



379 HARGRAVE STREET
AMBASSADOR APARTMENTS
(FORMERLY BREADALBANE APARTMENTS)

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

30 November 1985

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Rounding the corner of the intersection of Hargrave Street and Cumberland Avenue is a large elegant building known as the Ambassador Apartments. This structure is best viewed from Cumberland, providing an impressive sight of a handsome design and clean lines. Traffic patterns have altered this view considerably now that vehicles only travel north along Hargrave Street. The flatiron appearance at the corner of the block opens quickly into a wedge that ultimately forms a V-shape, thanks to a cut-out section at the rear of the block.

The building, originally called the Breadalbane Apartments, was constructed in 1909. It was the project of an interesting partnership of two Winnipeg men, J.M. McArthur and James Fisher. Mr. McArthur, the better known of the two, was a developer and a contractor, fully accustomed to tackling large projects and taking financial risks. James Fisher was a lawyer, a cautious and sober man unused to the perils of the open market. As the major investor however, he had chosen a suitable partner in McArthur. It was a profitable union, and likely quite an interesting one.

John D. McArthur was one of those Ontario born entrepreneurs who were instrumental in the development of the western business scene. He arrived in Winnipeg in 1879, on the eve of the big railway boom, and worked on railway gangs. He later subcontracted the building of small railway line portions in the early 1880s. By 1889, his contracting firm was large enough to tender successfully on the Northern Pacific and Manitoba railway line between Winnipeg and Emerson.¹ Building his contracting firm steadily with each success, he eventually controlled such projects as a 250-mile section of Grand Trunk Pacific to the Lakehead, 500 miles of CPR track and the Canadian Northern line between Humboldt and Edmonton. A driving and ambitious man, McArthur operated a large lumber and timber business in Manitoba and British Columbia as well as operating a contracting firm. Among his real estate projects was the McArthur Building (now the Childs Building) at the corner of Portage and Main. Described as a "hustling railway contractor" by the Free Press in 1905, the adjective "pioneer" was substituted before "railway contractor" upon his death in 1927.²

When he joined with James Fisher on the Breadalbane Apartment project in 1909, McArthur was also in the throes of constructing the McArthur Building. For Fisher, it was the biggest speculative construction venture of his career. A good measure of the significance of the project lies in Fisher's naming of the apartment. Breadalbane is a district in the Central Highlands of Scotland, where Fisher was born. The district in turn derived its name from the Earl of Breadalbane, the title given a Scottish warrior by the name of John Campbell. In the years of warring clans, Campbell assumed the role of reconciling some of the other chieftains to English rule in 1690, acting somewhat as a conciliator for the Crown (which makes the name Ambassador Apartments appropriate).³ The name Breadalbane surfaced again with the seventh earl, who rose in Court ranks to be Lord High Commissioner to the Church of Scotland and Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal of Scotland from 1907 to 1922.⁴

Born in Scotland in 1840, James Fisher came to Winnipeg in 1883 after spending several years in Ontario. He became a lawyer in Ontario in 1866 but was appointed to the King's Council in Manitoba in 1893. His law firm was the chief solicitor for the railway entrepreneur James Hill, which provided Fisher's contact with J.D. McArthur.⁵

To construct their apartment enterprise, McArthur and Fisher chose architect John Woodman, and contractors MacQuarrie and McLeod. Woodman also had strong railroad connections, having been the Chief Engineer for the CPR's Western Division for many years (see Appendix I). Working on a wedge-shaped lot, Woodman designed the apartment building to maximize the street views and the natural light. The block, made of brick masonry walls and reinforced concrete floors, is five storeys high. Heavy rains plagued Winnipeg in the summer of 1909, hindering the progress of construction and ultimately causing a serious accident on the site. With the foundation walls complete, the ground floor slab was poured over the beam in a board framework. After the concrete had been poured to the floor, it was thought that the temporary supports were not sufficient. Four men were sent down to install additional support posts. Heavy rains had pooled in the open basement, softening the base which had allowed the supports to sink. The wet, heavy concrete gave way at a critical moment and collapsed on the men. Two men escaped serious injury but two workmen were crushed and had to be dug out and rushed to hospital.⁶ Following the incident, the apartment was

rebuilt and completed at a cost of approximately \$157,000.⁷

The building runs approximately 140 feet along Hargrave Street, rounds the corner and runs 160 feet along Cumberland Avenue. It then extends down the lane and returns at a right angle to Hargrave in the south elevation. It is here that a large light well was cut in, giving many suites double entrances, extra windows and what was termed "bicycle storage" space in the courtyard. This was also the access to the freight elevator for moving heavy furniture.⁸ The building is faced with a tawny-coloured brick, trimmed with limestone. It was sandblasted fairly recently. The wall treatment is plain for the middle three floors, which are delineated by a narrow stone bank above and below. There are brick quoins at the corners. The stone foundation rises five feet from grade, punctuated by the windows of the basement suites. The first floor features the brick in a rusticated pattern. A very large iron cornice, bracketed and dentilled, wraps around the top floor, surmounted by a low parapet. Two side entrances beneath arched windows relieve the long wall along Cumberland. These lead to two stairways that were originally more open but have since been sealed. Each window has a flat head and a stone sill; the fenestration is very regular and contributes to the broad horizontal lines of the building.

The horseshoe-shaped turn of the corner suites has been emphasized as a strong visual feature through the use of wrought-iron "balconies" around the mid-section corner windows. This grillwork matches the main interior staircase railings which rise in the centre of the block beside the elevator, as well as the grillwork in the small balconies inset over the front entrance. Woodman placed a great deal of emphasis in this recessed entranceway, but some of his finest details are now covered by a large metal canopy. Behind the canopy are three large limestone arches and a beautifully detailed double-return staircase in stone. With carved stone balusters, the balustrades each terminated with an elegant light fixture of iron. The four upper floors each had shallow balconies to be open⁹ while two of them have now been glazed in. A scroll of stone in the parapet over the entranceway contains the date of construction 1909.

Generally, there are twelve suites on each of the five floors. While the corner suites and three or four other suites on each floor are fairly spacious, most of the apartment units are very small. The

larger ones contain a "drawing room" with a fireplace, a dining room, sometimes with built-in china cabinets and buffets, one or two bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom and a hall closet. At the small end of the scale are suites consisting of a bathroom and a sitting room-kitchen combined.

Originally, there was only a janitor's suite in the basement, as well as boiler rooms, laundry rooms, trunk storage and a cold room beneath the main entrance. The top floor was originally planned to contain a restaurant fit into the rounded corner area. Suitable food preparation areas ran behind this, as did the restrooms and a smoking section over the central balcony. Very small suites made up the rest of the area along the Cumberland Avenue side, possibly intended for the restaurant staff. As the restaurant was never opened, most of the space was converted into suites. The smoking lounge overlooking the balcony was retained for several years. There were 61 suites in total.

The Breadalbane straddled the boundary between the commercial district to the east and north of Hargrave Street, and the residential district to the west. It was a vibrant neighbourhood with a great deal to offer residents. Nearby Central Park had tennis courts and a band shell for summer concerts. Schools, the Main Library on William Avenue, a plethora of Churches and the Walker Theatre (now the Odeon Theatre) were all close, as were the banks and stores of Portage Avenue. As the city boomed and housing came at a premium, the Breadalbane filled immediately with tenants. For several decades, these residents were typical of the people in the houses and other apartments of the district, middle class men and women, mostly without children. This apartment was considered to be a very good address. Early occupations of tenants include two actresses from the Winnipeg Theatre, the curator of fine arts at the Museum, a bookkeeper with the CNR, an inspector with the Department of Indian Affairs and the manager of a clothing store.¹⁰ During the 1920s and 1930s, the turnover of tenants was relatively low. There were a good number of households headed by women, often clerks from the stores along Portage or the downtown offices. Into the 1950s, the apartment maintained a waiting list of prospective tenants and the occupants listed in the City Directory were steadfastly Anglo-Saxon.¹¹

Within two months of each other, early in 1927, both of the original owners of the Breadalbane died. The apartment had previously been sold to John McIvor, a "financial agent" who also resided in the

block. He immediately installed additional suites in the basement in 1927 and the following year converted the smoking lounge into rentable space.¹² Since that time, there have been approximately 70 suites in the block, which McIvor renamed the Ambassador Apartments in 1928.

Since the 1960s, the Ambassador Apartments has experienced a mixture of tenants reflecting changes to the residential aspect of the north of Portage neighbourhood. The elegant entranceway has been covered by the metal canopy, but the exterior of the apartment block is generally as it was when it was constructed in 1909.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Pioneer Contractor of Manitoba is Dead", Manitoba Free Press 11 January 1927.
2. Loc. cit. See also "Hustling Railway Contractor" Manitoba Free Press 29 September 1905.
3. Clare L. Barnhart, editor The New Century Cyclopedia of Names Vol. I Appleton, Century, Crofts (New York) 1954 p. 785.
4. Debrett's Illustrated Peerage and Baronetage England 19 p. 152.
5. "Pioneer Resident is Called by Death" Manitoba Free Press 10 March 1927.
6. "Walls Collapse, Two Men Injured" The Winnipeg Telegram 16 August 1909 p. 6.
7. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 946 4 June 1909.
8. Fire Atlas for Winnipeg Western Canadian Fire Underwriters' Association, February 1918 p. 104.
9. City of Winnipeg Plan, 379 Hargrave Street, No. 946-09.
10. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg 1913, 1916 and 1918.
11. Ibid., 1923, 1929, 1935, 1941, 1947, 1955, 1962.
12. Permits, op. cit., No. 1 3 January 1927, No. 230 4 March 1927 and No. 277 1 March 1928.

APPENDIX I

John Woodman

Architect John Woodman, throughout his 26-year career in Winnipeg, designed several of this City's most prominent commercial buildings.

He was born in Oshawa, Ontario, in 1860, coming to Winnipeg with the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1880. Until 1901, Woodman stayed on with the C.P.R., working his way to the position of Chief Engineer of the entire Western Division. In 1901, he retired from the C.P.R. to establish his own architectural practice in Winnipeg.

John Woodman worked on his own in earlier years but later in partnership with Raymond Carey and in the 1920s with A.E. Cubbidge. He retired in 1927 and died in Winnipeg in 1944.¹

Among the buildings to his credit are the Paris Building (1915-1917), the Lindsay Building (1911), the Allen Building at 288 McDermot (1905), the Somerset Building (c.1910), the Free Press Building, the Public Press Building at 290 Vaughan (1917), the Hudson's Bay Wholesale, and the Eaton's track warehouse on Alexander Avenue (1927). During the 1920s, in partnership with A.E. Cubbidge, John Woodman designed several striking houses and apartment blocks.²

¹ "John Woodman Dies, Aged 84" Winnipeg Tribune 18 May 1944.

² Compiled from a number of sources including Ibid., files from City of Winnipeg Historic Projects and Western Canada Decorating and Builder July 1920, October 1922, September 1923 and May 1927.

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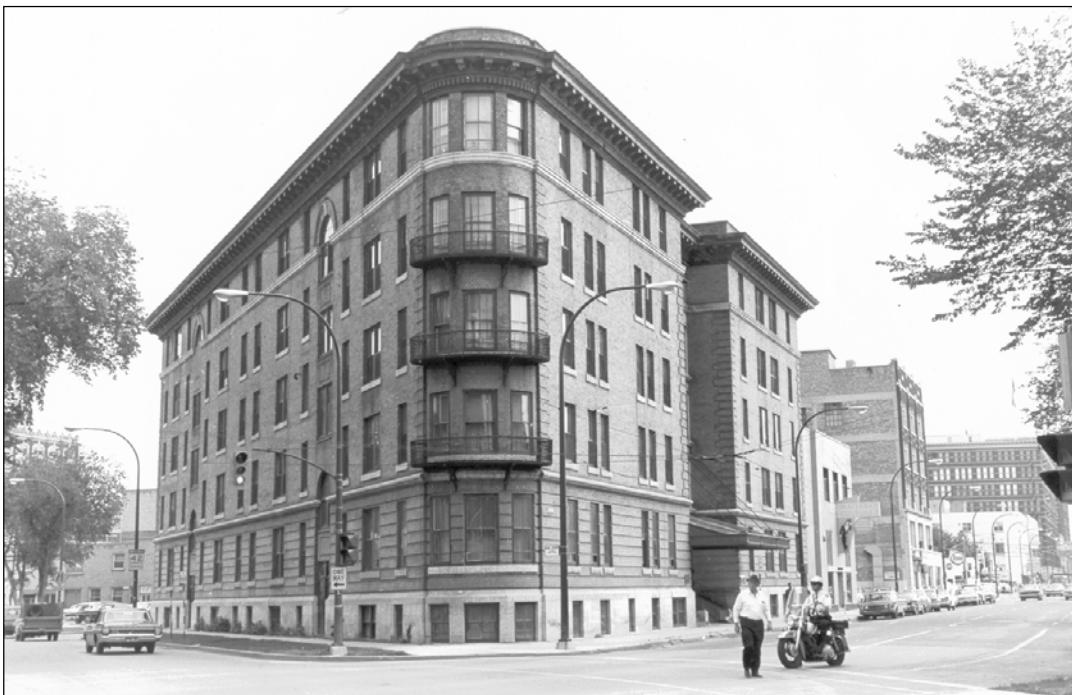


Plate 1 – 379 Hargrave Street, Ambassador Apartments, Hargrave Street and Cumberland Avenue façades, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 2 – 379 Hargrave Street, Ambassador Apartments, Hargrave Street façade, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 3 – Detail of the Hargrave Street entrance, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

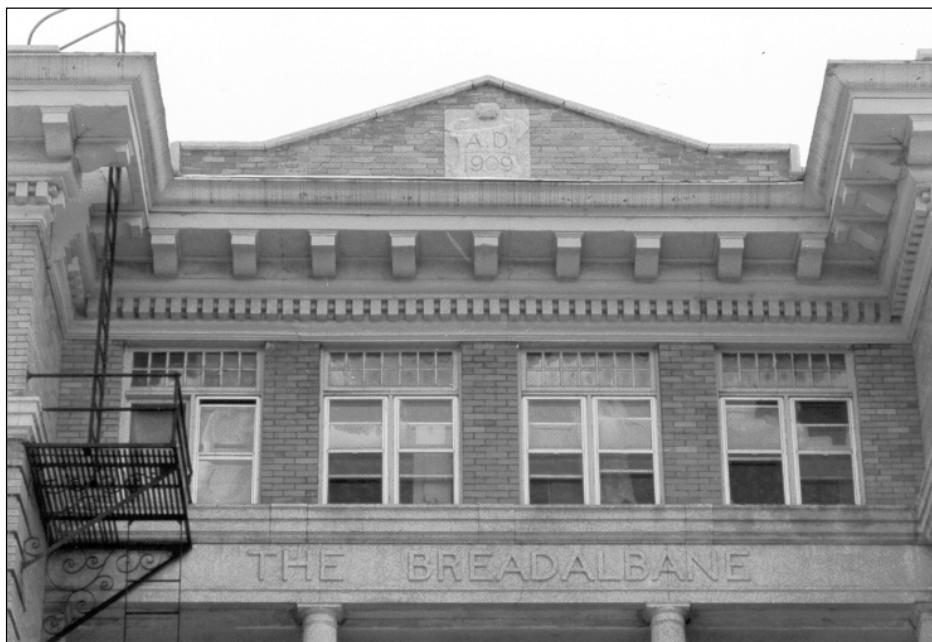


Plate 4 – Details of the Hargrave Street roof, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 5 – Laundry wagon parked in front of the Hargrave Street entrance of the Breadalbane Apartments, 1914. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2558.)