



366 QU'APPELLE AVENUE
WARWICK APARTMENTS

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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366 QU'APPELLE AVENUE WARWICK APARTMENTS

Located on the southern boundary of Central Park, the Warwick Apartments represented the apex of apartment block design in 1908, the year of its construction.

The Warwick was designed by William Wallace Blair, a top architect who had a formative impact in apartment building technology in Winnipeg. (See Appendix I for Blair's biography). A restless and creative designer, Blair was determined to solve the major problems of previous apartment block designs, that is, the healthy circulation of air and adequate natural light to each room.¹ The idea was to combine the advantages of single family dwellings with the economies and convenience of apartment living. While apartment blocks were not new, the idea of building an elegant apartment, with all the comforts of home, was a departure from the past. Apartments had been perceived as tenements, with all the connotations of overcrowded, unsanitary conditions. It took radical changes in apartment design to attract wealthy tenants. It was this very market that Blair pursued.

The Warwick is large, with 66 original suites, grouped around a rectangular interior courtyard. This is topped with a skylight that permits a good deal of light into the centre court. The suites which front onto the park all have open balconies, facing north, which provide light and ventilation. The other elevations also have a great many windows. Bay windows seem to be featured in every suite.

In that same year, 1908, Blair also designed the Roslyn Court on Osborne Street. Together, these two blocks represent Blair's resolution of apartment construction problems in buildings that are still functional today.

The year 1908 saw the end of a slump in construction brought on by world-wide depression.² With renewed confidence in the economy, investors put their capital back into circulation, such as the joint stock company which financed this apartment. Named the Warwick Apartment Company, the investors were said to be a group of prominent Winnipeggers.³ At the time of the excavation of the block, it was thought that most of the stock had been subscribed. For the investors, the Warwick

was a gold mine. Costing \$150,000 to build,⁴ its design and site assured full occupancy that parleyed into a healthy profit for the investors.

Central Park was a creation of the first Public Parks Board in 1893. The three-acre site, costing \$20,000, had to be filled before it could be used. By 1905, the park was so popular that tennis courts and a bandstand were added, and band concerts and community singing became regular features. The famous Waddell fountain on the north section of the park was erected in 1911 in fulfilment of the terms of a wealthy woman's will.⁵ Central Park is still attractive, particularly in summer, and a popular park with the downtown residents.

The Warwick was built by Sveinn Brynjolfson, an Icelandic contractor who built several blocks in the city. Brynjolfson was one of many Icelanders in the building trades after 1900. Although there was no frame housing in their native country, these immigrants had a long tradition of fine wood-working which enabled them to adapt easily to carpentry.⁶ They settled mostly in the west end of the city, and banded together as any new group does. Well-educated and confident, the Icelanders got ahead relatively quickly so that it was not long before the banks were willing to support their endeavours. The Icelandic contractors hired their fellow countrymen, as was likely the case with the Warwick, and their native language was spoken on the site.⁷ Many hundreds of houses and dozens of apartment blocks in the city were erected under this arrangement, particularly in the west end and the city centre, in the years between 1900 and 1914.⁸

Opened in the latter part of 1909, the Warwick had sixty upper suites, with five more and a janitor's suite in the basement. The early tenants were exactly the kind that the architect had anticipated — professional, upwardly mobile people, many of them young. George Ryan, for example, was the second generation of Thomas Ryan and Co., a major shoe and boot wholesaler. There was an accountant for Ogilvie's, doctors and manufacturers' agents. Teachers, a minister and middle management staffers were included as well.⁹

By the early 1930s, there was a shift in the kind of tenants domiciled in the Warwick. It is impossible to guess why this transition occurred, but this apartment fit into a general downtown

pattern of lower rents. Perhaps the location lost some of its appeal, or maintenance of the building began to slip, or perhaps the depression so gripped the region that there was a pressing demand of low-rental housing (especially when vacancies were the alternative).

The Warwick never recovered its lost prestige. During the 1940s, many of the larger suites were sub-divided in an insensitive manner.¹⁰ The tenants hail largely from the working class, with many retired people and single parent households. While slightly crowded compared to its early years, the Warwick remains a vibrant block of architectural significance.

FOOTNOTES

1. J. Pender West "Apartment Blocks in Western Canada" Construction April 1912 p. 54.
2. Ruben Bellan Winnipeg First Century: An Economic History Queenston House Publishing Co. Winnipeg 1978 p. 94.
3. "Warwick Apartments" Manitoba Free Press 27 July 1908.
4. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 673 24 June 1908.
5. Clare Marcus "Central Park's Years of Glory" Winnipeg Free Press 17 September 1960.
6. Ross Leckow "The Triumph of the Growth Ethic: Icelandic Involvement in Winnipeg's Construction Industry, 1900-1914" U of W Paper, 1980, p. 10. By permission of the author.
7. S.A. Thorarinson "Early Icelandic Builders in Winnipeg" The Icelandic Canadian Spring 1967 p. 28.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 24-30 *passim*.
9. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg, 1910 & 1916.
10. The number of suites rose from 66 to 89.

APPENDIX I

William Wallace Blair

W.W. Blair was considered to be one of the top architects in Winnipeg in the early years of this century. Blair received his architectural training at the Academical Institute in Belfast before emigrating to Ontario in the early 1870s. He worked in Toronto and Hamilton for several years, and even designed a warehouse and office building in Winnipeg, before returning to Ireland to superintend the construction of a massive waterworks system. Returning in 1898, Blair re-located his practice to Chicago until he moved to Winnipeg in 1905.

This range of stylistic influences is manifest in Blair's Winnipeg works. He designed both the Roslyn Apartment on Osborne and Roslyn Road and the Warwick Apartment on Central Park in 1908. The Roslyn is perhaps Blair's best-known work, demonstrating skill and innovation in a new building form. Among W.W. Blair's other projects are the Princeton Apartments on Broadway (1909), now demolished, and the elegant Mark Fortune house at 393 Wellington Crescent.

In ca.1912, Blair retired to the gentler climes of Victoria where he built himself a great rambling house that is still considered to be a showpiece of domestic architecture.

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Plate 1 – Warwick Apartments, 366 Qu'Appelle Avenue, not long after its construction, ca.1910. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – Taken from a picture postcard, this shot of the Warwick and Central Park has been touched up, ca.1910. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N1111.)

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Plate 3 – Sunrise on Central Park with the Warwick on the right, 1913. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Thomas Burns Collection #453.)

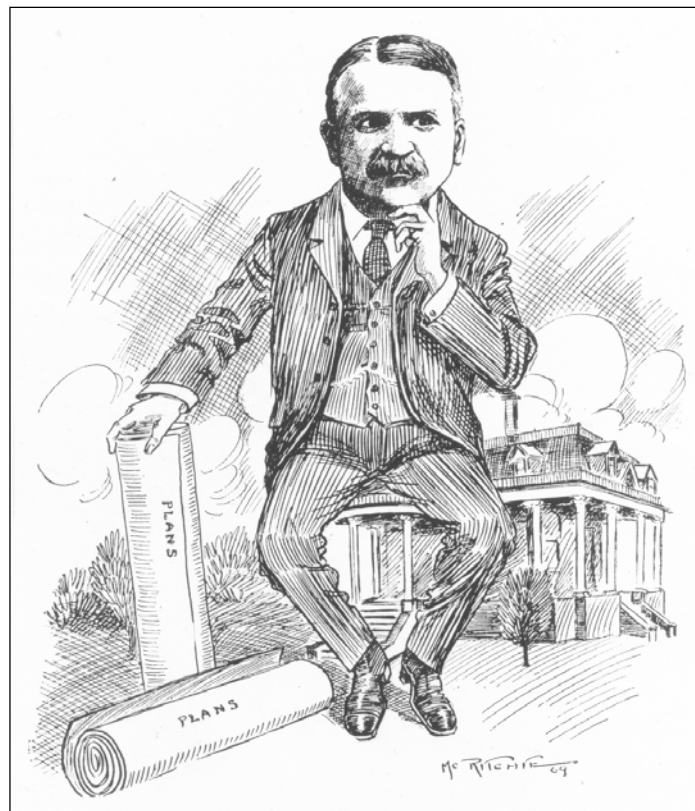


Plate 4 – A caricature of William Wallace Blair from a book of cartoons of famous Winnipeggers, 1908. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N4654.)

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Plate 5 – Warwick Apartments, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 6 – Details of the courtyard, no date. (City of Winnipeg Planning Department.)