



**1055 DORCHESTER AVENUE  
NO. 12 FIRE HALL**

Historical Buildings Committee

7 February, 1983

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No. 12 Fire Hall, at the corner of Dorchester and Wilton was one of thirteen fire halls built during the rapid expansion of the City of Winnipeg from 1900 to 1914.<sup>1</sup> Between 1900 and 1906, the city's population doubled, and nearly doubled again from 1906 to 1916, with the actual figures rising from 42,000 to over 200,000 souls.<sup>2</sup> This rapid rate of growth left the city racing to supply services to the new districts. Because fire protection was so critical to a city of predominately frame buildings heated by wood or coal burning furnaces, the Fire Department received more attention and resources than other municipal services. Fire halls were constructed systematically as new districts developed.

In order to keep construction costs down, several fire halls were built from the same plan. Alexander and William Melville established themselves as the Fire Department's architects following the Melvilles' planning of No. 3 Fire Hall on Maple and No. 5 station on Sherbrooke. Eleven other stations in the city were designed by the Melvilles,<sup>3</sup> including No. 12 Fire Hall on Dorchester. No. 12 Station was one of at least five identical Fire Halls constructed to specifications on the Melville prototype.

Like the others of its kind, No. 12 Fire Hall stands two and a half storeys high and is constructed of brick masonry. Its stone foundation rests on concrete footings,<sup>4</sup> while the floors are concrete. The building is 61 feet across and 34 feet deep.

The main floor has four bays which contain the three large vehicle doors and the main entrance offset on the right. Here the wagons and pumpers were stored, while the stables with stalls for eight horses filled the rear portion of the ground floor. Bedrooms, a washroom and a sitting room with a bay window were found on the second floor. The third storey was used for storage, and its large dormer windows helped to cool the building in summer. The quintessential tower, used for drying hoses is located on the right side, the access a narrow split stairway that hugs the tower wall. Pressed Metal ceilings were used throughout. This was the standard plan of Winnipeg's fire halls.<sup>5</sup>

The facade of the fire hall is a careful blending of several strong components: the tall, crenellated tower, the massive vehicle doors outlined with limestone trim, the centre bay window topped by a Flemish or stepped gable, and the broad expanse of the hip roof. Such touches as the Flemish gable and the gabled dormer windows were concessions to the residential setting, but the red trim left no doubt as to the building's function.

Construction of this fire hall commenced in 1911 and was completed the following year. In late 1912, <sup>6</sup> a wooden shed was appended to the rear to house an extra wagon that was used to exercise the horses. This fire hall and No. 13 on Cathedral were built by Sutherland Construction Company. The cost of this station was \$20,000.<sup>7</sup>

The jurisdictional range of No. 12 station was south to the CNR line, west to Kenaston (the boundary of the Town of Tuxedo), north to the Assiniboine River and east to Daly Street. It would routinely work in tandem with the old No. 4 Fire Hall on Gertrude and Osborne and with No. 14 on Lipton and Westminster.<sup>8</sup> When the station was constructed in 1911, the Crescentwood area was only sparsely settled and most of River Heights was non-existent. Development, however, was clearly spreading west, which made this fire hall centrally located within a matter of a few years.<sup>9</sup>

The district surrounding No. 12 Fire Hall is virtually all residential so that most of the fire fighters' work was house fires. The Winnipeg Fire Department's statistics in 1921 showed that 64% of their calls were fires in the home.<sup>10</sup> In addition to answering two-alarm fires in nearby districts, No. 12 Station had many grass fires to fight in the under-developed south end of River Heights.

In 1921, the fire hall had a staff of ten officers and men, under the direction of Captain David W. Adair and Captain J. Horne.<sup>11</sup> Their equipment consisted of one horse-drawn hose wagon and one horse-drawn chemical fire engine. When No. 4 Fire Hall on Gertrude closed in 1928, this station received its motorized pump and ladder to replace the obsolete chemical engine.<sup>12</sup> It was during the 1920s that most of the horse-drawn equipment was replaced by motorized engines. No. 12 Station's

first motor vehicle was a creation of the department that combined an old wagon with a hook and ladder to the chassis of a former 1924 Reo Speedwagon. A photograph of this creation, the pride and joy of No. 12 Station in 1929, appears at the end of this report.

Both the horse-drawn vehicles and the pre-World War II motorized trucks had no closed cabs, which made for cold drives for the wet firefighters. The horses were strong, fast and dependable animals, much loved and cared for by the firemen. They were exercised around the neighbourhood daily behind a spare wagon. Both the training wagon and the regular fire vehicles were put on sleigh runners for the winter months. For many years, horses had a distinct advantage over the early motorized vehicles on snow and in mud. The last horses were phased out of No. 12 Fire Hall in the late 1920s.

From 1911 to 1919, the firemen lived in the fire hall and had one afternoon and one evening a week off. Married men also received one night off weekly. In 1919, the department introduced a two-platoon system, with the firemen working either a ten-hour shift or a 14-hour night shift, and a 24-hour swing shift for an 84-hour week. In 1946, the four-platoon system brought in a 42-hour week.<sup>13</sup>

In 1921, the Fire Department posted the qualifications for its firefighters. They had to be 21 to 30 years of age to join, a minimum height of 5 feet 8 inches tall, 150 pounds or more, and of good character. There was a very stringent medical examination, and rookies were on strict probation for six months.<sup>14</sup> Until 1956, firemen were trained by the captain and experienced firefighters in their own station.

The Central Fire Hall was on Albert Street beside Market Square. All fire calls were received through No. 1 Station, which also activated the high pressure system when required for downtown fires. The Fire Chief sat on the Committee of Public Safety, and each station had its own captains. The city was divided into four geographic districts. While each station could easily be called to a fire in another district, it was a matter for the politicians and Fire Chiefs to decide when City of Winnipeg firemen would assist suburban firefighters with a particular fire. Needless to say, this was

often a source of frustration for men trained to fight fire at all costs. Both Tuxedo and Charleswood had rather inadequate volunteer fire departments.<sup>15</sup>

There have not been many changes to No. 12 Fire Hall over the years. The big doors, which used to open outwards, were replaced in 1930 with sectional doors that folded up and into the station. The stables have long been converted into a kitchen and an office. In earlier years, the windows each contained flowerboxes overflowing with petunias, and ivy climbed the sides of the building.

This fire hall was closed with the amalgamation of the urban and suburban fire departments through Unicity in 1974. It has been boarded up, its duties distributed among newer fire halls in the district. The other three identical stations have been altered considerably to re-use. No. 13 Fire Hall on Cathedral and Powers lost its tower and its vehicle doors when it was made into a multiple-family dwelling in the 1960s. No. 14 Fire Hall on Lipton and No. 15 Fire Hall on Osborne and Arnold have been refitted as ambulance depots. Only No. 12 Fire Hall has retained all of its original facade.

From the days of horse-drawn wagons clanging through the streets, this fire hall adapted to motorized equipment and later to the large fire-fighting equipment of modern use. It pre-dated most of the buildings around it and faithfully protected River Heights and Crescentwood from any serious fires from 1911 to 1974.

## FOOTNOTES--

1. Vince Leah, Alarm of Fire Firefighters Burn Fund Winnipeg 1982 p. 28-29.
2. Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914 McGill-Queen's University Press Montreal and London 1974 p. 130-1.
3. David Spector "The Architecture of Functionality" Report submitted to the Historical Buildings Committee 1981 p. 55 and 56.
4. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 2381 1 August 1911.
5. Spector, op.cit., p. 14.
6. Building Permits, op.cit., No. 4446 13 December 1912.
7. Ibid., No. 2381.
8. Interview with Mr. Gordon McLauchlin, retired Deputy Fire Chief and a fireman with No. 12 Station from 1925 to 1935. 1 February 1983.
9. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg 1912 and 1925.
10. City of Winnipeg Fire Department The Winnipeg Firemen's Benefit Association Winnipeg 1921, p. 61.
11. In 1921, the Fire Department in total consisted of 14 stations and 284 employees to protect the city's 200,000 people. op.cit., p. 6.
12. Ibid., p. 20. Also McLauchlin interview.
13. Leah, op.cit., p. 30.
14. City Fire Department, op.cit., p. 15.

**1055 DORCHESTER AVENUE – NO. 12 FIRE HALL**



Plate 1 – Fire Hall No. 12, 1055 Dorchester Avenue, no date. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index.)



Plate 2 – Fire Hall No. 12, 1055 Dorchester Avenue, no date. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, 531-16953.)

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Plate 3 – Hook and ladder equipment, no date. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)