



281-285 DONALD STREET

METROPOLITAN THEATRE

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

20 OCTOBER 1986

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METROPOLITAN THEATRE

Constructed in 1919, on a wave of motion picture palace construction across North America, this is the only theatre of its genre remaining in its original form in Winnipeg. The Metropolitan, opened in 1920 as the Allen Theatre, is our latest glittering remnant still intact from the golden years of the silver screen. Its competitors, the glorious Capitol Theatre, the Lyceum and the Gaiety have either been demolished or sectioned into smaller theatres. The Odeon, still proud and elegant, was converted at a later date from live stage as the Walker Theatre to a motion picture house. Of all these, only the Metropolitan survives intact.

Located on Donald Street south of Portage Avenue, the theatre is across from the mammoth Eaton's store. While the store was already erected when the new theatre was constructed, the east side of Donald Street was cluttered with a series of small shops; a tailor, a billiard hall, a Chinese merchant and a florist. The various lots were purchased from the lane on the north side up to a small restaurant which borders on the Holy Trinity property, thereby establishing the present composition of the block.

The theatre was constructed as part of a national chain of Allen movie houses, owned and operated by brothers Jay J. and Jules Allen and backed by their father Bernard (Barney) Allen. When this theatre opened in 1920, the Allen chain was the biggest of all the Canadian chains, and the most dominant.¹ From Vancouver to the Maritimes, the Allen Theatres were a string of glittering jewels, touted in their advertisements as an "all Canadian Achievement."² With either British or American origins (sources there are contradictory), the Allens moved to Brantford, Ontario in 1906 where they opened a small movie theatre.

These were the days when movie houses were generally viewed as disreputable fire-traps, patronized by the lower classes and offering paltry and even sordid entertainment. It took vision and keen instinct, to see a future beyond, but for those who took the risks, the rewards were just around

the corner. Movie theatres were being built safer, larger and more comfortable, while the motion picture technology produced longer, more sophisticated films with talented actors and gripping plots.

The Allens capitalized on this momentum, opening first a film exchange, the Allen Amusement Corporation in 1908 and their first luxury theatre in Calgary in 1913.³ With construction more or less suspended during the war years, the next Allen project was a large and glamorous theatre opened in Toronto in 1917. It was this new movie house that sparked a theatre-building war between the Allens and their biggest competitors, the Nathanson circuit, which was soon to become Famous Players Theatres. These post-war buildings were the dawn of a new era. Theatres were large, luxurious and built to more stringent safety codes while theatre-going had evolved into a respectable and accepted pastime. The two big chains leap-frogged each other across the country, constructing large and costly movie palaces, splitting markets and loyalties, but building excitement and attendance.

By 1919, when their Winnipeg Allen Theatre was built, the Allen circuit led the Canadian scene with 45 theatres across the country. Not all of these were in their name, for example, as the nine Allen theatres in Toronto were named the Danforth, Parkdale, Beach, Beaver, St. Clair, Bloor, College and Royal as well as the original Allen.⁴ What they all had in common was the same architect, C. Howard Crane of Detroit, and a similar architectural style.

C. Howard Crane, also the architect of the Winnipeg Allen Theatre, belonged to a firm by the name of Elmer George Kichler and Associates. While both Crane and the company were American, Crane opened a Canadian office in Windsor, Ontario to attend to his many projects north of the border.⁵

Crane adopted and enlarged upon neo-classical motifs established for picture palace design in the United States by leading American movie palace architect Charles Lamb. Lamb, trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition of opera-house design, continued the neo-classical design on his numerous Canadian projects. Between 1916 and 1921, Lamb designed 16 large movie palaces for the

Nathanson/Famous Player chain across the country, including Winnipeg's grand Capitol Theatre which opened only a few months after the Allen Theatre. Having erected many of the largest and most famous theatres in the United States, such as the Regent, Mark Strand and Capitol Theatres in New York,⁶ Lamb recycled his basic successful design in Canada without thinking adaptation to be necessary. As his chief competition C. Howard Crane accepted the style which Lamb had previously established, as the two squared off in movie theatre design across Canada.

Basically, from about 1912 to 1922, the Adams style was exclusively employed by both Lamb and Crane, and became definitive to theatre design in that era. The façades of the buildings were symmetrical, repeating low-relief classical ornamentation and figuring prominently the Palladian-type windows of Adams design. Interior spaces were luxurious, even opulent in their faithful reproduction of key Adamesque elements: classical plaster detailing, muted and complimentary colours, a sense of spaciousness and special attention to ceiling details. Mirrors, brocades, crystal and plaster ornamentation on the walls created the appropriate illusion. Like the exotic and wide ranging styles of picture palaces built later in the 1920s and 1930s, the theatre itself had become a source of entertainment as well as a suitable setting for the dazzling images of the modern screen. As to the recycling of theatre design across the country, Crane himself observed that "experience is the best teacher and it directs the architect through specialization in the development of each succeeding scheme to obtain the best possible result."⁷

Crane's Winnipeg Allen Theatre fit nicely into this national genre. The upper portion of the façade is unchanged from its construction in 1919. Constructed of brick over a steel frame, the exterior ornamentation is terra cotta. The arched windows with fanlights are framed by fluted pilasters. Each window has a wrought-iron faux balcony, the windows topped by swags of terra cotta. The low relief cornice features urns and a series of frieze details, capped by a plain brick parapet. The ground floor, however, was originally very different. To offset the expense of the theatre's construction and operating costs, shops were installed on the ground floor, two on either side of the theatre entrance in the centre. These shops, although small and shallow in depth, featured large store-front windows that opened up their interior space and made them attractive to passers-by. Almost immediately the

partitions were removed to make only one shop on either side. For a couple of decades the store at 285 Donald Street housed a confectionery, a natural adjunct to the theatre, while 283 Donald Street contained a blouse shop, a barber, Robert S. Ramsey Optician and later a music store in the 1940s.⁸

The arrangement of the ground floor interior was obviously also different. The box office was in the centre and patrons circulated to either side to a much smaller foyer than at present. There was a small concession to the rear, similar to its present position. The twin grand staircases invited patrons up to the mezzanine promenade, which effectively funnelled circulation to the balcony, long thought to be necessary in theatre design.⁹ It was on this second floor promenade that the show really began. Lit by the elegant arched windows, the room is much longer than it is wide (120 feet by 30 feet). It features classical plaster ornaments, various garlands and theatrical grotesques on the walls and ceiling. Mirrors and wall sconce lighting lighten the space while the portion of the promenade nearest to the auditorium features a barrel-vault ceiling which gives a special feeling to what could otherwise be a dead area beyond the staircases. At either end of the promenade were the ladies restroom and a gentleman's smoking room, each elaborately furnished.

Designed and furnished by "T. Jagmin, an expert in classical art",¹⁰ the promenade itself was graced with large overstuffed chesterfields, comfortable chairs and writing desks. Patrons were dazzled with a small fountain and live orange trees. The colours were very Adamesque: ivory, gold, and old rose with French grey trimmings,¹¹ which corresponds exactly with Lamb's preferred colour scheme.¹² The furnishings were elegant and luxurious, contributing to the total effect of a visit to the theatre as far more than simply seeing a show. Patrons came early and lingered after; the decor was intended to be appreciated more than simply in passing.

Access to the auditorium, which seated nearly 2,500 in all, was broken down into four main portals, two on the ground floor and two on the balcony floor. Beneath a huge domed ceiling, constructed of plaster over metal lath, and hung with a massive chandelier, the auditorium had a sloping ground floor and a cantilevered balcony that seated about 1,000. There are no columns to block the view and the seats are arranged in a curve around the proscenium. The walls continued the plasterwork

and particular attention was paid to the walls behind the loges on either side. Fretwork screens hid the pipes for the theatre organ, as well as concealing ventilation ductwork. The dome itself also contained a good portion of the sophisticated mechanical system.

Measuring 60 feet wide and 40 feet high, the elaborately detailed proscenium contained a shallow stage, the screen, and an orchestra pit for about 15 musicians tucked into its curving stage. A heavy velvet curtain, scalloped and tasselled, was worked from pulleys and sandbags backstage.

The loge seats were wicker, while the seats in the rest of the theatre represented the state of the art in design. Each seat moved independently so patrons would not disturb their neighbours. Aisle lights were a new safety feature, while the lighting of the auditorium represented many years of experimenting for a particular effect. Indirect lighting on the walls and at the base of the dome maintained a safe level of illumination as the picture rolled without interfering with the screen. When the house lights went up, rheostats brought up the side lights, while the dome was bathed in amber, red and blue lights. Wilton carpets on the aisles and walkways helped to muffle the sound.¹³

“Going to the movies” was a slightly different experience in the 1920s than at present. Because the films were much shorter (generally only two or three reels long), other entertainment was offered as well. The movies were silent, and had to be accompanied by live music. This was provided either by a small orchestra, ten to fifteen musicians playing from the pit at the end of the stage, or by the organ. These were not the lowly church organ, but the “Mighty Wurlitzers” of yesterday. Massive pipe organs with a full rich sound, they were also capable of simultaneously voicing several other symphony instruments.¹⁴ Both the organ and the orchestra were the pride of each theatre. The Allen/Metropolitan Theatre advertised in advance which musical pieces were offered as interludes beyond any “score” which the bank leader chose to accompany the feature film. Because the movie theatres were competing with vaudeville at the time, they also offered short vaudeville acts before each feature film. However shallow this stage may have appeared, it was large enough and technologically capable of displaying live acts. The backstage control panel, which is still intact, recalls this vaudeville era. If the musical compositions, live acts and feature films were not enough, short

films and news reels completed the varied bill of fare. It was an exciting entertainment package, appropriately set in a grand environment.

Thousands of Winnipeggers caught this excitement at the formal opening of the new Allen Theatre on 2 January 1920. The theatre was planned to be opened on Christmas Day, but to the great consternation of the management, the interior was not finished nor had the organ been installed. Still, the orchestra was on hand, the marquee flashed with coloured lights, the “usherettes” were striking in crisp black and white uniforms, the loges were draped with British flags and the Mayor and Dignitaries were primed. Comments ranged from describing the “fairy-like sight” of the interior to the Mayor’s declaration that the new theatre was the largest and finest in the country. Barney Allen, the father of the theatre’s owners, beamed delight while an “amusing farce” called “Upstairs” was screened.¹⁵

The theatre was a runaway success. While its main competitor, Famous Players’ Capitol Theatre opened only a year later, there were more than enough movie fans to go round. It offered four shows a day and advertised that its orchestra played each afternoon and evening, supplemented by the pipe organ.

But if the Winnipeg Allen Theatre was successful, the chain as a whole was in trouble. Because they were exclusively a Canadian firm, the Allens floated shares from local investors, and by 1922, they were seriously overextended. Meanwhile, N.L. Nathanson’s Famous Player Canadian Corporation had negotiated American backing in 1920 with the support of several of the big-name studio franchises. As the Allens weakened in the theatre opening battle, they fell prey to their well-financed competitors. In 1923, Famous Players acquired the Allen Theatre Corporation for a fraction of its value, leaving Famous Players in a near-monopoly situation.¹⁶ This theatre was renamed the Metropolitan in 1923.

Famous Players continued to buy up small chains and independent theatres throughout the 1920s, and it soon controlled first-run theatres in all the major cities. In fact, in his history of Canadian

cinema, Peter Morris noted that “the stifling control by Famous Players Canadian Corporation of the film industry in Canada was to lead, in 1930, to an investigation under the Combines Investigation Act. Despite the mass of evidence and the persuasive conclusion by Commissioner Peter White in 1931 that Famous Players Canadian Corporation’s operations were detrimental to the public interest, no remedial action resulted.”¹⁷ By 1981, the company owned 400 screens across the country. In Winnipeg alone, they own the Capitol, the Metropolitan, the Colony, the Northstar, Garden City, and Polo Park Cinema.¹⁸

The 1920s were also years of great change in the production as well as the distribution of films. “Talking” pictures came to Winnipeg in 1928, and quickly replaced the expensive live orchestras and Wurlitzers. The Metropolitan was fitted with speakers, which have been upgraded to its present dual-Dolby sound system. The large projectors, three in number, have also been improved. Movies were also longer, and now came almost entirely from Hollywood.

The major change to the Metropolitan Theatre came with the alteration of the ground floor in 1948. Architects Green, Blankstein and Russell removed the two flanking shops and the centre box office to its present arrangement. The ceiling was dropped, the candy counter enlarged and two new entrances to the auditorium opened. No major changes were made to the auditorium except for the loss of a few seats in the back, and the mezzanine was mainly untouched.¹⁹

Over the years, the theatre ran first-run films to large audiences. The post-war years brought two major changes to this and other downtown theatres, however. The most devastating change was the introduction of television, an inexpensive entertainment in people’s homes. The second change was the growth of Winnipeg’s suburbs, where small local theatres were constructed, siphoning off the business of the older downtown theatres. In 1954, when television was first introduced to this city, Winnipeg supported 46 movie theatres for a much smaller population. The Metropolitan fought back, continuing to show good quality films and maintaining its schedule of 6 screenings daily well into the 1970s.²⁰ It now operates on a much smaller schedule.

Despite the modern façade, the most impressive features of the original picture palace are still intact: the auditorium with its huge dome, balcony and loges, and the elegant mezzanine promenade. This second area is still gracious, furnished with comfortable furniture and recently painted with great care given to the elaborate plasterwork. The Metropolitan remains a grand old movie theatre.

FOOTNOTES

1. Peter Morris Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema 1895 - 1939, McGill-Queen's University Press (Montreal), p. 22.
2. Ad for the Allen Theatre chain reproduced in Hillary Russell All That Glitters: A Memorial to Ottawa's Capitol Theatre and its Predecessors, Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History No. 13, Parks Canada (Ottawa 1975), p. 85.
3. Russell, op. cit., p. 36.
4. Ibid., p. 41.
5. From the plans of the Allen Theatre, City of Winnipeg Plan No. 982, 1919.
6. Russell, op. cit., p. 47.
7. C. Howard Crane, "The New Allen Theatre, Toronto", Construction 1918, Vol. XI, No. 2, p. 29.
8. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg 1923, 1925, 1929, 1932, 1936, 1941, 1945.
9. Crane, op. cit., p. 40.
10. "The New Allen Opens Christmas Day," Manitoba Free Press, 29 November 1919, p. 5.
11. Loc. cit.
12. Russell, op. cit., p. 49.
13. "Thousands Attend Dedication Night at New Allen Theatre," Manitoba Free Press, 3 January 1920.
14. Russell, op. cit., p. 79. Also, "Thousands Attend Dedication Night at New Allen Theatre," Manitoba Free Press, op. cit. The organ was said to be capable of equalling a 200 piece orchestra in volume and tone.
15. Loc. cit. Also, "Allen Theatre Opens its Doors to Huge Crowds," Winnipeg Telegram, 3 January 1920.
16. Morris, op. cit., p. 92.
17. Ibid., p. 176-177.
18. "Famous Players marks 60th Year," Winnipeg Sun, 23 January 1981, p. 15.

19. City of Winnipeg Building Permits No. 982, 16 August 1919; No. 328, 14 February 1945 and No. 3298 (and plans), 29 June 1948. The cost of the 1948 renovations was \$40,000.

20. Advertisement for Metropolitan Theatre, Winnipeg Free Press, 3 March 1972.

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Plate 1 – The Allen Theatre, now the Metropolitan Theatre, Donald Street, 1919. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N9863.)

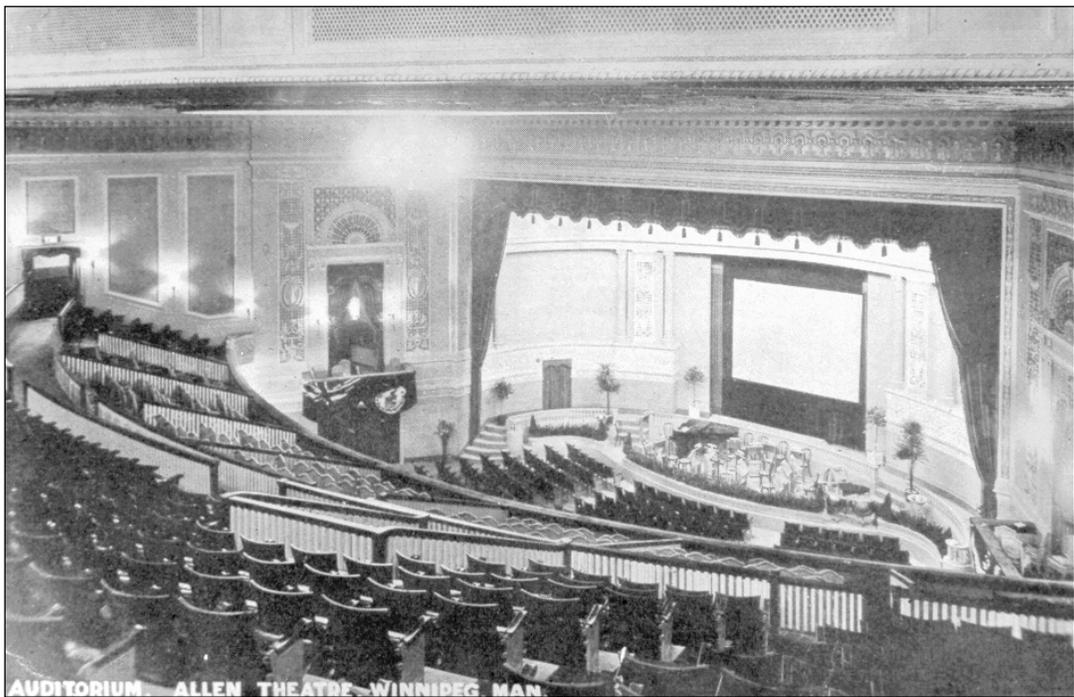


Plate 2 – Auditorium of the Allen Theatre, Donald Street, ca. 1922. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N9862.)

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Plate 3 – Orchestra pit of the Allen Theatre, ca. 1920. The organ is between the palm trees on the left side. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index.)



Plate 4 – The Metropolitan Theatre in 1959, showing the alterations to the ground floor completed in 1948. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)