

256 SMITH STREET – HOLY TRINITY ANGLICAN CHURCH

Charles H. Wheeler, 1883-84



The Holy Trinity Anglican congregation organized in 1867 and built a modest church in the late 1860s in what would become downtown Winnipeg. As the congregation grew, an addition was built and then in the mid-1870s, a larger structure was completed. This too was soon outgrown and in 1879, People’s Warden R.H. Hunter announced he had purchased land at the corner of Donald Street and Graham Avenue that some in the congregation openly asked, “Why did you go so far out?” It wasn’t long before the land was in the middle of Winnipeg’s expanding downtown. The magnificent new church, built large enough to ensure that it would serve the needs of the congregation for many years, took more than a year to complete, the first service was held on July 25, 1884.

Holy Trinity Church is one of Canada’s finest examples of a 19th century Gothic Revival (also known as High Victorian Gothic) style, popular from the 1850s until approximately 1900. The style is discernable by the use of pointed arches as well as the expressive use of buttresses, spires,

pinnacles and other carved ornamentation. Roofs are usually steeply pitched and complex and tracery and embellished mouldings often highlight windows. At its height, these buildings were extremely picturesque with a wealth of ornamentation.

The main body of the church measures approximately 45.8 x 17.1 metres and also includes a church hall/office, attached to the east side in 1966. The original design called for a 56.7-metre bell tower at the southwest corner, although a much reduced element was finally completed. Construction material includes both Stony Mountain and Selkirk limestone, as well as Ohio limestone for many of the exterior ornaments.

The architect's design shows an inventive use of the building material, an imaginative interpretation of the cruciform plan and a creative use of elements such as dormer clerestory windows, buttresses, pinnacles, turrets, finials and cresting. The entrance (narthex) originally included three doorways (now reduced to a single opening), with a pointed arch doorway, carved heads used as label stops and stepped buttresses and pinnacles at the corners of the porch. Above the narthex is a large pointed arch stained glass window with delicate tracery. The gable end is finished by turret pinnacles and a stone Celtic cross at its peak. The south elevation is asymmetrical – with a porch and rector's vestry attached. The elevation is divided into bays by means of stepped buttresses with turret pinnacles topped by Ohio stone-carved capitals with acanthus leaf motifs. Paired lancet windows with hood moulds are used in the south porch. Five dormer windows are used in the clerestory topped by Ohio stone Celtic crosses. The stained glass windows in these dormers were designed by the architect himself and represent the only original windows remaining in the church. Turret pinnacles are found at the corner of the transepts, the nave and the west entrance. At the southeast corner of the building is the octagonal rector's vestry with baptistery. This extremely ornate element features both pointed arch and square headed openings and is topped by an embellished frame spire with metal finials as accenting. The north façade is similar to the south elevation, with projecting transept. The rear or east façade was originally completely visible and included a large pointed arch window stained glass window.

Like the exterior, the interior of the church is richly ornamented, with a variety of finishes and ornamental details. The basic cruciform shape is based on an English parish church and at Holy

Trinity it includes a central nave, lower side aisles, lower apse and two transept arms. The sombre effect of the dark wooden pews and ceilings is softened by the lightly coloured limestone walls and accenting and the multi-hued light provided by the numerous stained glass windows. One of the most spectacular features is the hammerbeam ceiling, a Gothic-inspired interior truss system used to replace columns to support the ceiling. The ceiling of the chancel is a wagon roof style completed in dark wood. Steps in the sanctuary and chancel are finished in marble. The nave features 13 pillars, each with a different face or faces. Other unique elements include the oak pulpit designed by the architect and the lectern with its carved eagle. Alterations on the interior have been modest, the present lighting was added in 1929.

The architect chosen, after a lengthy and sometimes bitter competition process, was Charles H. Wheeler (1838-1917), British born and trained, who came to Winnipeg in 1882 and established himself as one of Western Canada's renowned early designers. He designed all types of buildings – homes, terraces, offices, churches and warehouse. Dalnavert Museum, originally the Sir H.J. Macdonald House, 61 Carlton Street (built 1895), is one of his best-known designs.

Elements of the building that would require approval if alterations were planned are:

Exterior:

- The west-facing church with its four lively architecturally significant façades and complex massing
- Roughly-dressed and smooth-cut stone superstructure with elaborate detailing, including gothic motifs, turrets, buttresses, High Crosses, etc.
- Pointed-arch windows throughout with fine tracery and hood moulding, save the clerestory windows
- Wood detailing on the bell tower in southwest corner, spire at the southeast corner and dormers on the north and south roof slopes, as well as around the west entrance

Interior:

- Volume of space and cruciform plan
- Commanding ceiling featuring wood planking and hammer beams, with a wagon roof ceiling in the chancel
- 1920s era lighting, some wooden pews and the oak pulpit
- Details including pointed arch accenting, marble and stone columns, wainscoting, stained glass, period grilles and hardware, etc.