

1150 SHERBURN STREET – PRINCIPAL SPARLING SCHOOL
J.B. Mitchell, 1912-13



Principal Sparling School in the West End was constructed as part of an ambitious expansion program by the Winnipeg School District prior to the First World War.

Like other public institutions, the District was hard-pressed to meet service demands caused by the city's rapid growth from the mid-1890s onward. Its chief architect, James Bertram Mitchell, completed a dozen new facilities from 1907 to 1913, all intended to respond in a cost-efficient manner to enrolment pressures and public concern about safety.

The District had relied on a three-storey, solid brick, square model for its buildings. Disastrous fires elsewhere on the continent, however, prompted Mitchell to develop a new plan for a two-storey rectangular school that could be evacuated quickly, yet would maximize available space by providing a well-lit, raised basement for classroom use. Interior corridors also were widened,

staircases and exits were strategically located, and the fire-resistance of boiler rooms and stairwells was improved.

Born in Ontario, Mitchell (1852-1945) was a former soldier and member of the North-West Mounted Police who had studied at the Montreal Art Institute. He was elected to the Winnipeg School Board in 1888, then later became its Building and Supply Agent. Except for wartime service with the Winnipeg Grenadiers, he continued to direct the District's building program until retirement in 1928.

Seven of his pre-1914 two-storey facilities are still in use. Although they are comparable in overall plan and design, they vary in size, interior organization and ornamentation. In particular, Mitchell drew from a neoclassical repertoire to provide each building with a distinctive exterior.

The dominant features at Principal Sparling are a 1.5-storey, classically detailed Tyndall stone portico above which extends an open tower in the centre of the school's symmetrical front (east) façade. The round-arched portico rises from a rusticated base to an ashlar superstructure. It is topped at the front by a round pediment with a carved medallion set in a floral motif. The arch theme carries through to the large main entrance and to the tower where openings are highlighted in tracery-like fashion by square and round stone columns. The tower also features a curved belt course bracketed by corbelled brick and a stone-capped parapet.

Other details on the main façade include two small gable dormers containing trios of multi-paned windows; a series of diamonds and a belt course below the eaves; windows trimmed with stone lug sills and continuous heads; brick arches; and shallow pilasters to delineate the tower. A plaque inscribed with the school's name and protected by hood moulding appears above the portico. The outer limits of the façade are defined by the projecting gable ends of the school's side wings. These sections are windowless save for solitary round openings (now boarded up) near the top. Ornamental relief is provided by patterned brickwork and stone coping along the parapet gables.

The building's side and rear elevations are similarly designed. At the rear are two classically

detailed porches, one of which has been connected to a gymnasium addition. On the side elevations, projecting central sections feature arched windows, corbelled brickwork in an arcade pattern, and curved parapet gable ends outlined by stone coping and finials.

The school sits on a raised, rusticated stone base. It has load-bearing brick walls of local sand-lime brick and a low-pitched hip roof. Large rectangular windows dominate, several of which retain stained-glass upper panes, a device commonly used by the District.

Interior finishes include dark wood trim around doors and windows. Classrooms, offices and other rooms run off wide central corridors. A second-floor multi-purpose area has been converted to a music room and computer laboratory. Several classrooms and a craft room (originally the 'manual training' room) are in the basement.

Located on the west side of Sherburn Street between Grundy and Notre Dame avenues, Principal Sparling was built for \$138,000 by S. Brynjolffson and Son of Winnipeg. It was occupied by eight teachers and 200 students after its official opening in August 1913. Within a decade, enrolment from the school's ethnically mixed, middle-income neighbourhood had quadrupled. The facility today accommodates Nursery to Grade 6 classes.

It was named in honour of Reverend Dr. Joseph Walter Sparling (1842-1912), a theologian and educator known as "the Father of Winnipeg Methodism." Sparling attended universities in his native Ontario and in Illinois before being ordained in 1871. He served in Belleville, Ottawa, Kingston, and Montreal, then was sent to Winnipeg in 1888 to establish Wesley College (now the University of Winnipeg). He also was instrumental in founding several of the city's Methodist churches.