



466 MAIN STREET
WOODBINE HOTEL

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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By nature of its chameleon-like changes, this small hotel has managed to endure and thrive in its Main Street locale by imitating its more sophisticated neighbours. Beneath the cosmetic layers and structural alterations lies a very old building that may well be the oldest hotel in Winnipeg.

Tracing its history through photographs and line drawings of the commercial blocks of Main Street, one can confirm the appearance of the Woodbine Hotel as far back as 1881 and possibly to 1879. In fact, it was built in 1878¹ as Dufferin Hall, a diminutive hostel 22 feet wide and approximately twice as long. It was originally a wood frame structure, which, unlike the current Woodbine, did not extend through to Albert Street.²

Saloons and bars were the *raison d'etre* for a string of hotels that ran along Main Street between the C.P.R. Station on Higgins Avenue to the North and the Northern Pacific and Manitoba Railway Station (later Union Station) near Broadway to the South. Winnipeg was a notoriously fast-paced place in its early years. In a pattern established in the 1881-82 boom, the city continued long after the boom to exhibit the darker side of unchecked urban growth. Bars and heavy public drinking found natural partners in the confidence artists, prostitutes, gamblers and ne'er-do-wells who stalked the city streets. With a startling lack of control for this Victorian era, 64 saloons flourished along this Main Street strip in 1881. In his study of the impact of liquor on the prairie west, James Gray's *Booze* described the scene along Main in the 1880s as a "perpetually self-renewing quagmire".³ For numerous and complex reasons, bars were the focal point of a great deal of social activity that produced the ugly consequences of drunkenness for men and their families. In strictly business terms, the sale of spirits was a gold mine for the proprietors of the saloons.

These were not bars in our modern understanding of the term. There were no chairs or tables, minimum decorations and fewer still concessions to comfort. Prairie saloons were designed for stand-up drinking, with only a footrail around the serving bar and spittoons placed strategically along the floor. While not entirely without cheer and camaraderie, the bars were designed solely for the function of drinking to get drunk.⁴

Dufferin Hall was apparently a saloon exclusively, with no rooms to let. Sometime in 1880 or 1881, the hall was sold and the name changed to the Woodbine. As the name of a popular racetrack and a big hotel in Toronto, it was a bid to appeal to expatriates from the east.

Early in 1882, two of the city's top hotelmen purchased the Woodbine. "A hotel could scarcely be in better hands" observed the Manitoba Free Press.⁵ James O'Connor and H.A. Chadwick owned and managed a series of successful Winnipeg hostelrys, turning the business over quickly and generally at a handsome profit. From 1882 to 1883, O'Connor managed the Woodbine in partnership with James Dimmick, maintaining the bar and possibly establishing a dining room in the hotel. Its subsequent owner, Melville B. Wood, suffered from the financial squeeze of having purchased the hotel at an inflated price and being forced to dispose of it on a soft market.⁶ Wood, son of Manitoba's Chief Justice, continued on for several years after as proprietor of the Woodbine, and may well have regained its ownership.

In 1884, the Woodbine announced that its boarding quarters and restaurant were under the management of Mrs. Douglas. Oysters, all the rage as a status symbol in Winnipeg, were served in "every style" as were available seasonal delicacies.⁷ As well Mrs. Douglas ran a respectable restaurant and a billiard hall on the second floor. Its well-stocked saloon was advertised in 1886 as "the rendezvous of the leading businessmen."⁸

These pronouncements indicate proprietor Wood's desire to diversify the attractions of the small hotel, while a tussle over the Woodbine's liquor licence in 1884 demonstrates the primary importance of its bar. In 1889, Wood made further extensive "improvements" to the hotel, including re-establishing the restaurant in charge of John Gurn.⁹ Not long after this, the Woodbine was sold to Edward H. Hebb, who operated the hotel for over 30 years. Hebb was initially in partnership with John Wilkes, who worked as a bartender in the hotel. In 1896, the Woodbine was listed in the City Directory simply as "Hebb and Wilkes, Saloon", which restates succinctly its contribution to Main Street life.

In 1899, alterations were made to the front of the hotel.¹⁰ Some time between the early 1880s and 1899, a light-coloured brick veneer was added to the façade and the two-storey structure was extended back on its lot to open onto Albert Street. This would entail a major restructuring of the hotel's interior, the remains of which can still be seen on some of the finishing. A dark brick veneer was applied in the summer of 1899, with heavy limestone trim, a stone parapet and a scrolled datestone displaying "1899" in the centre.

Under the proprietorship of Hebb and his later partner, Dennis Lennon, the renewed Woodbine prospered with a saloon, billiards, a restaurant and private rooms on the second floor.¹¹ On a windy day in the fall of 1904, a fire broke out in the printing shop of the Bulman Brothers, a shop running along Bannatyne Avenue between Main and Albert Streets. Fed by the chemicals stored for the printing process and fanned by gusty winds, the fire quickly became an inferno, jumping Bannatyne to the Ashdown store where more flammable goods were stored. The resultant explosions roared back, causing the roof at the rear of the Woodbine Hotel to ignite. The Bulman Block burned out of control and as the walls collapsed, the building fell onto the roof of the adjacent hotel.¹² Although there were no deaths, the damage to the district was extensive. Both the Bulman and Ashdown buildings were levelled, and the Woodbine and what became Birts' Saddlery (then the Dufferin Block) were heavily damaged. Bulman's was never rebuilt, leaving the open space that is now a parking lot along the rear portion of the Woodbine.

Hebb and Lennon used the fire damage as an opportunity for an expansion of their facilities. Architect J.H. Cadham rebuilt the damaged interior and added a third storey to the rear portion of the hotel.¹³ For some reason, this new storey extended from Albert Street to within about 30 feet of the front of the building. This curious step-back is obvious in a 1909 photograph at the end of this report, and lasted until 1923.

Following yet another fire in 1923 (the second recorded fire doing \$2,300 damage in 1906), the new owners of the hotel employed Architect E.W. Crayston to extend the third floor through to the street, and, once again, to rework the Main Street façade.

Meanwhile the interior of the Woodbine had also undergone major changes. As the number of hotels in the city climbed to 96 within a three-quarter mile radius of the C.P.R. Station, bars became the target of a growing and powerful lobby of prohibitionists. As part of a comprehensive reform movement, the Manitoba Government brought the Prohibition Act into effect on June 1st, 1916, which eventually eliminated all public and most of the private drinking establishments within the province. Alberta and Saskatchewan also voted to go "dry".

Winnipeg bars were closed by law. Those hotels which had depended solely on their bars as a source of revenue were devastated. Larger hotels, and those smaller hotels like the Woodbine that had diversified their businesses beforehand, survived. In the front portion of the Woodbine was placed a "temperance bar"¹⁴ where soft drinks, coffee and a special prohibition concoction called "temperance beer" were enjoyed by patrons. A barber shop was also established here. The long and narrow shape of the Woodbine, which had been established in its piecemeal growth in the nineteenth century, suited it perfectly for adaptive reuse. Eight of the finest Brunswick billiard tables were installed into what had been an elongated bar and, in the Albert Street portion, two bowling alleys were opened, one on the first floor and one in the basement. "Ban the Bar" under prohibition lasted until 1927 in Winnipeg.

When the fire underwriters surveyed the hotel in 1917, they noted that the upper two floors of bedrooms were vacant. The City Directory listed 466 Main Street as Woodbine Billiard Parlours, which indicates that for these few years, the Woodbine declined to function as a hotel and concentrated on its recreational facilities. James Gray hints at another side of the small hotels during the prohibition era. Bootlegging liquor was fairly common and many of the prairie hotels risked selling liquor furtively to avoid bankruptcy. When they were caught, as would inevitably happen sooner or later, the breweries paid the fines in order to keep the hotels going and keep their product selling. By the end of prohibition, many hotels had been taken over by the breweries for their debts.¹⁵ Shea's, Winnipeg's largest brewery, owned the Woodbine by the time they in turn were bought out by Labatt's. The present owner purchased the Woodbine from Labatt's in 1965 when the liquor interests were forced by law to sell their hotel holdings.

When the bars reopened in 1927, the Woodbine used the opportunity to make some changes in the hotel. The alterations of 1923 and 1927 brought the Woodbine to its basic appearance and layout of the present.

In 1923, E.W. Crayston, as previously stated, renovated the hotel after a fire had extended the third floor. He also reworked the façade of the Woodbine, reducing it to two bays of double windows on the upper floors and a storefront entrance at ground level. Beneath a copper painted cornice ran three brick piers framing the windows. A steel skeleton behind allowed for most of the 22-foot façade to be taken up with windows, giving the front a modern appearance. Prism glass squares set in copper ran above the doorways and below the second floor for an interior ceiling of 16 feet. Below was a bay window of plate glass with two side doors each with two glazed panels. Concrete formed the trim and prism glass was again used in a border below the bay window.

The rest of the walls of the hotel are a buff-coloured brick. The long north wall features four sets of three windows, with the middle window in each set added in 1927. The wall itself is perfectly plain. Side doors both to the rear of the hotel and to the Albert Street portion enter here. The storefront on the ground floor at 93 Albert Street, which is the rear section of the Woodbine, probably dates from 1927 or early in the 1930s.

The upper floor layout is the only solution to the long and narrow shape of the building. The bedrooms are adjacent to a corridor which hugs the party wall on the south side, thereby giving a window to every private room. The bathroom and toilets, once at the east end of the corridor, have been partially relocated. On the second floor is a large sample room, well lit by the Main Street windows, while this front portion on the third floor is taken up by the only housekeeping suite in the hotel. Skylights light some of the third floor bedrooms and hallway. The stairs have been relocated at least twice, but the early detailing has survived. Pressed metal ceilings from the previous century, singled out for removal in the 1927 plans, have remained on all three floors as well as on the ceiling in the basement. The foundations, heavy stone and concrete, are clearly part of one of the early renovations.

E.H. Hebb, who acquired the Woodbine in the 1890s, was the proprietor at least until 1927, when the long bar was reinstated. In compliance with the post-prohibition laws, the bar was still kept rather uncomfortable and for male patrons only. Women have only been permitted into the Woodbine bar since March of 1985. Only beer is sold. Stretching along both walls are head-high mirrors, which together with the high ceilings, save the space from feeling oppressive. Tables and chairs now provide patrons with comfort while a shuffleboard table provides entertainment. The bar has been relocated to the front section of the room. Because a large portion of the main floor was partitioned into the Albert Street retail space, the bar in the Woodbine is much shorter now, possibly similar in proportions to the original 1878 saloon.

While other Main Street hotels, such as the Winnipeg Hotel at 214 Main Street, date from the 1880s, the Woodbine is quite likely the oldest hotel still serving its original function. Its numerous renovations and awkward size have actually contributed to its capacity to adapt and change with the times. It is now, as it has always been, a modest hotel enjoying a prominent location.

FOOTNOTES

1. Erected as Dufferin Hall by Peter Sutherland at a cost of \$1,000. Thanks to Randy Rostecki.
2. 1880 Fire Atlas of Winnipeg Map 11.
3. James H. Gray Booze Macmillan of Canada (Toronto) 1972 p. 10.
4. Ibid., p. 14.
5. "City and Provincial" Manitoba Daily Free Press 21 April 1882 p. 8.
6. The property sold for \$55,000 in 1882 during the boom but could fetch only \$4,000 as a reserve bid above the \$12,000 mortgage remaining on the hotel in 1884. Manitoba Free Press 21 April 1882 and Winnipeg Daily Sun 8 May 1884 p. 6.
7. Winnipeg Daily Sun 8 May 1884 p. 4. See also various advertisements in Winnipeg Siftings in 1884.
8. The City of Winnipeg Thompson and Bayer Winnipeg 1886 p. 153.
9. "Brevities" The Sun 10 May 1889 p. 8.
10. "City & General" Manitoba Morning Free Press 3 May 1899 p. 10.
11. Goade's Fire Plan of Winnipeg 1895 (updated to 1905)
12. "Serious Image at Woodbine Hotel" The Winnipeg Telegram 12 October 1904 p. 3.
13. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 1685 7 November 1904. The dimensions were given as 22 feet by 162 feet, and the cost of the alterations and addition was \$6,000.
14. The Western Canada Fire Underwriters' Association Fire Atlas of Winnipeg December 1917 p. 202.
15. Gray, op cit., p. 100.

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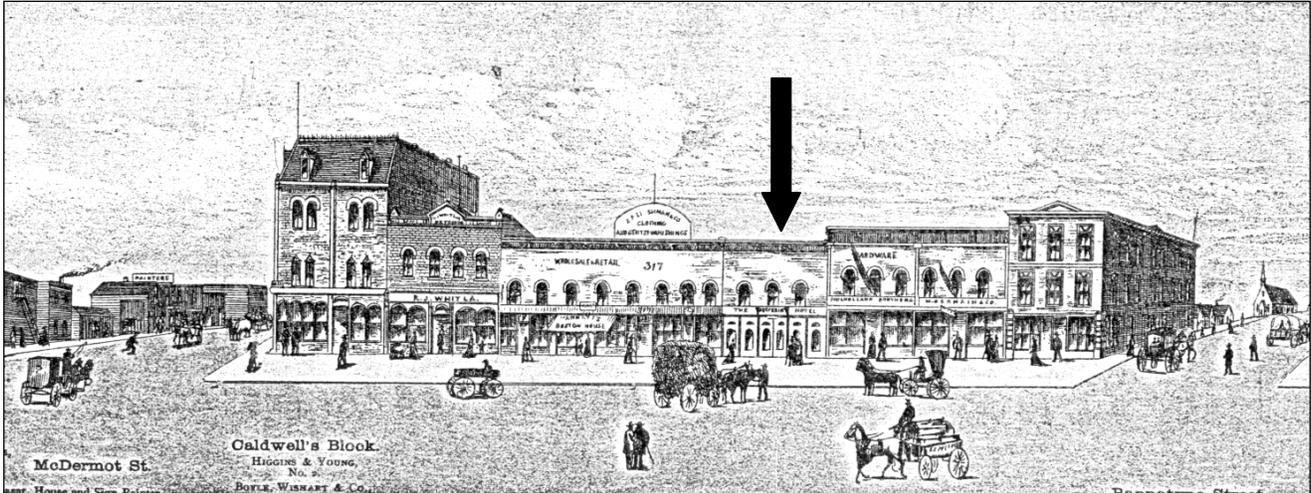


Plate 1 – West side of Main Street from between McDermot and Bannatyne avenues, 1880. The arrow points to the Dufferin Hotel, later the Woodbine Hotel. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – West side of Main Street looking south from the corner of Bannatyne Avenue, 1879. The Woodbine therefore is third building in from Whitehead's Medical Hall (arrow). (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N140.)

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Plate 3 – The Woodbine Hotel shows as dark brick between two lighter buildings, 1882. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – The Woodbine Hotel, painted white (arrow), 1884. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N5180.)

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Plate 5 – The Woodbine Hotel (arrow), 1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 6 – A circus parade along Main Street, ca.1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 7 – The Woodbine Hotel (arrow), 1907. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

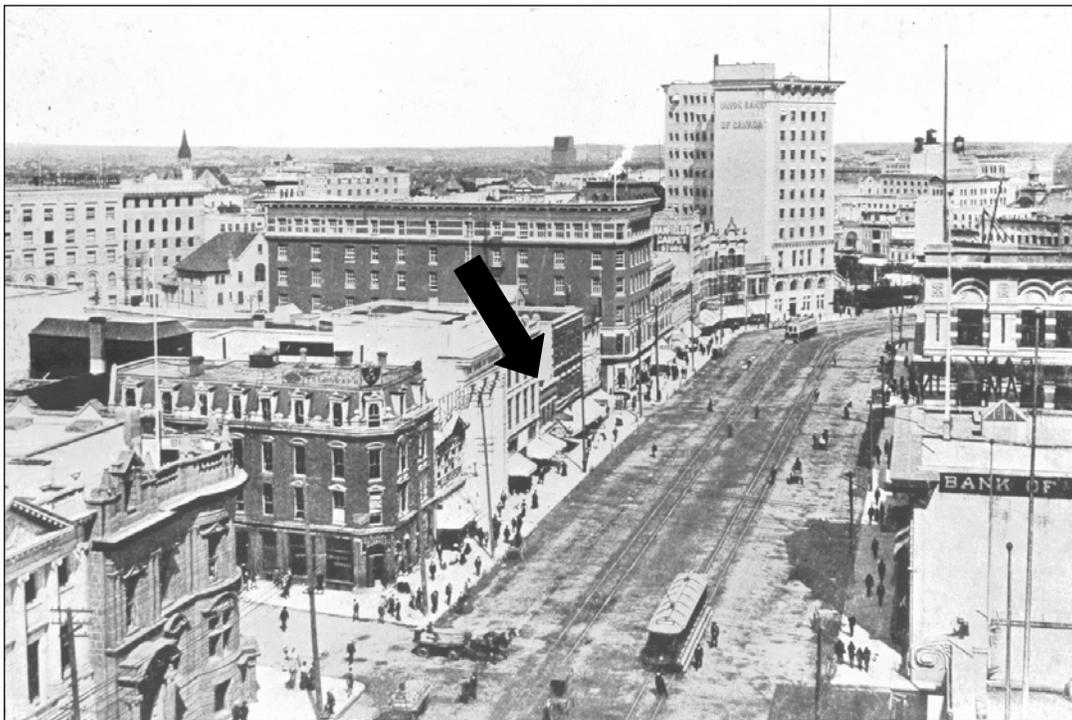


Plate 8 – Main Street with the Woodbine Hotel (arrow), ca.1910. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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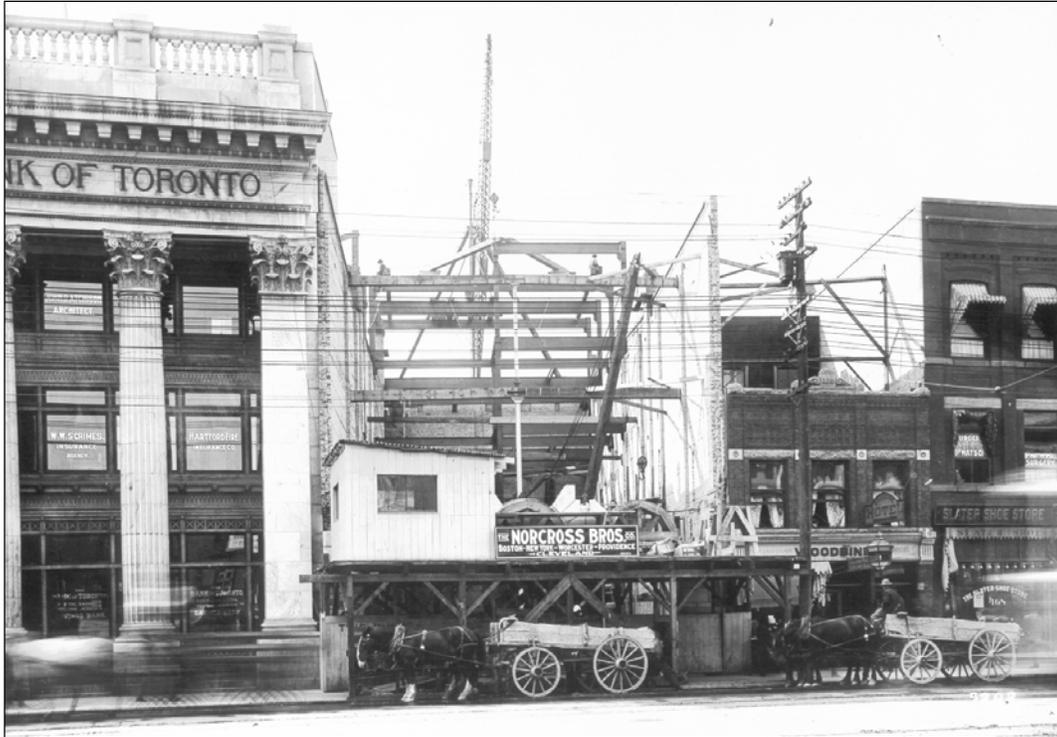


Plate 9 – Construction of the Royal Bank branch, to the south of the Woodbine Hotel, 1909. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 10 – Main Street, ca.1915. The marquee of the Woodbine can be seen clearly in the centre background. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N232.)

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Plate 11 – Main Street looking north from McDermot Avenue, 1930. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 12 – Interior of the Woodbine Hotel, ca.1920. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, 1287-38544.)

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Plate 13 – 93 Albert Street (west façade of the Woodbine Hotel), no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)