

353 ST. MARY AVENUE – ST. MARY’S ROMAN CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL
Balston C. Kenway, 1880; Samuel Hooper, 1896



In 1818, Bishop Provencher founded Western Canada’s first Roman Catholic mission – St. Boniface, established to serve the growing Métis and First Nations bands living near the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. As the Roman Catholic settlement grew west of the Red River, they clamoured for their own church. Bishop Taché agreed and in 1869 established St. Mary’s Chapel in the new Grey Nuns Convent and School on Notre Dame Avenue East. Five years later, a two-storey church/rectory building was opened near the present-day northeast corner of St. Mary Avenue and Carlton Street.

But in 1880, with the City's population growing steadily and a desire to provide a larger, modern facility, the congregation built a large brick church immediately east of the 1874 structure and the first service at St. Mary's Church was held on September 4, 1881.

The main portion of the building that stands today dates to 1881, the towered and ornately detailed front (south) portion was built in 1896 to provide a more suitable entrance for this important institution. This front includes a wealth of ornamental detailing – Romanesque Revival in style – with arched and round window openings, patterned brickwork, rough-cut stone accenting and common clay brick walls. The two most visually impressive elements are the round entrance tower on the building's southwest corner and the taller, squared tower, 35.1 metres in height, with delicate conical spire on the southeast corner.

The interior of the cathedral is a mixture of old and new, much of the interior finishes have been upgraded or repaired or replaced over time, although the layout has not seen significant alteration. Several panes of the original stained glass are still present.

The architect responsible for the original church was British-born and trained architect Balston C. Kenway (1844-1909). Kenway arrived in Winnipeg in the late 1870s after stops in Saint John, NB and Minneapolis, MN. He worked locally as an architect, contractor and lumber dealer until a move to Lethbridge, NWT (now AB) in 1888. His list of local works is small and included houses, banks, churches and business blocks.

A group of local builders were responsible for the construction of the original church.

The present front façade was designed by Samuel Hooper (1851-1911), a stonemason who became an influential architect and was ultimately appointed Manitoba's first provincial architect. Among his better-known commissions are: Grain Exchange Building II, 156 Princess Street (1898) – Grade II; Isbister School, 310 Vaughan Street (1898) – Grade II; Western Building (Schmidt Foundry), 90 Albert Street (1901) – Grade III; Provincial Gaol, 444 York Avenue (1901); Thomas Scott Memorial Orange Hall, 216 Princess Street (1902); St. Mary's Academy, 550 Wellington Crescent (1902); and Carnegie Library, 380 William Avenue (1903-1905) – Grade II.

Well-known local contractor Edward Cass was named as the general contractor for the 1896 work.

In 1965, the congregation built a large addition on the north and west side of the original church, to be used as a Parish Hall/gymnasium, Administration Centre and residence. It was designed by the well-known local architectural firm Green Blankstein Russell.

The congregation of St. Mary's continued to grow in the early 1900s, building a school across St. Mary Avenue from the church, which operated until 1968. In 1915, the Archdiocese of Winnipeg was created by the Vatican and in 1918; the building became St. Mary's Cathedral, a role it continues to fill today. It stands as one of only two pre-1900 Christian church buildings remaining in downtown Winnipeg, the other being Holy Trinity Anglican Church on Smith Street.

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

Exterior-

- Brick and stone building located on the northwest corner of St. Mary Avenue and Hargrave Street, its main façade facing south onto St. Mary Avenue, its east façade facing Hargrave Street, its west façade facing greenspace and its north façade partially hidden by an addition;
- Its main (south) façade with ornamental brickwork, stone accenting, arched and pedimented openings and two corner towers;
- Its east and west façades with lower one-storey sections with thin, arched openings accented with stone flanking the two-storey central area with round window openings and corbelled brick below both sets of eaves and projecting two-storey entrances at the north ends;
- The rear (north) façade, slightly shorter than the main building with tall, arched window openings and corbelled brick accenting; and
- Stained glass windows throughout.

Interior-

- Volume of space and ornamental finishes in the Cathedral