

626 WARDLAW AVENUE – DEBARY (HIGHGATE) APARTMENTS
C.S. Bridgman, 1912-13



The 1905-14 period was a fertile one for apartment block development in Winnipeg. The city's rapid growth created strong demand for housing of all types and provided the wealth needed to finance new multiple-tenant rental accommodations. The municipal council did not oppose this form of shelter, but through by-law controls sought to ensure appropriate standards of sanitation, safety and construction.

The blocks that appeared in most areas of the city were intended to appeal mainly to moderate-income tenants. Some, however, were targeted to an upscale market in the downtown and emerging residential districts such as Wolseley, Fort Rouge and Crescentwood. These luxury apartments were well-designed, sometimes technically advanced in terms of construction methods and materials, appointed with finishes and amenities found in better-class single-family dwellings, and costly to build.

One such structure was the three-storey DeBary Apartments located near Wellington Crescent at the corner of Wardlaw Avenue and Daly Street North in Fort Rouge. It was a long-term investment by the Belgo-Canadian Real Estate Co., a firm incorporated in 1911 and financed by capital raised in Antwerp, Belgium. This company erected two other luxury Fort Rouge blocks in 1912 — the Anvers at 758 McMillan Avenue and Brussels at 150-56 Lilac Street. All were planned by Charles S. Bridgman and built by the Claydon Brothers.

For its time, the DeBary's design was distinctive. Its elegant Queen Anne Revival style of architecture was uncommon in an era when most apartment blocks were given neoclassical facings. Its form also was unusual, organized as it was into three sections, each with their own main entrance off a deep and spacious inner court. Each wing was given light- and stairwells, bay windows, porches, and/or wall set-backs to maximize tenant access to natural light and venti-lation. Of further note were the DeBary's various partition wall and suite layouts. This design approach contrasted with the practice of using identical floor plans to facilitate the installation of plumbing, electrical and other services.

In terms of construction, the DeBary has a stone foundation and solid brick bearing walls faced on three sides with dark red-brown tapestry brick and contrasting light stone. The entrance court is angled toward the Wardlaw-Daly intersection. Pedestrian access is marked by a brick, stone and wrought-iron gateway and by two tower-like elements (multi-storey corner bay windows topped by polygonal spires) at the ends of the Wardlaw (north) and Daly (west) wings. Stone steps lead off a walkway to the three main entrances. Each has heavy doors of wood and etched glass set in stylized surrounds.

The north and west façades display a variety of projecting and recessed wall elements. Most of their windows are large single vertical rectangles with stone sills and modestly patterned brick heads. There also are a number of small openings, including some that are oriented horizontally. Stone string-courses and a bracketed cornice provide further detailing. The roof-line is dominated by ornamental gables accented with stone coping, crosses and diamonds. The south (lane) elevation is similar in design, but the rear (east) wall is relatively plain.

There are 30 above-grade, one- and two-bedroom apartments, each with a spacious living-room, open fireplace, formal dining-room, and service stairs. Some suites also originally had small bedrooms to house domestic staff. Dark wood and stained glass were used as hallway and stair finishes.

The Belgo-Canadian company retained ownership of the DeBary until 1970. The property was transferred twice before it was converted to condominium ownership in 1978. Physical changes over the years have included foundation reinforcement, interior remodelling, service upgrades, and transformation of the screened porches into glazed sun rooms with metal cladding and aluminum windows.

Architect Bridgman (1875-1965) was an Ontarian who graduated in 1891 from Atelier Masguray in New York and practised architecture in that city until 1903. After moving to Winnipeg, he undertook many local projects over the next 35 years including several churches, apartment blocks and warehouses, the Osborne-River Block (The Courtyard), St. Edward's Convent, Canadian Ukrainian Institute Prosvita, and the Mills, Metcalfe and Chambers buildings. He retired to London, Ontario in 1938, but was called on to design air training facilities during World War II. He later worked with his architect-brother Gordon until a second retirement at age 80.