The auditorium had an ornate and column-free vaulted ceiling, providing a clear view for all patrons. The cantilevered balcony was supported by columns at the rear of the main-floor seating, while the upper gallery

was secured by an immense truss and steel rods attached to the roof.

The proscenium opening was finished with ornamental plaster-work, the curve of its arch outlined with rosetted lights and a triple frieze of maple leaves. At the centre were two paintings of allegorical figures, plus the theatre's monogram enclosed in a wreath. Ornamental plaster-work also graced the fronts of the balconies, ground-floor boxes, and arched balcony boxes. The upper walls and proscenium arch were painted in ivory tints, with some yellow-gold highlights in the latter element to complement the colour scheme of the theatre's fireproof asbestos curtains.

The Walker's stage was one of the few in Canada capable of handling the most spectacular productions, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with ice floes, dogs and clouds ascending to heaven, and *Ben Hur* complete with a chariot race. The stage had a 21.4-metre-high gridiron with a full fly gallery and huge doors to permit the movement of scenery from the outside dock. Parts of the floor could be taken up to provide traps.

The main lobby was lined with white Italian marble and separated from the upper-gallery entrance by the box office. Patrons with seats on the main floor first encountered a semi-circular foyer that extended the full width of the auditorium. In addition to ornamental plaster-work, this element was finished with green silk tapestries and red velvet carpeting. It was separated from the plush interior seating by a high wainscot, green draperies and the balcony's supporting columns. A second lounge area in the centre of the house had an open fireplace and large settees. Off this space were the cloakroom and a ladies' room finished with rose silk tapestries and a green velvet carpet.

Balcony patrons climbed a wide staircase with treads of case brass and inlaid leather strips. They had access to a large smoking/toilet room and ladies' parlour with long mirrors, dressing tables and uniformed maids. The upper gallery, intended by Walker to make legitimate theatre accessible to those of modest means by providing cheaper, pew-like seating, also had a smoking and toilet room.

Various features were incorporated to meet contemporary concerns about fire safety - among them, skylights above the stage to permit smoke to escape from the auditorium; fireproof doors and stone walls to isolate the stage from other parts of the building; windows with metal frames, sash and

wired glass; emergency exits off each level; and tin coverings on all but the main doors to protect the theatre from fire in adjacent buildings. Behind the stage and in the basement were dressing and property rooms; workshops; space for ushers, musicians and other performers/staff; wardrobe storage; and a special room for animals. In addition to a connection to the public grid, the theatre had its own lighting unit. It also was equipped with a modern ventilation system.

The structure was built for \$185,000, although its fittings, many of which were imported, resulted in a much higher total cost. The architect, Howard Stone, was a native of Northampton, Massachusetts who practised in New York City before relocating to Montreal where he completed several commercial and residential projects between 1901 and his death in 1918. He also was active in Winnipeg during the first decade of the 1900s in conjunction with associate L. Bristow. His portfolio included the Tees and Persse warehouse (1904), Free Press Building on Portage Avenue (c.1905), Broadway Methodist Church (c.1905), Bank of Toronto, 456 Main Street (1905-07), and Dominion Bank, 678 Main (1907).

The Walker Theatre continued to prosper until the 1920s when the Theatre Syndicate's touring system collapsed. To compensate, Walker booked major British and American repertory companies, along with local amateur productions and available touring shows. He and other independent manager were less successful in coping financially with the efforts of Famous Players Canadian Corporation to protect its investment in talking pictures by banning live productions from its theatres. Because this corporation owned so many outlets, its move sealed the fate of theatrical touring in Canada. Walker discontinued regular operation of his Winnipeg outlet in 1933 after failing to establish a stock company.

The building was seized by the City for tax arrears in 1936. It subsequently was sold to the Morton family and converted to a single-screen cinema, reopening in 1945 as the Odeon Theatre. Over the years, alterations included a new entrance; renovations in the stage area, offices, lobby and box office; updating of the heating, cooling and electrical systems; removal of the orchestra pit; and installation of a false ceiling to hide the gallery. Closed in early 1990, the theatre subsequently was acquired by a local group for restoration purposes.