



300 RIVER AVENUE
CONGRESS APARTMENT

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

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It was 1905 before apartment blocks came to prominence in Western Canada. Once they were accepted by city dwellers used to living in single-family houses, blocks became the perfect answer for persons who did not wish to be responsible for the housekeeping chores associated with detached residences.

Block design and interior organization varied with the proposed market, ranging from massive, ornamental blocks with large suites and servants' quarters to plain buildings with small, simple suites. Added to this adaptability was an increasing demand for such structures and the relatively high return which could be realized from a greater density of development on only a few city lots. When added up, these factors provided more than enough impetus to fuel the creation of a large number and variety of apartment blocks in all areas of Winnipeg after 1905.

One of the city's early areas of prestigious residential development was Fort Rouge, known originally as St. Boniface West.¹ This area, which continually attracted influential families after the 1881-83 boom, filled with large beautiful homes and luxurious apartment blocks. The blocks were perfect mirrors of the tenants who chose to live in Fort Rouge — i.e., suites with living and dining-rooms and two or three bedrooms were not uncommon. In 1910, still during the height of Winnipeg's growth as a population centre, a brick apartment building was constructed on River Avenue for the large sum of \$90,000. The owner and builder of the structure was J. Moxam, a Winnipeg contractor of some prominence. The designer was Herbert E. Matthews, a Winnipeg architect.² Called the Boylston Apartments until 1923-24, this imposing block rose three storeys above River Avenue.

STYLE

The Congress Apartments at 300 River are an example of a simplified Edwardian Neo-classical building. Structures in the city using modest examples of classical detailing, such as this apartment building, are not rare. In the case of the Congress Apartments, the style adds to the structure's

'exclusive' air. This style is distinguished by "symmetrically arranged buildings of monumental proportions finished with a smooth or polished stone surface".³ The building is based primarily on the Greek example and, therefore, arches are not used and enriched mouldings are rare.

CONSTRUCTION

This brick and stone structure occupies lots 31, 32 and 33, Plan 102, 37 St. Boniface, and is found on the southwest corner of River Avenue and Lewis Street.⁴ The "brown tapestry" brick on an ashlar stone foundation runs the full width of the front or north façade and along most of the sides (east and west façades). The smooth-cut stone rises 0.9m (3') from grade. At the rear, and running a short distance along the sides of the building, is a rubble-stone foundation.⁵ A stone belt course divides the basement and main floor. The ground level includes stone lintels and limestone quoins. A projecting stone cornice divides the main and second floors of the building, with giant order brick pilasters at the corners to tie the superstructure together. These pilasters include stone bases and capitals. The top of the building is finished with corbelled brick leading to a metal cornice and low parapet. Limestone steps with brass doors and accents create a regal entrance to the block.

The three-storey structure rests on a stone foundation and concrete piles (this work cost \$5,000 in 1937).⁶ Basement walls are 45.7cm (18") thick, first and second-floor walls are 33.0cm (13"), and the third-floor walls are 22.9cm (9") thick. Overall, this oddly-shaped structure measures approximately 30.5m x 34.8m (100' x 114').

DESIGN

H.E. Matthew's design for an expensive set of suites is very successful in the Congress Apartments. While many such structures were (and are) designed with numerous, unadorned entrances to afford the tenants more privacy, Matthews has focussed almost all attention and traffic on one main entrance. While there are two small doors on the side façades and the back of the structure has a wooden fire escape, it is obvious that Matthews saved his most detailed and ornamented work for

the front entrance.

Wrought iron fencing runs along the sidewalk between four stone and brick gate posts. Two small posts are located at the sides, while the walkway up to the block is framed by two large posts with light fixtures mounted on top.

The building is designed in the familiar U-shape, with the grand entrance placed at the end of this indentation. Numerous windows on the inside of the 'U' allow for light and air in the suites. Smooth stone steps, complete with a balustrade, lead to large brass doors creating the elegant entrance. Above the doorway is a segmental arch pediment connected to the cornice between the main and second floors of the main building. Three-quarter-inch round Tuscan order columns and a full entablature complete this element.

Windows on the first and second floors include diamond-shaped leaded panes and rectangular side lights. Windows on the third floor off the main façade are paired and double hung, with brick mullions and stone sills. Internal window divisions are unmatched throughout the building and range from twelve-over-one to twenty-over-one.

INTERIOR

The block at 300 River has been spaciouly designed to afford its tenants a great deal of comfort. The entrance hall of marble leads to a heavily ornamented staircase that splits and moves off in opposite directions. The split takes place under a large stained-glass window. The dark wood staircase includes bevelled mirrors and ornate lamps.

The arrangement of suites in the building is the same on the first, second and third floors. The four suites in the front of the building (facing River Avenue) contain two bedrooms, living and dining-rooms and a pantry. The two suites at the back of the block running along the outside walls include one bedroom, and living and dining-rooms. The other two rear suites lack dining-rooms. The

original basement of the block included two laundry rooms, a boiler room, two locker rooms and three suites (a one-bedroom suite with living and dining-rooms, and two suites with two bedrooms, living and dining-rooms and a pantry).⁸ This total of 27 apartments was altered by 1978 with the addition of two one-bedroom basement suites.⁹

INTEGRITY

The Congress Apartments occupy their original site and have suffered little alteration to either the exterior or the richly ornamented interior. The building is in excellent structural condition.

STREETSCAPE

This building is one of several on River Avenue that were originally intended for high-income tenants. As such, they were built to convey wealth and stature in order to attract this type of resident. The Congress Apartments contribute to the existing historical make-up of the area.

ARCHITECT

While little is known of Herbert E. Matthews, some details have been discovered. He arrived in Winnipeg around 1905 and immediately began working as an architect. He worked as a private architect and in the Dominion Public Works Department for over thirty years. (See Appendix I for biography).

PERSON

J. Moxam owned the structure for only one year, selling it to Alfred Joseph Andres, K.C. (1865-1950).¹⁰ Andres had a long and distinguished career in law. In 1898, he was the youngest person ever to be called to the bar in the province.¹¹ He was appointed the Deputy Minister of Justice during the 1919 General Strike. He also was appointed the defense counsel for the provincial

ministers charged with conspiracy to defraud the government following the Manitoba Legislative Building Scandal.¹² He served two terms as mayor of the City in 1898-99, gaining the nicknames of "the bad mayor" and the "Father of Waterworks" for his youthful appearance and his creation of a central water system.¹³ Andrews owned the Congress Apartments until 1923 when the block was bought by Jennie and John McIvor who maintained ownership until 1931.¹⁴

Tenants included many prominent Winnipeggers through the years, but as time went on the concentration of influential residents decreased. Original tenants included Matthews; the Hon. Thomas L. Metcalfe, Justice in the Court of King's Bench; W.B. Lawrence, owner of the Winnipeg Theatre; and William T. Newman, owner of the National Hotel. Matthews remained in the block only a few short years, then moved to McMillan Avenue. As early as 1920, signs of the block's loss of its exclusive nature were seen as clerks, a CNR repairman and a bookkeeper were all listed as tenants.¹⁵

EVENT

There is no known event connected with this structure.

CONTEXT

The Congress Apartments were built during the latter stages of the period of fabulous growth in the city that started with the land boom had been transformed into a major developed city with all the amenities. The need for high rent apartments was great after 1905 and the Congress and many like it quickly set out to satisfy this need.

LANDMARK

The growth of the Osborne Street area as a retail and dining area has been accompanied by the

preservation and redevelopment of many older structures in the area. The Congress Apartments fit well with both neighbouring buildings and 'the Village' structures to the west.

FOOTNOTES

1. Fort Rouge Through the Years. (Winnipeg-1974). p. 2.
2. Building Permit #727/1910.
3. John J.G. Blumenson, Identifying American Architecture. (Nashville 1981). p. 69.
4. Assessment Records #319910, Ward 1, Class 19.
5. Ibid.
6. Building Permit #671/1937.
7. Assessment Records. op. cit.
8. From the original plans, City Archives #722/1910.
9. Assessment Records. op. cit.
10. Assessment Rolls #319910, Ward 1 and Free Press June 13, 1964.
11. Morning Telegram. December 31, 1898.
12. Tribune July 17, 1948.
13. Free Press. January 3, 1948 and Free Press June 13, 1964.
14. Assessment Rolls. op. cit.
15. Henderson's Directory.

APPENDIX I

Hebert E. Matthews

H.E. Matthews came to Winnipeg in 1905 and immediately began to practice architecture. In that year alone, he designed ten structures totalling \$103,000 in construction value. These structures included large and small homes, warehouses and a business block. His best year in terms of total cost of buildings designed was 1910 when he was in partnership with Fred F. LeMaistre. The two men created six structures costing slightly over \$200,000. The partnership lasted only two building seasons, 1910 and 1911; by late 1911, Matthews was back on his own.¹

In 1921, Matthews was hired as an architect for the Dominion Department of Public Works, a position he held until his retirement in 1938. His name leaves the Henderson's Directory in 1942 but what became of him is unknown at present. Matthews served as the first president of the Manitoba Association of Architects "for a term of two and a half years"² in 1914 with J.B. Mitchell acting as Vice-President and J.H.G. Russell as Secretary. A list of buildings Matthews designed, taken from the City of Winnipeg Building Permits Books, is as follows:

1905:

Dwight House, Wellington Crescent
Perrin Warehouse, Portage Avenue East
5 houses for Robert Wyatt, Norquay Street
William Weld and Co. Block, Princess Street
Simpson House, Academy Road
Bell Warehouse, Portage Avenue East

1906:

Myers Iron Fence Co. factory, Chambers Street

1907:

McIntyre House, Broadway

1908:

St. James Park Church, Home Street
House, Maryland Street

1909:

Apartment Block, Matheson Avenue
Humphries House, Harvard Avenue

H.E. Matthews' designs continued:

1910:

Congress (Boylston) Apartments, 300 River Avenue
 Drewery Stables, Redwood Avenue
 Mrs. Derby House, Florence (now Baltimore Road)
 Spiers-Parnell Baking Co. Bakery, Elgin Avenue
 Wordmans Factory, Saskatchewan Avenue
 O'Donohue House, Arlington Street

1911:

Two houses for A. Slipchenko, Burrows Avenue
 Shaw House, Banning Street
 Mrs. E. Hayward House, Weatherdon Avenue

1912:

Three stores, Furby Street
 St. Matthews Episcopal Church, Maryland Street
 Rumley Products Co. warehouse, Dufferin Avenue

1914:

Drill Hall for the Department of Public Works, Machray Avenue

1915:

Sharpe and Colledge Warehouse, Henry Avenue

1919:

Spiers-Parnell stable, 666 Elgin Avenue

--and several additions and alterations to churches, business blocks, warehouses and houses.

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1. This information, along with the list of buildings, is gleaned from the Building Permits Book.
 2. J. Chivers, "A History of the Manitoba Association of Architects", Unpublished M.S. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1966, p. 31.

300 RIVER AVENUE – CONGRESS APARTMENTS



Plate 1 – Congress Apartments, 300 River Avenue, front (north) façade. (M. Peterson, 1989.)

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Plate 2 – Congress Apartments, main (north) entrance. (M. Peterson, 1989.)