



**86 ALBERT STREET (227 - 237 McDERMOT AVENUE)  
ALBERT BLOCK (FORMERLY THE MARIAGGI HOTEL)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

3 APRIL 1984

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When Frank Mariaggi opened his new restaurant in the new Alexandra Block in December, 1902, he caused quite a stir among Winnipeg restaurant patrons. When Mariaggi converted the rest of the building into a luxury hotel the next year, he dazzled them. With panache that bordered on genius, this Italian chef created both a restaurant and hotel that was the toast of the town for a few frenetic years.

The block had been erected in 1901, a combination of retail shop space and "bachelors quarters" on the upper two floors, the joint enterprise of two local investors and one shrewd developer. James Stewart Tupper, son of Sir Charles Tupper, a Father of Confederation, and his brother, William J. Tupper were then prominent Winnipeg lawyers. Born in Amherst, Nova Scotia in 1851, James Stewart was the eldest son of Nova Scotia's premier who had convinced a formidable opposition to accept union with the other British provinces in 1866-67.<sup>1</sup> After training in Ontario as a lawyer, J.S. Tupper came to Winnipeg in 1882, where he formed a law partnership with the son of another Father of Confederation, Sir Hugh John MacDonald. As younger brother, W.J. Tupper and others joined the firm, the name evolved from MacDonald, Tupper, Phiden and Tupper to Tupper, Tupper, McTavish and Company.<sup>2</sup> This firm specialized in corporate law, playing a prominent role in the burgeoning west by representing such companies as the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Bank of Montreal.<sup>2</sup> J.S. Tupper himself pleaded cases before the Supreme Court of both Canada and Great Britain. Appointed a King's Counsel in 1890, he was elected president of the Law Society of Manitoba in 1910.<sup>4</sup>

The younger William Johnston Tupper, who was born in West Halifax in 1862, followed in his brothers' footsteps'. He was honoured as a King's Counsel in 1912 and president of the \_\_\_\_\_ in 1931. He entered politics as a M.L.A. and was extremely active in the Conservative Party. In December, 1934, the Honourable W.J. Tupper was appointed Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba for a five year term, a tenure that included the royal visit of the King and Queen in 1939 on the eve of Britain's entry into World War II.<sup>5</sup>

To this esteemed and affluent partnership was added Walter Suckling, an aggressive Winnipeg entrepreneur who made a fortune in real estate development. Jointly, Suckling and the Tupper brothers financed the construction of the Alexandra Block in 1901, with the realtors company maintaining ownership of the building until at least 1906.<sup>6</sup>

The new block was designed by a Minneapolis architect named Fremont D. Oroff, about whom little is yet known. It was constructed by George Alsip, a contractor connected with the massive Winnipeg construction material firm of Alsip, Brick, Tile and Lumber Company. This firm, started in 1898, manufactured double the quantity of any other brick and tile company in Canada, supplying a booming building trade with a large variety of brick, hollow blocks, sewer pipe, terra cotta, tile and lath.<sup>7</sup>

As constructed in 1901, the new Alexandra Block looked nearly identical to its present appearance. Three storeys of red brick were trimmed with salmon coloured stone quarried on the Kettle River in north-eastern Manitoba. Measuring 113 feet by 66 feet and running back 95 feet, the brick walls and iron columns are supported by a stone foundation 18 inches thick. Three stores ran back from the facade along McDermot Avenue while the upper floors each contained 18 bachelor suites consisting of two or three rooms. With a passenger elevator, two fire escapes, steam heat and electric lights, the building was as comfortable and up-to-date as possible. The cost of its construction was \$52,000.<sup>8</sup>

Located on a wedge-shaped block radiating out from the Old Market Square, this building has an irregular shape angled down Albert Street. In order to give each suite ample natural light and ventilation, the architect cut three light-wells onto the structure, on each side above heavy masonry arches and across the front elevation in a cutaway on the second and third floors.

Using red brick to provide warmth and contrast with the buff brick of most of the warehouses, the architect used texture and a restrained design to make the building an attractive residence. Quoins and horizontal bands of brick are the only features of otherwise plain walls but the fenestration and

dentilled cornice provide visual interest. The two private entrances on Albert and Arthur Streets had a simple stone head of classical lines, while the projected retail space along McDermot Avenue had plate glass fronts with transoms. The south-east corner was angled back as it is now.

From a 1903 photograph of Mariaggi's Hotel, it seems that the ground floor shop fronts were not overly modified for the introduction of the restaurant, cafe and front desk. The main dining room, spacious and elegantly finished, had damask wall coverings with stencilled designs that gave it an old-world appearance. There were also smaller private dining rooms on the main floor. But what intrigued patrons more than this elegant décor and fine cuisine was the "grotto", a series of four small dining rooms and a bar in the basement.<sup>9</sup> Cave-like, the rooms were fashioned in sand and mortar knotted along the walls, a trembling pool where gold fish flashed in the low light. It was fantastic, weird and vaguely improper. Winnipeegers were drawn to it like magnets, in part because it was so different from the rest of their staid surroundings.

Using the success of his restaurant and the Grotto, Frank Mariaggi converted the rest of the building into a luxury hotel. With all the bachelors suites self-contained, there was little structural work involved. Instead Mariaggi concentrated on luxurious furnishings to complete his hotel: heavy Wilton velvet carpets, tinted walls, thick draperies, oak chairs covered in soft leathers, oriental divans and ornamental brass beds. When Winnipeg's first "European plan" hotel opened on 15 May, 1903, it was said to be without equal for luxury in Manitoba.<sup>10</sup>

As Mariaggi originally had built his reputation as a chef, he continued to pay special attention to the food served in his new hotel. He kept a farm near to the city where he raised the vegetables and poultry served in the restaurant. As well, he kept Jersey cows to provide fresh dairy produced for his patrons.

Born in Corsica, in 1847, Frank Mariaggi came to Winnipeg in 1870 with Colonel Wolseley's Red River Expedition that ousted Riel's provisional government. Mariaggi remained in Red River when the troops were disbanded, later spending several years in Alberta before returning to Winnipeg in

the 1890s. His activities in Winnipeg are unknown at this time but towards the turn of the century, he concentrated on a restaurant that gave him the base to open in the Alexandra in 1902. He operated Mariaggi's with the competent assistance of George Skinner, formerly with the St. Charles Hotel.

Mariaggi was clearly a fine chef, a strong promoter and innovative hotelier. He also made a tidy bundle on land dealings in Winnipeg and Port Arthur. Perhaps these strong qualities also led him away from the demanding hotel business because in 1908, he liquidated his assets, took his Canadian wife and returned to Corsica where he died ten years later.<sup>11</sup>

George Skinner carried on with the hotel and grotto for several years without Frank Mariaggi. In 1912, the new proprietor, T.B. Campbell, changed the name to the St. Andrew's Hotel. Undoubtedly, the grotto disappeared, and without the verve of its previous proprietors, the hotel closed in 1915. It reopened in 1917 with three shops across the front,<sup>12</sup> as originally intended, and the upper floors reclassified as apartments.

The Albert Block has approximately 40 suites in it, corresponding to the 40 suites of the Mariaggi Hotel. It has been home to a variety of tenants since its illustrious early years.

The commercial space along McDermot Avenue has also seen a variety of occupants. Among these are professional offices, manufacturers' agents space and textile wholesales. Max Guberman's Continental Clothing store has been in the building for decades. The present spatial patterns follow closely along the early layout of the retail space.

Today the Albert Block remains an integral part of the warehouse district. In its early years, the Mariaggi Hotel offered a European flavour to the Winnipeg scene that was unique. The Corsican hotelier symbolizes the range of personality and entrepreneurial spirit drawn by Winnipeg's emergence as the metropolis of the Canadian west.

FOOTNOTES:

1. W.L. Morton The Kingdom of Canada McClelland and Stewart Limited. Toronto 1963 p. 316.
2. Frank Schofield The Story of Manitoba Vol. III. The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co. Winnipeg 1913 p. 348.
3. Loc. at:
4. C.W. Parker, ed. Who's Who and Why Vol. II. Canadian Press Association Canada 1912 p. 589.
5. B.M. Greene, ed. Who's Who in Canada 1940-41. International Press Limited. Toronto 1941 p. 1231.
6. "Walter Sucking and Company" Winnipeg Telegram 18 September 1906, p. 17.
7. "Alsip Brick, Tile & Lumber Company, Ltd." Telegram, op, cit., p. 60.
8. City of Winnipeg Building Permits No. 122 24 April 1901. W.B. Lait was the supervising architect. See also "Winnipeg's New Buildings of 1901" Manitoba Free Press 25 November 1901 p. 9.
9. "Winnipeg's First European Hotel" Winnipeg Town Topics 25 April 1903 p. 15.
10. Loc. cit.
11. "Mariaggi Dead" Manitoba Free Press 14 March 1918.
12. There was a computing scale shop, Logan Paint and Glass Company in the long centre shop and William McLelland printers in the west section. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg, 1918.

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Plate 1 – The Mariaggi Hotel, 1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

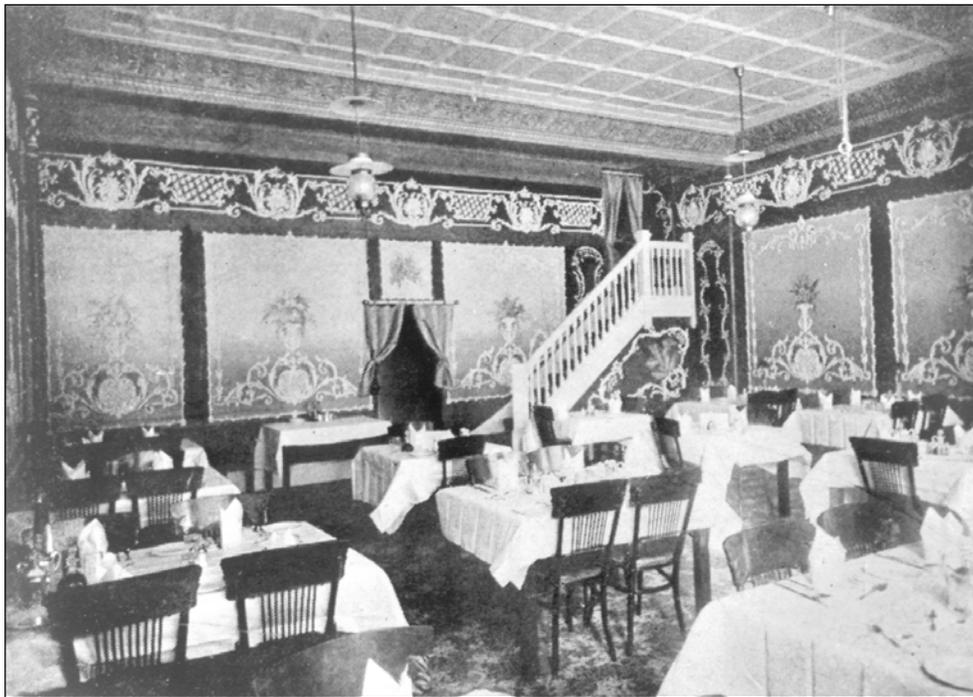


Plate 2 – Main dining room, Mariaggi Hotel, 1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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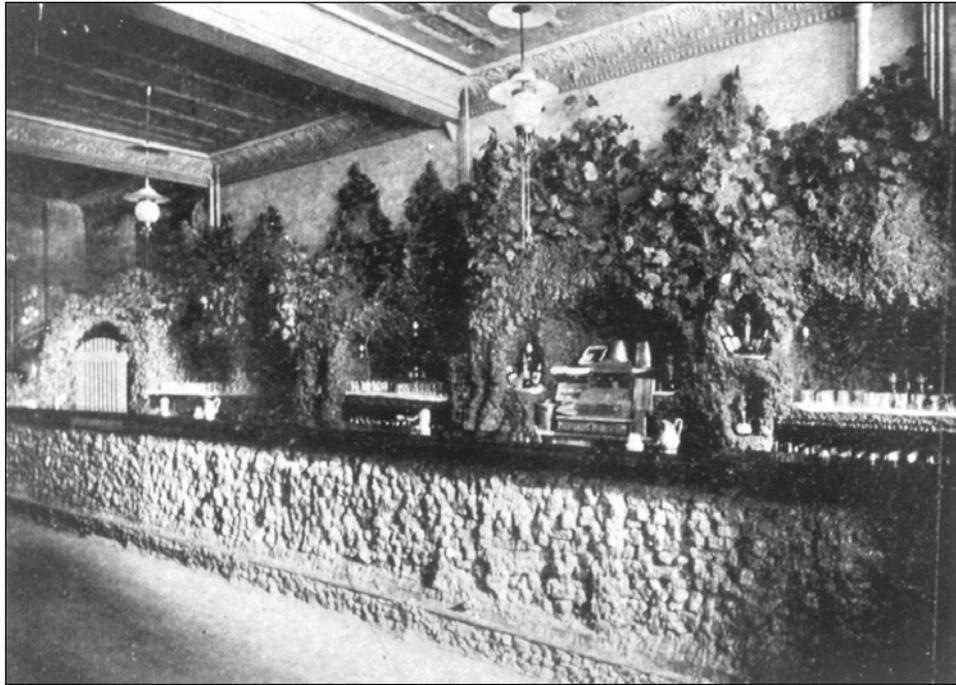


Plate 3 – Bar in the “Grotto” at the Mariaggi Hotel, 1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – A private dining room in the “Grotto” at the Mariaggi Hotel, 1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 5 – A bachelors' dinner in one of the private dining rooms of the Mariaggi Hotel, 1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 6 – One of the private suites at the Mariaggi Hotel, 1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 7 – Warehouse District, ca.1905 with the Mariaggi Hotel at arrow. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 8 – McDermot Avenue looking west, ca.1905. (M. Peterson Collection.)

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Plate 9 – The Albert Block, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 10 – The Albert Block, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)