

511 CLIFTON STREET SOUTH – WOLSELEY SCHOOL
J.N. SEMMENS, 1921



The first few decades of the twentieth century were quite a challenge for the Winnipeg School Division. Its programs, teaching staff and classroom facilities were constantly pushed to new limits by a rapidly growing student body.

Enrolment pressures were driven to some extent by the introduction of compulsory attendance and a lack of employment alternatives in years when the economy was poor. But the main impetus came from demographic factors. Winnipeg's population more than quadrupled between 1901 and 1921. Typical of developing societies, the city was filled with children and young adults in the process of forming new families. More than 80 per cent of residents were under 45 years of age and about three-tenths ranged from infancy to 14 years. Not even during the post-1945 "baby boom" was the population again so weighted toward the young.

Two personalities were instrumental in guiding the division's response to this context. Superintendent Daniel McIntyre (1852-1946) and Building and Supply Agent James Bertram Mitchell (1852-1945) worked together for four decades to establish an educational system noted for its safe, well-designed buildings, among other advances.

Mitchell personally planned many of those structures, but in 1920 he turned to a local architect and military colleague, Colonel John Nelson Semmens, for assistance. Over the next two years, Semmens designed eight one-storey buildings for the division. Among them was Wolseley School in West Winnipeg where two other elementary facilities, Isaac Brock and Laura Secord, needed relief from overcrowding.

The one-storey bungalow style had been adopted by Mitchell in 1918-19 as a quick and economic means of providing temporary classroom space. His buildings were finished with locally produced yellow and grey sand-lime brick and minimal ornamentation. In contrast, the Semmens schools were to be permanent and thus required more attention to exterior details. Use of imported red tapestry brick and stone accents immediately distinguished this group from its 1918-19 predecessors. To help offset the additional costs of ornamentation, building plans became more standardized and foundation systems were based primarily on concrete posts and beams. Only small basements were provided for utility and maintenance purposes.

Of the three bungalow schools build in 1921, Wolseley was the largest and its construction and site costs, at \$75,000 and \$49,084 respectively, were the highest. The nine-room, L-shaped building was erected by the Sutherland Construction Co. on a 1.5-hectare site bound by Clifton Street South, Wolseley Avenue, and lanes off both Clifton and Camden Place.

The school has a concrete foundation, solid brick walls, flat roof, and stone-capped parapet punctuated by delicate brick columns with stone caps. The large, rectangular, multi-paned classroom windows are set in plain wooden frames and underlined by smooth-cut stone lug sills. The two main entrances project slightly from the south (Wolseley) facing. They are topped by pointed and layered stone arches, stone crests and a quasi-basement effect at the parapet.

Both the north and south ends of the west wing feature a recessed solid brick arch with a wide stone sill and pointed drip-moulding. Above is a brick gable with stone capping and a keystone. The wing's outer wall is in two sections joined by an angled bay containing a narrow solitary light.

Further detailing is provided by a belt course that runs above the windows, brick buttresses with stone caps, and a stone name-plate. Interior classrooms, offices and other spaces are situated off a wide central corridor. Finishes include dark wood trim and light maple floors.

An auditorium was added to the school's northeast corner in 1959. Eleven years later, an entrance near the northwest corner was closed so the area could be converted to a classroom. A two-part City of Winnipeg complex, the Wolseley Recreation Centre, is connected to the north side of the auditorium. When needed, portable classrooms also are placed in this area. Foundation repairs have been required over the years due to settlement of the original west wall.

This school was named after Colonel Garnet Joseph Wolseley (1833-1913), a career British officer who led the military expedition sent from eastern Canada in 1870 to take control of the new province of Manitoba. Wolseley later (1895-1900) headed the British army.

Architect Semmens (1880-1961) was born in Toronto and trained at the University of Pennsylvania. He opened an office in Winnipeg in 1910 and went on to plan many commercial, residential and institutional buildings in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, including numerous schools. For a brief period in the latter 1930s, he was joined by a nephew, Harold N. Semmens, then for a few years prior to retirement in the 1950s, he practised with John S. Allison. His military career included a stint as an officer under Mitchell's command in the 100th Regiment, Winnipeg Grenadiers, and active service during both world wars.

Wolseley School is one of five surviving bungalow-style buildings out of the 16 built in 1918-21. One is slated to be demolished. Wolseley and Florence Nightingale are still used as elementary facilities by the Winnipeg division, while Anna Gibson and Sir Sam Steele schools house educational programs run by other institutions.