

26 EDMONTON STREET – J.W. HARRIS HOUSE
James Chisholm, 1902



The solid brick, Queen Anne Revival house at 26 Edmonton Street serves as a reminder of a time when this part of downtown Winnipeg was a fashionable residential district.

Upon the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada in 1869-70, the region's former commercial power, the Hudson's Bay Company, retained a substantial tract of land adjacent to its Upper Fort Garry base on Main Street. The company tried various strategies to maximize returns from development of this holding, called the Hudson's Bay Reserve. One of its successes was to establish an exclusive residential district along Broadway filled with substantial single-family dwellings, terraces and apartment blocks.

The first owner of 26 Edmonton Street, John Walter Harris, was well attuned to the value of property in the Reserve because of his experience as Winnipeg's assessment commissioner.

A native of Oxford Township in Ontario's Grenville County, Harris (1845-1926) had come to Manitoba in 1873 as a Dominion land surveyor. He prepared Winnipeg's 1879 and 1880 tax assessment rolls, but failed to keep the position in 1881 after seeking a salary increase. He had more than enough private surveying commissions to compensate, however, as southern Manitoba was then in the midst of a speculative property boom. Harris was rehired as one of three assessors in February 1882 and by year's end had secured the dual appointment of assessment commissioner and city surveyor. Through to retirement in April 1916, he was among a handful of officials who played pivotal roles in shaping the early civic administration.

During his tenure, personal property taxation was replaced by a system of business assessments based on annual rental values. Local improvement assessments and a new method of voter registration were introduced. As well, special sectional surveys were done to correct past errors that had hampered orderly development. The responsibilities of his office greatly expanded after 1900 when rapid urban growth multiplied the value of property in Winnipeg and required the surveying of many new streets and sites for other public infrastructure such as parks and fire halls.

Harris was a founder, secretary (1881-1904) and president (1907, 1916) of the Association of Provincial (later Manitoba) Land Surveyors. He invested privately in numerous property and business ventures. He also was an active Mason, a timer or judge at many athletic events, and an avid promoter of the sport of baseball. After retirement, he served on the Board of Valuation and Revision and self-published a mathematics book.

His diaries, preserved by the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, reveal someone who was principled, practical, intolerant of mediocrity, unafraid of controversy, and open to new ideas. The modestly ornamented house at 26 Edmonton was in keeping with his no-nonsense personality. Other period dwellings in the Queen Anne Revival style often displayed highly picturesque arrays of architectural elements, materials and colours to animate otherwise flat wall

surfaces and roof-lines. The Harris House by architect James Chisholm was more subdued, yet still tastefully detailed.

Chisholm (1840-1920) was born in Paris, Upper Canada. He farmed in Glengarry County and studied architecture at London, Ontario before moving to Winnipeg in 1877. He interrupted his design career to spend about a decade in Wisconsin (1892-1901) as a preacher for the Methodist Episcopal Church. After reopening a local office, he developed an extensive portfolio, including architectural commissions in other prairie provinces. He was joined in c.1907 and eventually succeeded by his son, Colin Campbell Chisholm (1883-1936). Among their Winnipeg projects were the Sterling Bank Building, Young and Sparling Methodist churches, Strathcona, Granite and Thistle curling rinks, and Marlborough and La Salle hotels.

The brick Harris House was built in 1902 for \$6,500 by William Brydon and F. Powell. It extends 2.5 storeys from a raised stone foundation and contains four bedrooms. Its most striking element is the complex, high-pitched hip roof, the lines of which are broken by a cross gable on the north side and dormers on the other elevations. The east- or front-facing dormer stands out because of the use of returned eaves, bracketing and wood siding.

Other surviving highlights include stone accents around windows and doors, a brick string course, stained glass in the large main-floor front window, a south-side bay window with an unusual glass roof, and enclosed eaves with ornamental bracketing. The interior contains well-appointed oak woodwork, including intricately carved filigree at the bay window.

Lost from the design is a front porch that once wrapped around to the main entrance on the home's north side. After the porch was removed in 1954, a below-grade concrete wall and basement door were installed, as were concrete steps and an open, two-storey frame porch at the northeast corner. The rear wooden staircase, deck and fire escape also are non-original.

These changes, plus alterations to the interior, coincided with the building's use as a boarding house from the 1920s onward. The property was converted to offices after being purchased in 1977 by William Hanuschak and Associates Ltd. Heating and electrical systems were upgraded and the interior layout was restored. This recycling enabled 26 Edmonton Street to weather the

post-1945 transformation of much of the Broadway area into a high-rise commercial office and apartment district.