



**960 WOLSELEY AVENUE  
LAURA SECORD SCHOOL**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

30 June 1985

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Laura Secord School, in Winnipeg's West End, represents an enlightened partnership that was formative in the development of education in this province in the early years of this century. The Superintendent of Winnipeg schools, Dr. Daniel McIntyre, found in Colonel J.B. Mitchell the ability to express in architecture the new ideologies and the practical technologies of education. Together, they built up a school system in Winnipeg that was in the national forefront of progressive educational theory.

The years 1890 to 1914 saw explosive growth in the Canadian west and in the City of Winnipeg in particular. Thousands of new immigrants flooded what could still be viewed as a pioneer society, not yet fully gelled, and sometimes overwhelmed by the changing conditions. Yet, despite the pressures of growth and uncertainties of change, it was a progressive society, capable of creative responses carried forward by a buoyant economy.

Serving the Winnipeg Public School Board as superintendent from 1885 to 1929<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Daniel McIntyre spent his career in pushing for reform of the public school system. Under his intelligent direction, education became a priority for Winnipeg taxpayers because it came to be seen as the best long-range solution for society's ills. McIntyre viewed education as more than curriculum and classrooms. He believed children should be given the finest opportunities for knowledge in an environment free from any conditions that prevented the fullest development of the individual. Included in this was the provision of proper nutrition (a hot lunch program), proper medical and dental care (regular inspection and treatment of the students), special education for handicapped children and a well-rounded and progressive curriculum that included practical training. Such corollaries as night school, English as a second language and community use of the school buildings were also in his scope.<sup>2</sup> Awarded honorary doctorate by the University of Manitoba in 1912 and the Order of the British Empire in 1935, Daniel McIntyre was a shaper of educational policy in Manitoba and a leader in educational thought and practice in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

In J.B. Mitchell, McIntyre found someone to give physical form for his ideas. Mitchell served as the Commissioner of School Buildings for the Winnipeg School Board from 1892 to 1928. In this capacity, he designed and supervised the construction of 48 school buildings at a value of \$8 million. Nothing was too good for Canada's children in his view, and furthermore:

it should be known, appreciated and remembered by every parent in this Dominion that education is more important than good streets...and more public money should be spent to thoroughly equip the children for the battle of life, than is now being devoted for that purpose.<sup>4</sup>

Born in Ontario in 1852, James Bertram Mitchell received his architectural training at the Montreal Art Institute. He served with the Canadian militia in the Fenian raids as well as with the first formation of the North West Mounted Police in 1873. After serving with the police force in the pioneer west for four years, Mitchell came to Winnipeg in 1877 and was elected to the school board in 1888. Mitchell fought with Wolseley's troops against the Métis in 1885 and led the 100th Winnipeg Grenadiers as colonel to France in World War I.

His designs for various schools include the old St. John's and Kelvin high schools, Strathcona (1904), Luxton (1907), Lord Selkirk No. 1 and No. 2 (1909 & 1912), La Verendrye (1909), Earl Grey (1914) and Laura Secord (1912).<sup>5</sup> These schools vary in exterior architectural detailing while using a common plan. Following a tragic school fire in Collingwood, Ontario, the elementary schools were two storeys in height for fire safety. The corridors were wide, 14 to 18 feet with metallic ceilings throughout. Exits front, back and side were well separated from each other. In the interests of fire safety, the schools were constructed of steel and brick, with floors of reinforced concrete and a stone foundation. The partition walls were brick, with the plaster laid on hollow tiles instead of lath. The stairs were made of iron. Heating and ventilation were also an important part of Mitchell's school design, demonstrated to the height of technological capacity in Laura Secord School.

Of particular interest in the high schools and older three-storey elementary schools was the new fire escapes. Large steel tubes, shaped in a gentle spiralling curve were connected to the building by iron

balconies. Manufactured and designed in Winnipeg by Vulcan Iron Works, these slide escapes could clear a school's population in two minutes. The overall design, special care and architecture detail of these J.B. Mitchell schools caused a school inspector from Toronto to remark "Winnipeg is especially to be congratulated on the liberal, vigorous and wholesome manner in which they have undertaken to teach and house their school children".<sup>6</sup>

Laura Secord School fits perfectly with this overall description. Erected in 1912-13 at a cost of \$208,000, the dimensions are 165 feet by 152 feet to a height of 72 feet.<sup>7</sup> Nearly square, the school is built around a large interior courtyard that makes the building exceptionally light and airy. Across the courtyard at ground level is the original shops covered with a long gabled skylight of fire glass. The school is two storeys high over a raised basement. It is made of a pale brick with a good deal of limestone trim and rustication. The front of the building, facing onto Wolseley Avenue, features symmetrical end pavilions each of three arched bays, and a tall central tower (now removed) that eased into an open portico with side staircases. The sides have large central pavilions with projecting stone porticos while the rear formerly had one large pedimented projection. These wall projections correspond with variations in the roofline. Semi-elliptical dormers peek out from what is essentially a mansard shape, originally outlined with iron cresting. Most of the attic is empty space supported by wooden rafters but the Ruby Street side contains several vacant rooms. This was the janitor's suite, with space for a family, and lit by extra windows onto the courtyard. With a narrow stairway that goes directly to the boiler room, the janitor could stoke up the boilers during the night to keep the school warm for the early morning.

Besides the careful exterior ornamentation, Laura Secord School also has some remarkable interior finishes. The iron balustrade of the stairways incorporates small plaque with school's initials on it. Each of the original classrooms has four long windows, each with a transom of beautiful stained glass. Several other windows in the school also have stained glass, such as the first floor offices. The crest of the school is executed in glass in a delightful little teachers' room at the base of the tower overlooking the roof of the portico. There is a large assembly hall on the south end which has a stage (and formerly had a small balcony) but also serves as the gymnasium. The corridors, which

are lit by the courtyard, are so broad that they are used as extra rooms for showing films, running races, etc. The spacious library, which occupies two former classrooms on the northeast corner, is also a pleasant feature. Careful layout and special consideration of interior spaces characterize the school's interior.

Architect Mitchell was especially concerned with the mechanical systems of his schools. Massive boilers, originally fuelled by coal, now produce steam heat from gas. Ventilation is a combination of air flow from the double sash windows and an elaborate state of the art mechanical system. Air sweeps into the school by a wind tunnel, passes over a tight grid of heated radiator to warm it and is then pushed by a huge electric fan into the ducts. An exchange system extracts the stale air and vents it at the rear of the building. Housed in the boiler rooms is the sub-basement of the school, the original equipment daily performs its routine function in this early system of air conditioning.

Laura Secord School was constructed by Thomas Kelly and Sons, the contractors who achieved great notoriety for their role in the Legislative Building scandal. The contractors were convicted in 1916 of defrauding the Manitoba government and were ordered to repay \$1.2 million.<sup>8</sup>

The School opened in September 1913. The school yard extends for an entire city block behind, purchased by the School Board at a cost of \$37,000.<sup>9</sup> Originally only 10 rooms were finished, with six more completed in January and the remainder of the school finished by the summer of 1914. The boundaries of the school's jurisdiction were Portage Avenue to the north, the Assiniboine River to the south, Chestnut Street to the east and Dominion Street to the west. In 1914, there were 774 pupils from Grades I to IX. In 1921, Wolseley School opened to take some of the pressure off Laura Secord and in 1960, all junior high classes, Grades VII to IX, were transferred to Gordon Bell School.

Pupils in the new Laura Secord School came from comfortable homes in the West End. The district, which was new in 1912, developed rapidly, and the school grew as a part of the thriving community. It was almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon in its ethnic composition and rigorously middle-class. From

the start, Laura Secord School was an integral part of the neighbourhood, with a high level of community involvement. Originally this was due in part to the first principal, who quickly established a firm relationship with the parents of his students. A.G. McArthur opened Laura Secord School as principal in 1913 and served the school with dedication until his retirement 25 years later in June 1938. McArthur was a vibrant, congenial man, active in sports and interested in music. Following the principal's retirement, a framed portrait of him was unveiled in the front hall of the school he had loved. From the response of students, teachers and officials in the crowd, it is obvious that they loved him as well.<sup>10</sup>

McArthur was succeeded by another principal of long-standing, Fred Baragar. Born in Ontario and a graduate of United College and University of Toronto, Principal Baragar also administered Laura Secord School with a populist's touch from 1938 to 1957. Besides his long hours in the school and community, Baragar was also a devout churchman who served as President of the Manitoba Teachers' Society.<sup>11</sup> His memory lives on at the school as the Baragar Memorial Library, an expansion of the regular library in Laura Secord School made in 1965.

Aileen Gunter maintained the tradition of the school's principal from 1961 to 1970. One of the first chairpersons of the Canadian College of Teachers, and a highly dedicated professional, Gunter was also greatly admired by her pupils.<sup>12</sup> The tradition of these strong and dedicated personalities, which continues to the present, has had a positive and formative effect on the history of the school.

When Laura Secord School first opened its doors in 1913, the basic curriculum for grades I to IV was reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, geography, singing, drawing and "elementary handwork". By Grade V, the girls had branched into sewing, the boys into bench work and both studied history. Grammar was added as a separate study in Grade VI, with geometry, cooking, forge and woodwork added in Grade VII.<sup>13</sup> Because of the large school yard and the proximity of the river, the pupils have enjoyed a dynamic sports program that is now tied with the City's Community Club on the south border of the school yard.

Beyond the quota of Christmas plays and teas, the students at Laura Secord School have historically

demonstrated particular intuitive and verve. Through the medium of Laura Lites, a school newspaper published from 1938 to 1957, we have a window in the activities of the student body. Through its mimeographed pages and student's drawings, we read of the school's involvement in gathering waste material for the war effort, of the nostalgia of a graduating class of Grade Nine's, of fighting the flood waters in their community in the flood of 1950, or the special delights of field days and class parties. Photographs of grinning gap-toothed children at sports and play, posed proudly to receive some special honour or cackling behind a fort of snow, animate the spirit of student body.

A special feature of Laura Secord School was the establishment of a School Board dental clinic there in the early years. As one of four clinics serving the city's school children, the dental clinic was one facet on a new holistic approach to education.<sup>14</sup>

In 1940, enrolment reached 1,013 students in 24 classes,<sup>15</sup> with morning and afternoon kindergarten classes added shortly thereafter. At this point, the neighbourhood was still extremely stable, with most of the students completing all their primary schooling at this one institution.<sup>16</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s there was a discernible shift in the student population as rents lowered in the district and many of the large houses were subdivided. Laura Secord School has been revitalized with an infusion of new ethnicities, symbolized with a mini-Folklorama held there in 1976. French immersion classes, a school band, nursery classes and computers demonstrate the school's remarkable ability to change with the times. The enrolment now rests at 402 pupils from nursery school to Grade VI.

The school is named for Laura Secord Ingersoll, a young Ontario woman who trekked through hostile American territory to warn Canadian troops of a planned ambush during the War of 1812. The incident occurred in 1813, but was for several decades a nearly forgotten event. After 1860, her legend grew, reaching a peak in 1910 with a monument erected to her memory in Queenston Heights. Her portrait was hung in Queen's Park and Laura Secord School established at Queenston.<sup>17</sup>

In the local school board's desire to name their schools after Canadian heroes, Laura Secord was an obvious choice.

The school has undergone some structural changes. The central tower was removed in the 1960s because it was structurally unsound and the rear of the school has suffered some alteration. The shops room in the centre of the courtyard has its skylight darkened and it is now a craft room. To bring the hallway's rear exits, and assembly hall into accordance with fire codes, all have had some modifications. Despite these changes, most of the school's exterior and a good deal of its layout and finishing is original to 1912. This further underlines the care that was taken in the design of these large schools.

It would be appropriate to compare these schools as the academic counterpart of the handsome banks on Main Street, the functionally elegant warehouses of the downtown or the masterful Legislative Buildings inasmuch as the same pride, confidence and big budget is reflected in all these building types. In a study of public school buildings across the province, Ivan Saunders observed that Winnipeg's "large, massively proportioned and extremely expensive elementary schools" demonstrate a commitment to offer citizens the best facilities possible for an enlightened education. In examining the period 1904 to 1914, to which Laura Secord School belongs, Saunders concludes:

The great economic prosperity enjoyed by Manitoba through most of its pre-war decade clearly produced a substantial growth in the size and quality of its schools...Winnipeg's energetic building program thrust Manitoba into the forefront of Canadian school building construction during the years 1904-14. It would appear that these architectural and administrative advances were the product of a prosperous maturing society able and willing to avail itself of the best of contemporary school construction technology.<sup>18</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. W.G. Pearce, M.A. Winnipeg School Days, 1871-1950 (condensation) (Winnipeg) c.1951, Chapter VI, p. 10.
2. Reports of the Superintendent of Public Schools, Sessional Papers, Department of Education, 1914, p. 207; 1916, p. 251 and 1917-18, p. 106-107.
3. Pearce, op. cit., p. 11.
4. "Winnipeg's School Building" Construction, November 1909, p. 67.
5. Ibid., also from Sessional Papers, op. cit., 1907 to 1914.
6. "Schools of the West" The Western School Journal, December 1909, Vol. 4, No. 10, p. 353.
7. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 1131, 10 May 1912. Laura Secord School opened in September 1913.
8. W.L. Morton Manitoba: A History University of Toronto Press (Toronto) 1979 (1957 first edition), p. 221.
9. "Winnipeg Schools", Manitoba Free Press, 15 November 1922.
10. Pearce, op. cit., p. 117.
11. "Frederick Drury Baragar M.C." obituary Winnipeg Free Press, 5 October 1964.
12. "Understanding and concern are parts of Aileen Gunter's professionalism" Our Schools 1976 Ewart-Morgan Scrapbook Collection p. 757, Teachers Library and Resource Centre, Winnipeg School Division No. 1.
13. Sessional Papers, op. cit., 1914, p. 207.
14. Sessional Papers, op. cit., 1917-18, p. 107.
15. Laura Lites Vol. III, No. III, p. 7.
16. Ibid., Vol. IX, June 1947, p. 3.
17. Frances P. Halpenny, general editor, Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. IX, University of Toronto Press (Toronto), 1976, p. 406.
18. Ivan J. Saunders, A Survey of Manitoba School Architecture to 1930 C.I.H.B. Research Bulletin No. 222, November 1984, p. 9 and 10.

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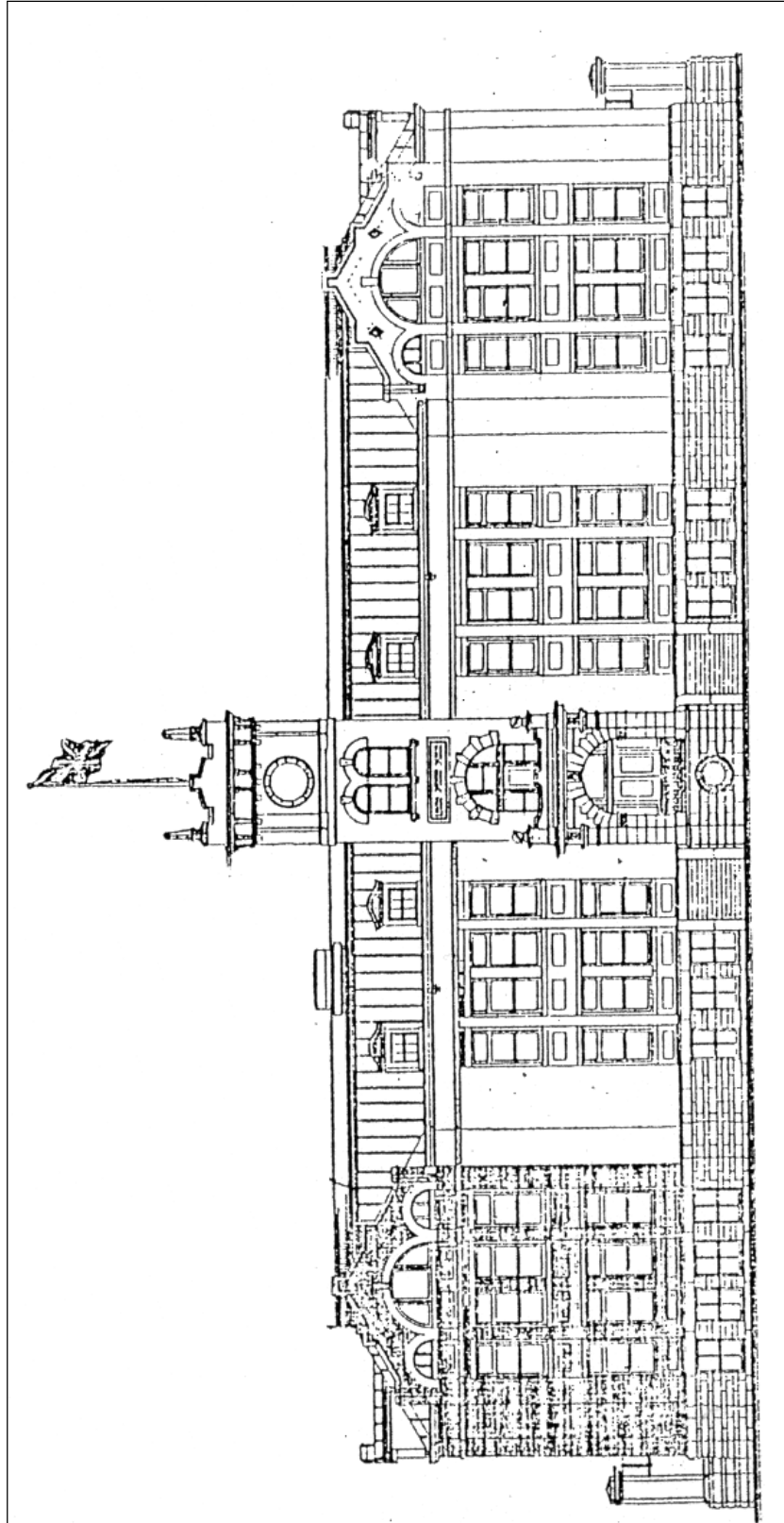


Plate 1 – A sketch of Laura Secord School, 1912. (Reproduced from Winnipeg Free Press, August 17, 1912.)

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Plate 2 - Laura Secord School, 960 Wolseley Avenue with its tower intact, 1915. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

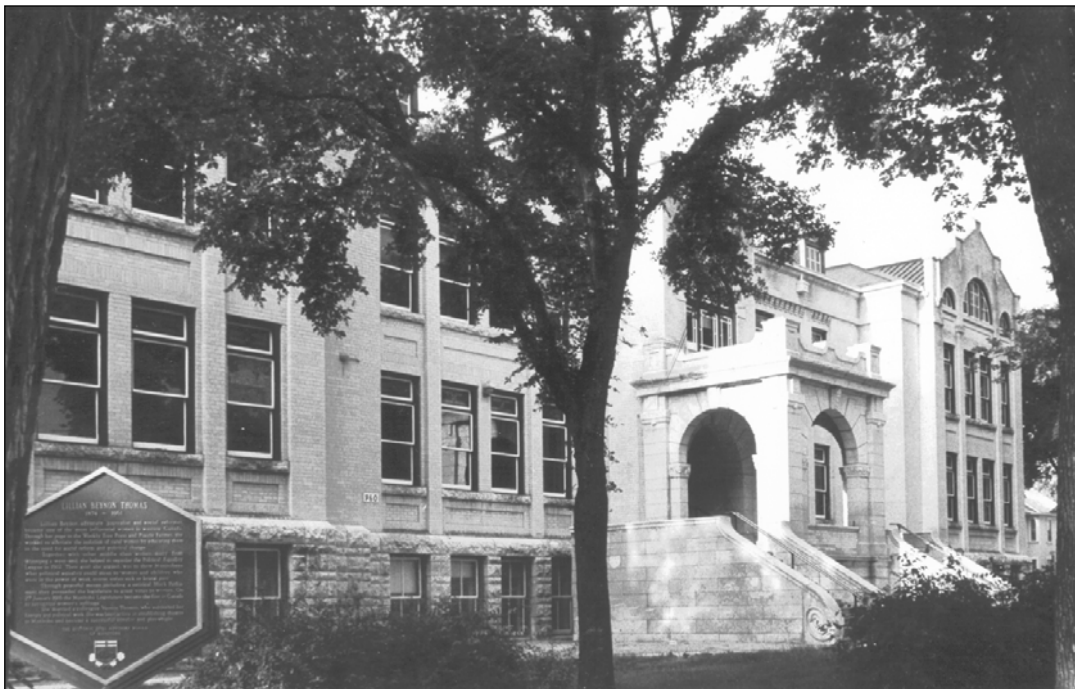


Plate 3 – Laura Secord School, no date. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 4 – Laura Secord School, rear façade, 1970. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)