

511 CLIFTON STREET SOUTH
WOLSELEY SCHOOL

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

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The newly organizing society of Manitoba and Winnipeg was strongly influenced in the 1870s by the arrival of Ontario farmers, businessmen and their families. With them came many established ideas and practices that they would transplant to their new homes. One of their most strongly held traditions was the establishment of a properly organized and funded public school system.

Men like Ontario's Egerton Ryerson had promoted the public school as the developer of good taste and manners, and as society's great assimilator. When the number of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants rose, schools became an important cog in the machinery of citizenship. Part of the process, as Ryerson and his contemporaries saw it, was to make the school system more appealing by making its buildings as attractive as possible. This meant that aesthetics, fire safety, ventilation and lighting had to be major considerations when designing new schools.

When eastern Canadians began settling in Winnipeg, however, they found a school system limited mainly to those who could afford private classes. The public schools that did exist were substandard – dimly lit and cramped, often located in rented rooms with questionable fire protection and sparse furnishings. The situation did not quickly improve since adequate public support, financial and otherwise, was not forthcoming until the late 1880s.

Three events in that decade ultimately created a modern educational system that became a source of pride for Winnipeggers. Firstly, provincial regulations were adopted in 1883 to ensure minimum air requirements for each student, to provide professionally designed public schools, and to guarantee outdoor space for urban students. This created a foundation for public school infrastructure and forced administrators to seek professional help in designing and building facilities.

The second major development was the 1885 appointment of Daniel McIntyre (1852-1946) as Inspector and Superintendent of the Winnipeg School District. For the next 43 years, McIntyre used his knowledge of U.S. and eastern Canadian school systems and buildings, gleaned from

numerous fact-finding trips, to improve the Division's delivery of education. Better heating, lighting, ventilation, and fire prevention and escape methods transformed the dark public schools into large, well-lit and airy structures.

The third event was the appointment in 1888 of a newly elected trustee as Chairman of the Winnipeg School District's Committee on Buildings. The trustee, James Bertram Mitchell (1852-1945), would later become the Divisions' Building and Supply Agent. Much like McIntyre, Mitchell's design expertise evolved on the basis of his common sense and use of models provided by other jurisdictions. Until his 1928 retirement, the same year as McIntyre's, Mitchell remained a fixture in the design department of the Division.¹

The working partnership of McIntyre and Mitchell – the former the architect of the school system and the latter, the designer of its buildings – lasted 40 years. The two oversaw construction of more than 50 schools and numerous additions, and created what some saw as North America's safest and most elegant collection of school buildings. In 1921 four new facilities were built in various parts of the city. Three were similarly designed and finished one-storey structures which had the same basic floor plan and were surrounded by ample playground space: Sir John Franklin School in River Heights, Sir Sam Steele School in Elmwood and Wolseley School in the West End.

STYLE

Wolseley School is one of a dwindling number of one-storey facilities by the Division between 1918 and 1921 (see Table 1). They were intended to provide relief from overcrowded classrooms nearby or as the first schools in growing residential districts. They were built during a period of economic slowdown in Winnipeg and therefore were not as ornamentally complex as earlier two- and three-storey structures (Plates 1-5).

¹ Murray Peterson, "Champlain School, 250 Machray Avenue," report to the Historical Buildings Committee, July 1991, p. 2.

The one-storey or bungalow style had become the popular choice of the Division starting in 1918. Mitchell had designed eight such schools in 1918 and 1919 as temporary buildings to satisfy the immediate demands for classroom space in various parts of the city. They could be built cheaply and they required less time to complete and less money to operate, yet they still housed children in a safe, comfortable atmosphere. Mitchell and the Division saw the bungalow-style school as the perfect compromise.

In 1920, Mitchell hired a consultant to lighten his workload – a local architect and military friend, Colonel John N. Semmens. Semmens immediately provided the Division with plans for five new bungalow-type schools. They differed significantly from the 1918-1919 versions because they were intended to be permanent. Given Semmens's formal architectural background, it is not surprising that his buildings were also more ornamentally detailed. As well, he shunned the previous reliance on use of local yellow and grey sand-lime brick in favour of more expensive imported red fact brick. Semmens had succeeded in his goal to produce schools with a greater conspicuousness in their neighborhood.²

While the 1920 schools were more pleasing to the eye, they were also more expensive – on average, more than double the cost of the schools built one year earlier. The Division's economic circumstances demanded lower construction costs. As a result, the three bungalow schools of 1921 were ornamentally reduced.

² Ibid., p. 4.

TABLE 1³

**ONE-STOREY SCHOOLS BUILT IN WINNIPEG SCHOOL DIVISION NO. 1
BETWEEN 1918 AND 1921**

SCHOOL NAME	ADDRESS	YEAR BUILT	ESTIMATED COST	STATUS
Ralph Brown No. 1	Andrews Street	1918	\$37,000	DEMOLISHED
Cecil Rhodes No. 2	East Street	1918	\$26,000	DEMOLISHED
Riverview	Maplewood Avenue	1918	\$30,000	DEMOLISHED
River Heights (renamed Robert H. Smith)	Oak Street	1919	\$27,000	DEMOLISHED
Anna Gibson	Talbot Avenue	1919	\$20,000	- used as part of Mennonite Brethren Bible College since 1944 (now Concord College)
Ralph Brown No. 2	McGregor Street	1919	\$40,000	DEMOLISHED
Greenway No. 2	Banning Street	1919	\$25,000	TO BE DEMOLISHED
Lord Roberts No. 2	Beresford Avenue	1919	\$30,000	DEMOLISHED
Margaret Scott	Arlington Street	1920	\$107,000	DEMOLISHED
Montcalm	Tecumseh Street	1920	\$50,000	DEMOLISHED
Aberdeen No. 3	Stella Avenue	1920	\$50,000	DEMOLISHED
Florence Nightingale	Shaughnessy Street	1920	\$40,000	- active elementary school
Norquay No. 2	Lusted Avenue	1920	\$50,000	DEMOLISHED
Sir Sam Steele	Chester Street	1921	\$56,877	- used for adult education
Wolseley	Clifton Street South	1921	\$75,000	- active elementary school
Sir John Franklin	Beaverbrook Street	1921	\$40,000	- DEMOLISHED

To further economize, a standardized plan was developed for the new schools. While it had long been Division policy to exercise careful control over the arrangement of interior space, beginning in 1921 exterior design and ornamentation also became standard, although minor differences in detailing and basic plan did occur.

³ Compiled from G. Bugailiskis, "Quiet Dignity. Aspects of Building Schools in the Winnipeg School Division No. 1 – 1871-1928," unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, University of Manitoba, October 1990, p. 158 (below as "Quiet Dignity"); and interview with the staff of Winnipeg School Division Building Department, March 19, 1996.

CONSTRUCTION

The solid red tapestry brick walls of Wolseley School rest on a concrete foundation. Stone trim around windows and along the roofline are found on all elevations.⁴ The structure's flat roof is highlighted by a stone accented parapet and the building's two entrances on the south façade feature modest stone detailing.

The school was originally a nine-room building placed on a 137.3 x 107.7-metre (450 x 353-foot) lot in the heart of the Wolseley residential district.⁵ Construction of the \$75,000 facility was completed under the supervision of the Sutherland Construction Company, a local general contracting firm which also supervised the construction of Sir John Franklin School.⁶

DESIGN

Semmens had attempted to add architectural features to the bungalow schools to make their facades more attractive and prominent. While he succeeded in creating aesthetically pleasing buildings, financial restraint within the Division limited the ornamentation of some works, including Wolseley School. Semmens would later comment that the architect was being forced “against his better judgment...to condense plans and build types [of schools] that in his heart he loathes.”⁷

The exterior of Wolseley School is handsomely, albeit subtly, ornamented. Smooth-cut stone accents give contrast to the dark red tapestry brick walls at grade, around windows and doors, and along the roofline. Stone elements include lug sills, a belt course above the windows, and capping for the parapet. The two main entrances on the south side are topped by pointed arches

⁴ City of Winnipeg Assessment Record (below as AR), Roll No. 806111, Ward 1, PC 83.

⁵ Manitoba Free Press, December 6, 1922, p. 4, December 7, 1922, p. 4, and December 8, 1922. The other two schools were smaller, Sir John Franklin School with five classrooms and Sir Sam Steele School with six. In terms of land prices, the Sir Sam Steele site was the cheapest, costing \$7,500 for 1.6 hectares (3.8 acres), the 0.8-hectare (2-acre) lot for Sir John Franklin School cost \$8,000, and the Wolseley School site, by far the most expensive, cost \$49,084 for 1.5 hectares (3.6 acres) of land.

⁶ Manitoba Free Press, December 6, 1922, p. 4.

⁷ J.N. Semmens, “Typical Schools of Western Canada,” The Journal, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Vol. IV, No. 11 (November 1927), p. 401.

of stone, stone crests and a decorative parapet (Plate 6). The multi-paned windows are set in plain wooden frames and add to the visual beauty of the design.

The rear of the school continues the window pattern and stone accents of the front façade. Additions and renovations have altered the aesthetics of this elevation. The basement is very small, a cost-cutting measure made popular by Semmens. Space was provided only for heating and other equipment. To support the remainder of the structure, Semmens relied on a system of concrete posts and beams.⁸

A major addition – an auditorium – was built on the northeast corner of the original school in 1959. It cost \$78,962 and featured similar materials to better blend with the original (Plate 7).⁹ The other major alteration was the closing of the northwest entrance to the school in 1970, after which the space was converted to a classroom. Foundation repairs were carried out, including one piling in 1964 and additional piles in 1983.¹⁰ Temporary classrooms have been used sporadically as needed from 1968 to the present and have always been located on the north side of the auditorium.¹¹

Another change, also on the north side, has been the addition of a City of Winnipeg Parks and Recreation building, known as the Wolseley Recreation Centre. This building measures approximately 10.4 x 22.1 metres (34 x 72.3 feet) and includes dressing rooms, a large hall, canteen, washrooms and an office.¹²

INTERIOR

As in Mitchell's 1918-19 temporary structures and Semmens's 1920 schools, the interior of Wolseley School contains a wide central corridor running the entire length of the building and

⁸ "Quiet Dignity," p. 132.

⁹ AR.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

flanked on both sides by classrooms, offices and other space (Plates 8 and 9). Finishes, as one would expect, concentrate more on durability than aesthetics, but dark wood trim and accents do give the interior a rudimentary grace, as does the light-coloured maple floors. The school's 3.7-metre (12-foot) ceilings add to the openness of the interior (Plate 10). Changes to the original interior have been few and have not negatively affected the space.

INTEGRITY

The school remains on its original site as mentioned above. The additions were completed sympathetically and do not intrude upon the original design. The major structural problem – the settling of the west wall – is noticeable to the naked eye, and has continued despite numerous attempts by the Division to underpin the affected area.

STREETSCAPE

The school, surrounded by a large open playground, is located in the center of a residential area primarily composed of single-family detached homes. Houses throughout the neighborhood vary from small cottage-like frame dwellings to large stone and brick mansions. The school's warmly coloured building materials and one-storey design blend into the surroundings and add to the elegance of the neighborhood.

ARCHITECT

Colonel John N. Semmens began his distinguished architectural career shortly after coming to the city in 1910. He designed schools, residences, banks and commercial blocks in Winnipeg and western Canada (see Appendix I for biographical information). He has received 10 points from the Historical Buildings Committee.

INSTITUTION

The Winnipeg School Division was faced with a dilemma throughout the decade after 1910. The cost of building schools had risen dramatically because of material and labour shortages during the First World War. At the same time, student enrolment was also on the rise, almost doubling from just over 17,000 in 1910 to approximately 32,000 in 1920 (due to compulsory attendance and the lack of employment).¹³ The increasing enrolment was matched by an equally large jump in the Division's payroll due to the need to have more staff. In combination, these factors made it extremely difficult to balance the books and also provide proper classroom space for the growing student population.

Regardless of the financial situation, however, members of the School Board were unwilling to allow their facilities to be overcrowded or substandard. As well, the schools continued to be seen as assimilators of the immigrant population. Therefore buildings still had to be well laid out and stylistically pleasing in order to attract immigrant families to the public education system.

The one-storey bungalow school was a compromise. It was small enough to be built cheaply and flexible enough to allow for additions and alterations as need be. Moreover, its limited number of classrooms allowed it to serve as an overflow facility.

It was just such a role that prompted construction of Wolseley School. The elementary departments of both Isaac Brock (1265 Barratt Avenue) and Laura Secord (960 Wolseley Avenue) schools were overcrowded and Wolseley School was built to take the overflow.¹⁴

EVENT

There is no known event connected with this building.

¹³ "Quite Dignity," pp. 90, 129.

¹⁴ Manitoba Free Press, December 8, 1922, p. 14.

CONTEXT

Wolseley School, like the thoroughfare to the south and the residential district in which it is located, was named after Colonel Garnet Joseph Wolseley (1833-1913), a career British soldier sent to Canada in 1861 as assistant quartermaster-general. In 1870, he led a military force of 400 British regulars and 800 Ontario and Québec militiamen sent by Canada to assume control of the new province of Manitoba after its transfer from the Hudson's Bay Company. His efforts won him high praise from many circles and he went on to become commander-in-chief of the British army from 1895-1900.¹⁵

Use of Wolseley School remains high. Attendance figures for the 1995-96 school year are at approximately 200 elementary students.¹⁶ In terms of its uniqueness, this is one of only four 1921. The originality of both its exterior and interior add to its historic importance.

LANDMARK

This building is conspicuous in its neighborhood, given its scale, level of ornamentation and location – set apart from surrounding buildings by a large open space. Its important function within the community, however, is what gives this structure its status in the neighborhood.

¹⁵ Canadian Encyclopedia (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), Vol. 3, pp. 1837-38 and Vol. 4, p. 2322.

¹⁶ Figure supplied by office staff, Wolseley School, June 4, 1996.

APPENDIX I

John Nelson Semmens

Colonel John N. Semmens was born in Toronto, Ontario in 1880, the son of a pioneer Methodist minister. He graduated from Wesley College and received his architectural degree from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1910 he moved west to Winnipeg, opened a practice, and soon became associated with the prominent New York firm of McKim, Mead and White. While in its employ, Semmens served as local supervising architect for the Bank of Montreal project at the southeast corner of Portage Avenue and Main Street.

Semmens also pursued a military career and in 1912 was given the rank of Lieutenant in the 100th Regiment, Winnipeg Grenadiers, then under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel J.B. Mitchell. Two years later he became a Major and in 1915 went overseas as the second-in-command of the 78th Battalion. After rising to the rank of Commanding Officer in 1917.¹ During his career, he was twice president of the Manitoba Association of Architects, 1921 and 1941.²

In 1920 he was hired as a consultant for the Winnipeg School Division by J.B. Mitchell. In that role (which was expanded as Mitchell approached retirement in 1928), Semmens designed a great number of Winnipeg schools and supervised the planning of others.

During World War II, Semmens organized the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadiers but did not go overseas. He spent the remainder of the war as Commandant at Camp Shilo.³

In 1958 he moved to Victoria, B.C. and died three years later. Semmens's work covered a wide range of structures – houses, banks, warehouses and office buildings. He was well known in the city and left his mark on its development. An incomplete list of his work includes:

¹ Winnipeg Free Press, November 5, 1961.

² Information courtesy of the Manitoba Association of Architects, Winnipeg.

³ Winnipeg Free Press, November 5, 1961; and J.N. Semmens, "Typical Schools of Western Canada: in The Journal, The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Vol. IV, No. 11 (November 1927), pp. 401-406.

Winnipeg Buildings:

E.:L. Taylor House, 611 Wellington Crescent, 1911 (local supervising architect for McKim, Mead and White)
Bank of Montreal, Portage and Main, 1911-13 (local supervising architect for McKim, Mead and White)
Turner-Walker Block, 425 Henry Avenue, 1912 (Grade III)
R.R. Scott House, 29 Ruskin Row, 1914 (Grade II)
Winnipeg North End Library, 500 Salter Street, 1915
Security Storage Co. Building, Portage Ave. at Huntleigh St., 1929
Civic Auditorium, 444 St. Mary Avenue, 1931-32 (member of board of design)
24-car Garage, RCMP Barracks, Portage Ave. at Dominion St., 1935 (demolished)
House, 265 Kingsway Avenue
St. Boniface Sanatorium
Grace Maternity Hospital
Winnipeg Electric Company Building

Winnipeg School Division Buildings:⁴

Margaret Scott, Arlington Street (demolished)
General Wolfe, Ellice Avenue (demolished)
Montcalm, Tecumseh Street (demolished)
Addition to Cecil Rhodes No. 2, East Street (demolished)
Aberdeen No. 3, Stella Avenue (demolished)
Champlain, Machray Avenue (demolished)
Florence Nightingale, Shaughnessy Street
Norquay No. 2, Lusted Avenue (demolished)
Isaac Newton, Aberdeen Avenue
Machray No. 2, Mountain Avenue
Sir John Franklin, Beaverbrook Street (demolished)
Wolseley, Clifton Street South
Sir Sam Steele, Chester Street
Daniel McIntyre Collegiate Institute, Alverstone Street
Grosvenor, Grosvenor Avenue
Faraday, Mountain Avenue

Out of Town Work:

School for the Feeble Minded, Portage la Prairie
West End Collegiate, Saskatoon
The Collegiate Building, Dauphin
McKenzie Junior High School, Dauphin, 1927

⁴ G. Bugailiskis, "Quiet Dignity. Aspects of Building Schools in the Winnipeg School Division No. 1 – 1871-1928," unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, University of Manitoba, October 1990, pp. 158-159.

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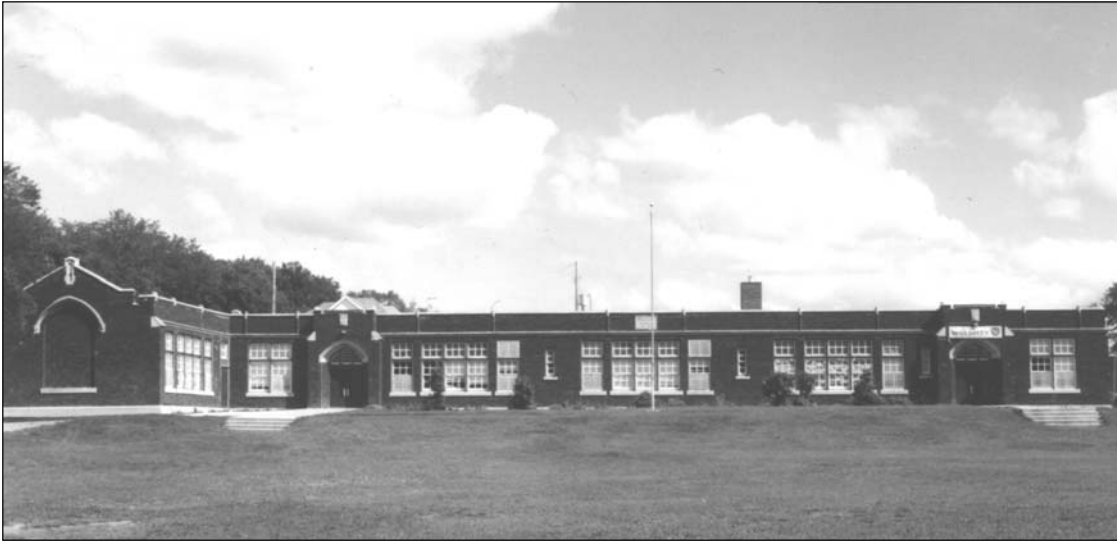


Plate 1 – Wolseley School, 511 Clifton Street South, front or south façade; built 1921, Colonel J.N. Semmens, architect, Sutherland Construction, general contractors. (M. Peterson, 1996.)



Plate 2 – Sir John Franklin School, 386 Beaverbrook Street, rear or east façade (DEMOLISHED); built 1921, Colonel J.N. Semmens, architect, Fraser and McDonald, general contractors. (M. Peterson, 1991.)

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Plate 3 – Sir Sam Steele School, 15 Chester Street, front or west façade; built 1921, Colonel J.N. Semmens, architect, H. Sigurdson, general contractor. (M. Peterson, 1996.)



Plate 4 – Former Anna Gibson School, 77 Henderson Highway, front or west façade; built 1919, J.B. Mitchell, architect, Sutherland Construction, general contractor. (M. Peterson, 1996.)

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Plate 5 – Florence Nightingale School, 31 Shaughnessy Street, front or west façade; built 1920, Colonel J.N. Semmens, architect, Sutherland Construction, general contractor. (M. Peterson, 1994.)

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Plate 6 – Wolseley School, 511 Clifton Street South, south façade. (M. Peterson, 1996.)



Plate 7 – Wolseley School, 511 Clifton Street South, northeast corner, showing 1959 auditorium and the Community Club (built ca.1976). (M. Peterson, 1996.)

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Plate 8 – Interior of Wolseley School, 511 Clifton Street South, main hall looking east. (M. Peterson, 1996.)

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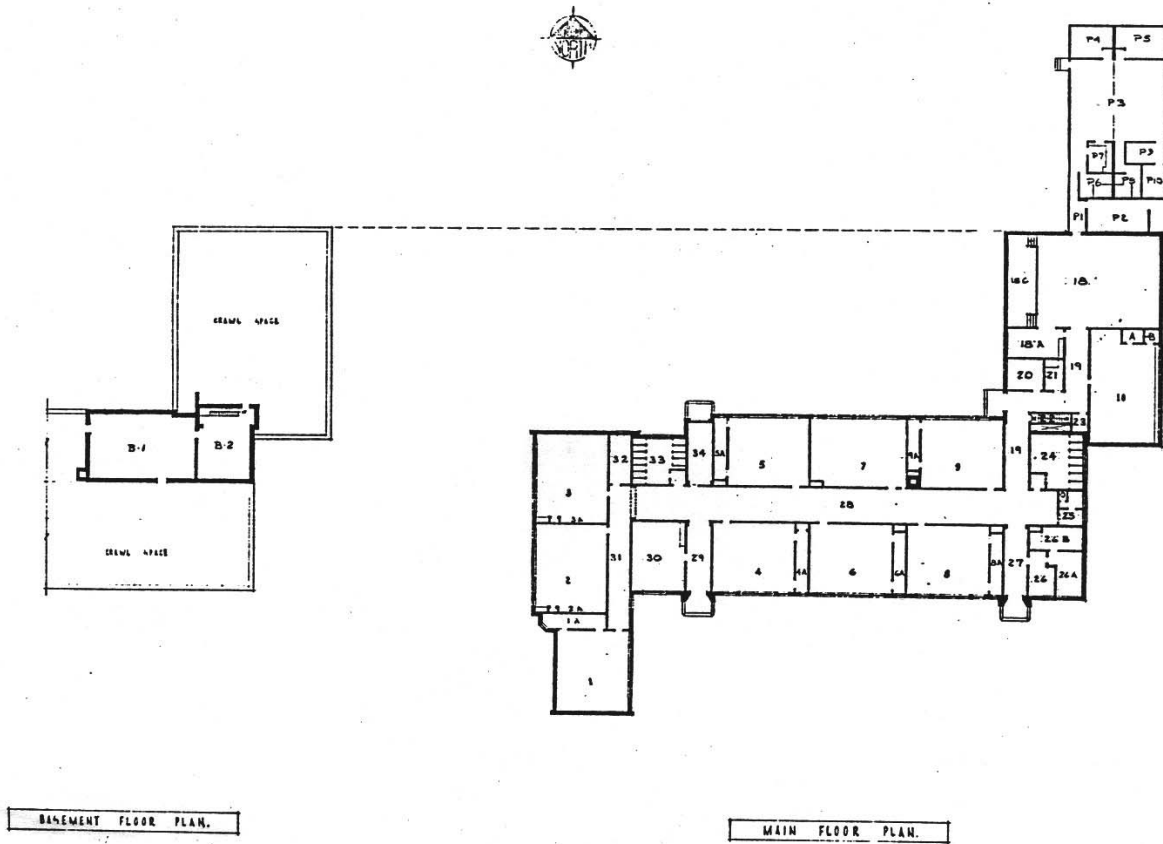


Plate 9 – Wolseley School, 511 Clifton Street South, “Main Floor Plan.” (Courtesy of the Winnipeg School Division No. 1, Research Department.)

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Plate 10 –Wolseley School, 511 Clifton Street South, typical classroom. (M. Peterson, 1996.)