



**ST. JOHN'S UNITED CHURCH  
(PRESBYTERIAN)  
250 CATHEDRAL AVENUE**

City of Winnipeg  
Historical Buildings Committee

January 1988

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By World War I Western Canada's popularity as an immigration mecca had all but vanished. New arrivals would certainly come, but in the vast waves that westerners had become accustomed to in the past. Virtually all of the new citizens travelled through Winnipeg from eastern points and the city's growing influence; socially, politically and commercially often acted as a magnet for these newcomers. Finding work in the shops and factories of north Main Street, but lacking the financial strength to live elsewhere, many immigrant families took up residence as near to their employment as possible. Winnipeg's North End, that is the area north of the CPR tracks on Main Street, soon became a centre of cheap immigrant housing.

As more and more immigrants stayed in the city, more and more of their extended families chose to settle in the district, thus the phenomenon of chain migration took place in an urban as well as rural setting. By 1921, 60% of Winnipeg's German population lived in the North End, along with 86% of Winnipeg's Ukrainian, 84% of the Jewish total and 76% of the Poles.<sup>1</sup>

This new population of citizens came into contact with many Winnipeggers, not the least of which was the non-immigrant population already residing in the area. As had occurred in other areas of the city, this group consisted of mainly British Isle stock and grew into strongly unified communities. These families were either given land or purchased it for small sums from the Hudson's Bay Company or the Dominion Government. As was the usual practice, the lots, called long lots, had river frontage and stretched back from the shore in thin strips. The lure of easy cash from land speculation converted these lots into smaller and smaller parcels as the nineteenth century came to a close.

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<sup>1</sup> W. J. Carlyle, "Growth, Ethnic Groups and Socio-Economic Areas of Winnipeg" in T. J. Kuz (ed.), Winnipeg 1874-1974 (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Industry and Commerce, 1974), p. 32.

Closely connected with this growth was the congregation and church. In this case, a group of Presbyterians (26 families in all)<sup>2</sup> at St. Giles Presbyterian Church (239 Selkirk Avenue) formed the congregation of St. John's in 1904 and within three months had successfully completed the first St. John's Church at the corner of Charles Street and Cathedral Avenue. By 1923 this original building had been moved, enlarged and finally demolished to make way for the present structure which now stands on the southeast corner of Charles Street and Cathedral Avenue.

## STYLE

This structure is a modest example of the Free Style Edwardian Gothic school that grew rapidly in England after the turn-of-the-century. Less ornamented than true gothic Revival style, the Free Style movement developed from a negative reaction to the highly decorative Art Nouveau style of the European continent. Only slightly less important as a factor in the creation of Free Style buildings was the concern over the cost of the highly ornamented buildings of the Gothic Revival and Art Nouveau schools.<sup>3</sup> Although the church at 250 Cathedral exhibits the twin towers and centre gable of a Gothic Revival structure, it has been simplified to the point of being nearer the Free Style.

## CONSTRUCTION

St. John's Church was built in two stages, the basement was completed on the present site in 1914. This element was built in order to support the weight of a super structure that would ultimately be completed in 1923. The base of this church was stone, and 6" steel columns provide support.<sup>4</sup> All elevations are of Fort William red brick, finished with stone accents. In all, the

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<sup>2</sup> Winnipeg Free Press, March 31, 1923 p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Alastair Service, Edwardian Architecture (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1977) p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #3179/1913, and City of Winnipeg Assessment Records, Roll No. 527511, PC 90, Ward 3.

building cost \$80,000 and provided seating for one thousand.<sup>5</sup>

## **DESIGN**

While architect R. L. Smith designed the basement section and included the necessary features for twin towers and buttresses, J. H. G. Russell, a Winnipeg architect of some reputation, must be given credit for the present building as we have no record of how Smith would have completed the basement. The rusticated stone base is topped by a smooth bevelled stone belt course to ease the movement into the red brick. Entrance to the building is gained from two doorways, both placed in the tow towers. The entrance facing Cathedral Avenue on the north side of the building is placed in the taller of the two towers. Both towers exhibit stepped diagonal buttresses built of matching brick and finished with stone caps. The towers are both crenellated with bevelled stone caps and raised corners.

The front facing gable has three lancet windows typical of Gothic revival architecture. A stone sill ties the triple lancets together and stone keystones top the windows. The north facade displays a double lancet with stone sill and keystones. Windows lack the tracery bars found in most Anglican church windows and the building lacks a rose window common in Gothic Revival churches. Also on the front gable is a set of three slim indentations tied together by a stone sill and a stone lintel that runs to both sides of the gable.

## **INTERIOR**

Entrance to the church could not be gained.

## **INTEGRITY**

The church occupies its original site, legally described as 45 Parish of St. John, Ward 3,

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<sup>5</sup> Winnipeg Free Press October 15, 1905.

Plan 222, lots 1 to 5. There have been only three permits issued for renovations and these have been of an insignificant nature. The present building's exterior is unaltered and structurally is in excellent condition.

## **STREETSCAPE**

Not unlike other Winnipeg structures dotted throughout the city limits, St. John's United Church startles the unsuspecting viewer. Close to Main Street and yet unseen from it, this beautiful brick structure rises from the one-and-a-half and two storey houses and small apartment blocks that form the immediate neighbourhood. It adds much grace and stability to an area of modest architectural content.

## **ARCHITECT/CONTRACTOR**

The two architects for 250 Cathedral Avenue were R. L. Smith and J. H. S. Russell. Smith designed the basement section that was completed prior to the onset of World War I, and while accounts give this as the reason for the lack of a superstructure, the congregation's limited size and the presence of Smith's blueprints showing only a basement leads us to conclude a superstructure was not in the plans until finances allowed. Smith also designed at least two other churches in the city, First English Lutheran Church in 1911, and Winnipeg Lutheran Tabernacle Church in 1912. First English, 484 Maryland Street, was built of brick, measured 55' x 84' and cost \$25,000.<sup>6</sup> Winnipeg Lutheran (now First Lutheran) at 580 Victor Street, was also a brick structure costing \$25,000. It measured 65.5' x 91.5' and was built using day labour.<sup>7</sup>

John Hamilton Gordon Russell (1862-1946) was one of Winnipeg's better known architects during his career and many of his fine buildings can be seen throughout the city (see Appendix I for biography).

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<sup>6</sup> BP #2921/1911.

<sup>7</sup> BP #1872/1912.

An incomplete list of Russell's Winnipeg religious structures includes:

Augustine United Church (1903) - Gothic Revival

Crescent-Fort Rouge United (1910) - Romanesque Revival

Robertson Memorial United (1911) - Romanesque Revival with similar features to St. John's United

Westminster United Church (1911) - Gothic Revival

Knox United Church (1914) - Gothic Revival

Home Street United (1920) - Free Style

Riverview United (1925) - Gothic Revival

Russell has previously been given twenty points by the Historical Buildings Committee. Russell's contractor was Pearson-Burleigh Ltd. with heating and plumbing contracted to Josie McLeod. Russell's ledger book mentions a spire that was originally planned but was not included on the finished building.<sup>8</sup>

## PERSON/INSTITUTION

St. John's Church was originally a Presbyterian facility until Church Union in 1925. This union brought together the Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian churches in Canada. These three entities, so closely related, joined in 1925 with all Methodists and Congregationalists and approximately two-thirds of the Presbyterians voting for Union.<sup>9</sup> The St. John's congregation voted 319 to 236 for union, with the 236 opposing voters breaking away and forming the St. John's Presbyterian congregation, and building a fine church a block north on Charles Street in 1928.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Russell, J.H.G., Provincial Archives of Manitoba, File MG 11, E2.

<sup>9</sup> N. Bingham, A Study of the Church Buildings in Manitoba of the Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian and United Churches of Canada. (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation, 1987), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> G. J. E. Gustafson, Winnipeg Pictorial Historical Souvenir 1872-1949.

The first United service of the Methodist and Presbyterian congregations was held at 250 Cathedral Avenue on January 3rd 1926.

The Presbyterian and Methodist congregations had both organized in the area in 1904 and opened churches two weeks apart the same year, the Methodists at Polson and Charles and the Presbyterians on the north corner of Cathedral and Charles. The original St. John's Presbyterian was a frame structure that was moved to the southwest corner of Charles and Cathedral and enlarged in 1907.<sup>11</sup> In 1914 this structure was moved to the back of the lot and the basement of the present structure was built. The congregation used the basement as a church until final completion of the brick structure in 1923. A mortgage burning ceremony took place in 1944. Not unlike congregations throughout Winnipeg and Canada, the St. John's United families slowly moved out of the area and the congregation dwindled. In 1986 the church was closed and it has stood empty since then.

## **EVENT**

There is no significant event connected with this structure.

## **CONTEXT**

The construction of St. John's Presbyterian Church in 1914 and 1923 is reflective of the pattern of local church construction that took place across Western Canada from the late 1890's until the mid-1920s. While rural construction ended before World War I, urban centres throughout the west continued to build monumental churches right up until the beginning of the Great Depression. Unfortunately, another movement reflected by St. John's is the shift of original members causing the inevitable closing of the church.

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<sup>11</sup> "Winnipeg - St. Johns," Vertical File, United Church Archives.

**LANDMARK**

At the community level, St. John's United Church certainly stands out as one of the most conspicuous buildings in the entire area. Added to this importance is the stories and remembrances that the past congregation members will always carry of the fine brick church in Winnipeg's North End.

## APPENDIX I

J. H. G. Russell

John Hamilton Gordon Russell was born to a large family in Toronto in 1862. Here he studied architecture before moving to the United States. After working in Washington and Chicago,<sup>1</sup> he moved to Winnipeg in 1893. His family built one of the earliest homes on Wellington Crescent, which later became his own home.

In 1895 Russell opened his own office. With the economy of Winnipeg booming, and construction at a peak, Russell had an active business. He was prolific. Not given to specialization, J. H. G. Russell designed houses, churches, warehouses and commercial buildings in good numbers. We are particularly fortunate in having an archival record of his account books, which itemize suppliers and costs for most of his works.<sup>2</sup> An incomplete photographic record of Russell's work also survives.

His best-known buildings include Augustine Church (1903), the McArthur Building (now Childs) (1909), Westminster United Church (1912), the J. H. Ashdown house (1912) on Wellington Crescent (now Khartum Temple), and the magnificent Knox Presbyterian Church (1914) on Edmonton Street. Other Russell designs include:

- Dingwall Building (1911) 62 Albert Street
- Hammond Building (1902) 63 Albert Street
- Franklin Press Building (1904) 168 Bannatyne Avenue
- Casa Loma Apartment Block
- Marlborough Hotel
- St. Andrews Church (Moose Jaw)

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<sup>1</sup> F. H. Schofield, *The Story of Manitoba* (Winnipeg: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1913), Vol. III, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> "Russell, J. H. G. Collection," Provincial Archives of Manitoba, MG11 E2.

J.H.G. Russell Buildings, continued:

- Canadian Institute for the Blind (1928)
- YMCA (Selkirk Branch and Central Building, Winnipeg)
- Numerous residential structures throughout Winnipeg
- J. H. Ashdown Warehouse, 157 - 179 Bannatyne (1899 to 1911)
- J. H. Ashdown Hardware Store, 476 Main Street (1904)
- Glengarry Block, 290 McDermot Avenue (1910)
- Additions to:
  - Daylite Building, 296 McDermot (1904)
  - McClary Building, 185 Bannatyne (1903, 1904)
  - Bright and Johnston Building, 137 Bannatyne (1903, 1907)

Russell was president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada in 1912, the first year that it included all the provincial bodies. He was on the examining board of the Manitoba Association of Architects, involved in several local businesses, and Chairman of the Presbyterian Church Board of managers.

Russell died in Winnipeg in 1946.

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Plate 1 – St. John’s United Church, 250 Cathedral Avenue, 1988. (M. Peterson.)