

56 MAPLE STREET

**FIRE HALL NO. 3
(FORMER FIRE HALL NO. 2)**

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

October 1990

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At 1:50 a.m. On May 3 [1877] as the city slumbered, flames burst forth from the Dominion House and stables at St. Mary's and Main street. The brigade responded to the clanging of the alarm bell with a 100 per cent response and at 20 minutes after being called from their beds, they had the first stream of water going. The fire had gained much headway before the alarm was given and it was impossible to save the stables but they managed to save the Garry House next door. At 5:25 a.m. the fire was out. After the fire, there was no going home to bed and breakfast. The fire tanks had to be refilled from the Red River and it was afternoon before the apparatus was back in the station. This was the first fire for the reorganized department.¹

The growth of Winnipeg from a trading post into an organized town and ultimately an incorporated city necessarily meant an increase in the number of buildings lining the streets. The vast majority of these structures were wooden and of limited height.²

With time, increasingly larger buildings were placed closer together, thereby adding to the possibility of the most feared of all disasters: fire. One has only to scan the front page of any local newspaper in the 1880s or 1890s to see the fascination with which major fires were held. Countless stories from all over the world were reprinted on the subject and citizens became acutely aware of the dangers of a major downtown conflagration.

On September 24, 1874 a volunteer brigade was formed including Thomas Ryan, J.H. Ashdown, Daniel McMillan, W.F. Luxton and Stewart Mulvey. The men received \$1 for each fire attended and 50 cents for alarms where no equipment was used. Fines were levied for each fire the men missed (\$1) and for each weekly drill missed during the summer (25 cents).³

On April 19, 1877 Winnipeg City Council reorganized the volunteer force into a full-time entity,

¹ V. Leah, Alarm of Fire (Winnipeg-1982), p. 23. Emphasis added.

² M. Peterson, "The King Building (Formerly the Ryan Block)-104 King Street", Report for the Historical Buildings Committee, August 1988, p. 6.

³ V. Leah, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

with a chief, Dan McMillan (later lieutenant-governor of Manitoba), an assistant chief, James McDonald, and two 20-men companies: the hose and engine, and the hook and ladder teams. Five years later a full-time, paid department was formed. Captain W.O. McRobie and his assistant Alex Aiken were placed in charge of 36 firefighters, 17 horses, four steam pumpers, three chemical wagons, three horse-drawn hose wagons, one hood and ladder wagon, and 2,652 m. (8,700 feet) of hose.⁴

In January 1883 a new central station on William Avenue opposite Charlotte Street was opened; several weeks later Station No. 3, or the north hall, at Fonseca (now Higgins Avenue) and Maple streets was occupied. In June of that year the south hall, No. 2, at York and Smith streets completed the early fire hall system.⁵ These three buildings were attacked in the press and by firefighters as beautiful shells with slum-like interiors.⁶

By 1900 technological advances and the size of the fire department forced the City to update its existing structures or, as was usually the case, design new buildings. In 1904, just months after four new halls had been completed, a new stone and brick Fire Hall No. 3 at 56 Maple Street was built across the road from the 1883 structure.

STYLE

Occupying the apex of a public utilities hierarchy were fire halls. These architect-designed edifices frequently were erected at strategic street corners. To enable each building to blend into its residential or commercial surroundings, architects specified gables and occasionally a stone facing.⁷

As the author of above quote correctly observed, fire halls often were placed at busy street corners

⁴ Ibid., pp. 22-25.

⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶ D. Spector, *Architecture of Functionality*, Unpublished report, City of Winnipeg, 1981, p. 11.

⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

and therefore in the public eye. They were built to blend in, not stand out or appear garish. In residential neighbourhoods, smaller halls could be found with plain façades and window boxes brimming with flowers. While the stations' towers tended to catch the eye, their role mainly was functional (i.e., for hose drying), not ornamental.

For a few fire halls, being seen was considered an important method of conveying a city's willingness to fight fires. Winnipeg's Fire Hall No. 3 was placed not only in an historically fire-prone area, but also close to many businesses and homes and, most importantly, near the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) Station.⁸ New arrivals had to be shown a substantial building. As one observer remarked, the station was "visited by hundreds of tourists during the summer season."⁹ The basic Melville plan adopted by the City for its fire halls (see Plate 3) was ornamentally reduced for the other four 1904 stations but was enlarged and left with all of its embellishments in the case of Fire Hall No. 3. As a result, the Maple Street facility cost almost twice as much as each of the other four.

This hall blends aspects of several styles. Classical and Romanesque features adorn its façades, but these were only ornaments to what was first and foremost a utilitarian structure. As with all fire halls designed by Alexander and William Melville, this was a highly efficient building intended to enhance the work carried on by its inhabitants, rather than an architectural masterpiece.

CONSTRUCTION

The fire hall at 56 Maple Street constitutes the city's first enlarged and adorned version of the original A. and W. Melville design.¹⁰

Now known as Fire Hall No. 2, this station is a two-storey brick structure with stone accents on the

⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹ Winnipeg Telegram, February 10, 1906, p. 20 (second section).

¹⁰ D. Spector, op. cit., p. 18.

west side of Maple Street between Henry and Higgins avenues (i.e. on the southerly 12.8 m. (42 ft.) of lot 50 and all of lot 51, Plans 21 and 63, 17 St. Johns).¹¹ The hall cost \$22,000 to build and general contractors were J.B. Flinders and Hugh Hudson. Stone foundation walls measure between 45.7-61.0 cm. (18-24"), while the brick walls measure 22.9 cm. (9") on all sides except for the front where they are 33.0 cm. (13") thick.¹² Including the 3.7 x 3.7 x 27.4 m. (12x12x90') tower, the building provides just under 5,000 cu. m. (176,530 cu. ft.) of space for the fire department.¹³

DESIGN

The term far-sighted best describes the basic structural specifications of the original Melville fire halls.¹⁴

The rusticated stone facing on the front or east façade is the first element on Fire Hall No. 2 that strikes the observer as unusual. In most other halls stone was used only a short distance up the front façade, but here it ends just short of the second-storey windows.

The four large equipment doors on the ground floor are round-headed with radiating stone arches and raised keystones. The same elements mark an entrance door for the men at the northern end of this façade. In combination with the texture of the stone, the arches provide the structure with its Romanesque detailing.

The second storey is brick with rusticated stone lug sills and lintels on the rectangular window openings. Each of these windows is completed by a pane of leaded and bevelled glass. An oriel window also is found at this level, with a smooth-cut stone base and a rough stone lug sill. Its openings are rectangular and the ornamental glass is again present.

¹¹ City of Winnipeg, Assessment Records, Roll No. 918181 (old no. 14566), Ward 2, P.C. 80, (below as AR).

¹² Architect's Plans, provided by the Firefighters' Historical Society of Winnipeg.

¹³ AR.

¹⁴ D. Spector, op. cit., p. 13.

The gable end above the oriel window is finished with a Palladian window outlined by radiating brick heads, a keystone above the middle opening, and a continuous rough stone sill.

The original hip roof had more ornamental detailing than at present. Plate 2 shows cresting on the roof as well as two small pedimented gable dormers at the front. Removal of these ornamental features cannot be accurately dated at present. The eaves are large and heavy but do not appear to have been ornamentally treated at any point since construction.

The south side has an all-brick face with windows on both the first and second floors that mirror the front openings except for the heads which have radiating brick rather than stone. Basement openings at grade have been closed in with bricks. The rear of this elevation is one storey with no openings (the old stable/hay loft area).

The north side of the building is almost exactly the same as the south side, being all brick and including windows of similar dimension and ornamental treatment. The most important difference is the tower which rises high above grade and includes numerous sets of windows of varying styles, sizes, and finishes within its recessed central area. By recessing the tower walls, the Melvilles created the illusion of giant order pilasters running up the corners to what originally was a crenellated top. This crenellation added to the hall's ornamentation (see Plate 2), but has since been removed in favour of a plain top (see Plate 1).

The west side or rear of the hall contains both the two-storey main brick building and the one-storey brick stable/loft area extending westward from the main structure. This low extension originally was designed with three entrances at grade and three entrances into the loft, but now only the central doors to each level are present. Windows are similar to those on the south face. Above the loft is the gable end of the main building which was designed with two attached brick chimneys, again giving the impression of pilasters.

INTERIOR

The interior on the ground floor is prettily decorated...[the] men's rooms are light and airy...[and] the bath room is modern in every respect.¹⁵

The interior of this fire hall has remained remarkably unchanged for its 86 years of existence due to its singular function.

The basement has not been altered significantly since construction - sand and coal chutes are still visible (the sand chute was used until the winter of 1989). Storage space is also present at this level. Ceilings measure 2.4 m. (8').¹⁶

The first floor originally was designed to hold the equipment and horses. The front area held the wagons and pumpers, while the rear housed the horses with the hay loft above. The equipment area is very much unaltered - the tin ceiling remains, as do the cement floors and walls. The stalls, originally totalling 10 with two spares,¹⁷ have been replaced by washroom, kitchen, and storage facilities. The hay loft is no longer used, while the ceiling at the south end of the stable area has been raised to allow for the storage of the taller equipment used by today's firefighters aerial ladders).

The round-headed doorways leading from the stables to the front exit doors also have been altered. Some have been totally closed, while others have been converted to normal rectangular openings.

The second storey is almost totally intact. Running off the central hallway are bedrooms, sitting rooms, and washrooms. Although firefighters no longer live in the building, some of the bedrooms remain, while others have been converted into office and storage space. The tin ceilings are well preserved, while the leaded and bevelled glass adds to the elegance of the residential area. Four

¹⁵ Winnipeg Telegram, February 10, 1906, p. 20 (second section).

¹⁶ AR.

¹⁷ City of Winnipeg, Architect's Plans, #1257/1904.

poles running from the ceiling are located strategically around the second floor and still carry men to the first-floor trucks when the alarm sounds.

The attic, once used as a locker room and gymnasium, is now storage space and has remained unfinished since construction.

INTEGRITY

Except for new wiring and fluorescent light fixtures installed during the 1970s and the removal of castellation on its hose drying tower, the building still dominates its surroundings much as it did nearly eighty years ago.¹⁸

The fire hall occupies its original site, is in good structural condition and retains much of its interior and exterior ornamentation and internal floor plan.

STREETSCAPE

From the main entrance of the newly completed CPR station, businessmen, visitors and immigrants had a direct view of one of Winnipeg's most lavish fire halls.¹⁹

The area in which Fire Hall No. 2 is found has undergone many changes since the building was constructed. Gone is most of the district's residential character, replaced by garment factories. A few scattered houses, most in varying degrees of disrepair, a church, and some small retail shops are all that remain of the once thriving community. Gone too is the activity created by the CPR Station which during its heyday brought thousands of visitors and new citizens to the area.

¹⁸ D. Spector, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

ARCHITECT

The simplicity and adaptability of the original 1904 design ensured its continued construction in several versions until 1914.²⁰

The architects of Fire Hall No. 2 were Alexander R. and William N. Melville, brothers who operated a small architectural and engineering company in the city starting in 1903. By 1914 their original plan had been used to construct 14 fire halls across Winnipeg (see Appendix I for biographical information).²¹ The Historical Buildings Committee has given the Melvilles 10 points.

INSTITUTION

Winnipeg was incorporated as a city Nov. 8, 1873 and the concerned citizens of the young community, already accustomed to the storms of winter, grasshopper plagues and flooding, were aware of the ever-growing danger of fire. Other struggling communities across the breadth and width of the land had experienced the disaster of fire and the ambitious council under the colourful, controversial mayor Francis Cornish Q.C., began preparations for fire fighting within the city's boundaries.²²

Fire fighting is an activity that draws a lot of attention. There is the threat of loss of life and property, the bravery of people rushing into dangerous and often unknown situations, and the fascination which people attach to fires. Thus a crowd is never too far away from the scene. As with other facets of life, technology has had numerous dramatic effects on the job of the fireman, but never did it obscure his heroism or lessen people's desire to watch, as witnessed on February 19, 1895 when 5,000 people observed the testing of a new 19.8 m. (65') aerial ladder.²³

During the days of the volunteer brigade and into the twentieth century, three basic pieces of horse-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

²¹ Ibid., p. 15 and M. Peterson, "The Coliseum - 225 Fort Street", Report for the Historical Buildings Committee, 1988, p. 10.

²² V. Leah, op. cit., p. 20.

²³ Ibid., p. 27.

drawn equipment were used to fight fires. The steam pumpers of the 1880s and 1890s were heavy and usually needed a long warm-up period (see Plate 8). Chemical engines, using carbonate of soda and vitriol in a water chamber produced carbon dioxide in under 20 seconds, but were dangerous to use.²⁴ Ladder trucks were bulky and had little vertical range; once taller buildings became the norm, their effectiveness came into question (see Plate 6).

Technological advances soon improved both the life of the men in the halls and their jobs. By the 1880s telegraphic fire alarm boxes were installed to provide quicker signalling. By 1913 internal combustion engines were replacing horses, in turn improving travelling time and maintaining constant water pressure.²⁵

While equipment changed rapidly, so too did the life of the fireman. In 1882 the reorganized department offered its men one afternoon and one evening off per week; otherwise, they lived at the halls (although they could go out for dinner). Married men were also given one complete off per week.²⁶ The pay was low and living conditions in the halls were primitive at best. Yet 150 applications were received for the first 36 full-time positions.²⁷

As mentioned previously, improvements were slowly introduced by the turn of the century. By 1919 the work schedule had been replaced by a two-platoon system with an 84-hour week and firemen lived at home. Ten years later they received one day off in seven and by 1960 the week was further reduced to 42 hours.²⁸

²⁴ D. Spector, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8,9.

²⁶ V. Leah, *op. cit.*, p .30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

EVENT

No. 3 station would earn the tragic record of being the first unit to have two of its members give their lives in the line of duty at the disastrous Radford-Wright fire of 1912.²⁹

Fire Hall No. 3 existed for many years as the headquarters for fire fighting in the North End. As such, it was responsible for answering thousands of cries for help from businesses, homes, and warehouses. A 1912 fire at the Radford-Wright³⁰ Sash and Door Factory on the west side of Main Street near Higgins Avenue was one of the worst to date, killing seven and injuring many others (see Plates 9 and 10).

On the evening of March 9, 1912 pedestrians noticed smoke and fire rising from a shed behind the factory (along with several other small fires in the vicinity that had been purposely set). As firemen from stations No. 1 (Central Hall at 110 Albert Street) and No. 3 answered the bells, flames spread to the second floor of the building (Plate 6). The crews began placing ladders and climbing to the second floor, but two naphtha vats exploded with enough force to be felt and heard for blocks.³¹

The roof and most of the upper floors were sent flying in all directions including into a large crowd that had gathered to watch the spectacle.

Fireman Charlie McPherson died instantly when he was buried under a mountain of bricks and other debris. His friend, Edmund Molyneux, lay under almost 2.0 m. (6') of brick and mortar. When the explosion died away, his calls for help were clearly heard and he was rushed to St. Boniface Hospital, only to die shortly after his arrival.³² Firemen John Gibson, R.G. McDonald, Charles Schram and J.R. McKinnon, all of Fire Hall No. 3, sustained various injuries from the showering

²⁹ V. Leah, op. cit., p. 25.

³⁰ Both business men were prominent citizens and both are remembered by street names; Ibid., p. 70.

³¹ Ibid., p.70 and Winnipeg Tribune, March 11, 1912, pp. 1-2.

³² Winnipeg Tribune, March 11, 1912, p. 1.

glass and brick. Also killed by the debris were five bystanders, including a 12-year-old boy.³³ Many other onlookers also were struck by flying pieces and had to be treated at area hospitals (including one man who was so confused by the explosion that he walked in front of an oncoming ambulance).³⁴

Ultimately, police arrested James Dodds, a 23-year-old Scot who had arrived in the city in 1911. He later confessed to setting over 200 fires and was sentenced to 10-15-year sentences for arson. McPherson and Molyneaux were buried in a double ceremony with full honours.

CONTEXT

...next to a battle, a prize fight or a duel, the thing which attracts the average creature, not altogether a fossil, is a good healthy fire.³⁵

Fire Hall No. 2 was built during a period of rapid growth of both the city and the technology related to fire fighting and building construction. By early 1883 as the City organized its first professional, full-time department, 17 horses and 36 firemen were housed in three fire halls.³⁶ As time went on, more equipment, more men, and more halls were needed to protect the sprawling residential districts and the developing downtown retail, banking and warehouse districts. Horses gave way to motorized vehicles, chemical wagons gave way to high-pressure pumps and hoses, and live-in firemen gave way to split-shift employees.

In such tumultuous times, the City needed to build new halls that were basic enough to be inexpensive, adaptable enough to keep pace with ever-changing technology, and efficient enough to aid in the task at hand. City officials also decided to utilize one basic floor plan in order to lessen

³³ Ibid., p. 1.

³⁴ V. Leah, op. cit., p. 71.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

³⁶ Morning Telegram, December 24, 1898, p. 9.

costs and allow firemen to feel at ease in any of the City's numerous fire halls. The Melville plan fit the bill quite nicely.

Winnipeg's three new fire halls of 1882 and 1883 had been erected to be aesthetically pleasing to passers-by. Exterior features included intricate ornamental detailing, rusticated stone bases, dormers, and large towers (see Plate 4). But the interiors, due to the lack of technology, were primitive at best. The oak floors of the stables were highly unsanitary and difficult to clean; indoor plumbing, central heating, and electric lighting were non-existent. Sleeping arrangements consisted of a common bedroom for all men (it was 1919 before the men lived away from the hall).³⁷ As a result of these sparse interiors, more money could be spent on the exterior embellishments listed above.

As improvements in heating, plumbing, and lighting technology became available, and as fire fighting equipment became more advanced (and heavier) costly interior designs became the norm. This reduced the amount of money available for exterior elements, resulting in fewer ornamentally rich structures after 1900.³⁸

Of the five new halls constructed in 1904, only the Maple Street building displayed a high degree of ornamentation due to the unusual circumstance as discussed earlier. The other four, Burrows Avenue at Aikens Street, No. 7 (still in use), Gertrude Avenue at Pembina (now Osborne Street), No. 4 (demolished), Sherbrook Street near Portage Avenue, No. 5 (redesigned as a business block), and Pearl Street at McDermot Avenue, No. 6 (demolished),³⁹ were similar in overall design, comfortable and efficient in the interior, and sparsely decorated outside. It was truly the shape of things to come for fire hall construction in Winnipeg.

Once called the "chief factory" by the men because three of its graduates went on to become the

³⁷ V. Leah, *op. cit.*, p.25 and D. Spector, *op. cit.*, p.11.

³⁸ V. Leah, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³⁹ D. Spector, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

chief of the department,⁴⁰ Fire Hall No. 2 now stands waiting its first change in schedule since its official opening. A new hall is nearing completion on Watt Street that will replace No. 2. With the Firefighters' Historical Society of Winnipeg already utilizing parts of the building for office and storage space, and the Society's desire to create a museum in the soon-to-be-vacated station, it does not seem that this busy structure will be allowed to rest peacefully for long.

LANDMARK

In whatever form it is, the struggle is a noble one and when, as often happens, the brigade wend their way back to the station in the early morning light, bearing on their truck the charred remains of some poor comrade, is it any wonder that his name is inscribed among the list of heroes and that his brother fire-fighters are looked upon with pride and gratitude.⁴¹

The area surrounding Fire Hall No. 2 has seen several years of decline and, with the closing of the CPR Station, that decline has been furthered. The building can no longer claim to sit upon one of the city's busier intersections and, because of the area, its conspicuousness has also declined.

⁴⁰ Winnipeg Telegram, February 10, 1906, p. 20 (second section).

⁴¹ Morning Telegram, December 24, 1898, p. 9.

APPENDIX I

Alexander R. and William N. Melville -

Little is known biographically about William Melville, other than he was listed for the first time in Henderson's Directory in 1903 where his occupation was given as architect. In the 1904 volume his brother Alexander was listed, and the firm of A. and W. Melville, architects and civil engineers, had been formed. This firm continued until c. 1913 when William was listed in the Directory as being an architect separate from his brother's firm. This continued until 1915 when no listing was found for William Melville.

Alexander Melville was born in 1873 in Fraserburgh, Scotland and received his architectural and civil engineering degrees in Aberdeen. For many years he was a member of the Manitoba Association of Architects and, from 1913 to the late 1940s, continued his private practice. His last position appears to have been a short tender as draftsman for the Provincial Government. He died in 1949.¹

Over the years of partnership, the brothers were responsible for a number of buildings still standing in the city. An incomplete list includes:²

Winnipeg Fire Halls: 349 Burrows Ave.
410 Cathedral Ave.
1055 Dorchester St.
470 Gertrude Ave.
161 Lipton St.
56 Maple St.
542 Osborne St.
66 Pearl Ave.
596 St. Mary's Rd.
825 Sargent Ave.
354 Sherbrook St.

¹ M. Peterson, "The Coliseum – 225 Fort St." Historical Buildings Committee, 1988, Appendix I and Henderson's Directory, 1913-1950.

² M. Peterson, op. cit., Appendix I.

Winnipeg Fire Halls (continued):

180 Sinclair Ave.
325 Talbot Ave.
1470 William Ave.

Ashford Apartment Block, 381 Balmoral St. (demolished)
Broadway Court Apartments, 251 Broadway (demolished)
T. Thompson House, Canora Street, 1912 (BP #2374/1912)
The Touraine Apartments, 410 Ellice Ave. (demolished)
The Coliseum, 225 Fort Street, 1912 (demolished)
Canadian Film Exchange Theatre, 646 Main St., 1912 (BP #3861/1912)
The Colonial Theatre, Main St., 1912 (BP #4417/1912 - demolished)

56 MAPLE STREET – FIRE HALL NO. 3 (FORMER FIRE HALL NO. 2)

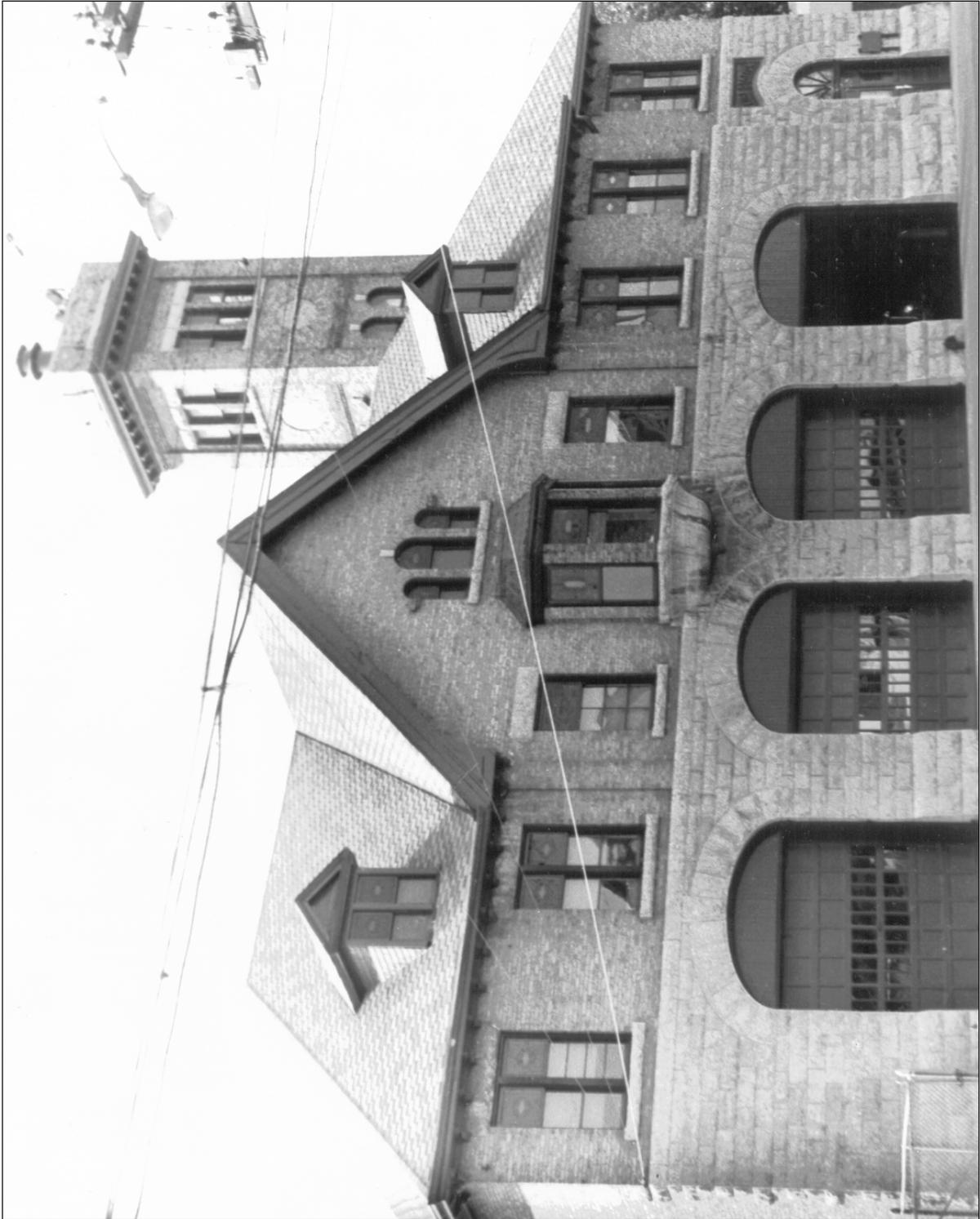


Plate 1 - 56 Maple Street, Fire Hall No. 3, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

56 MAPLE STREET – FIRE HALL NO. 3 (FORMER FIRE HALL NO. 2)

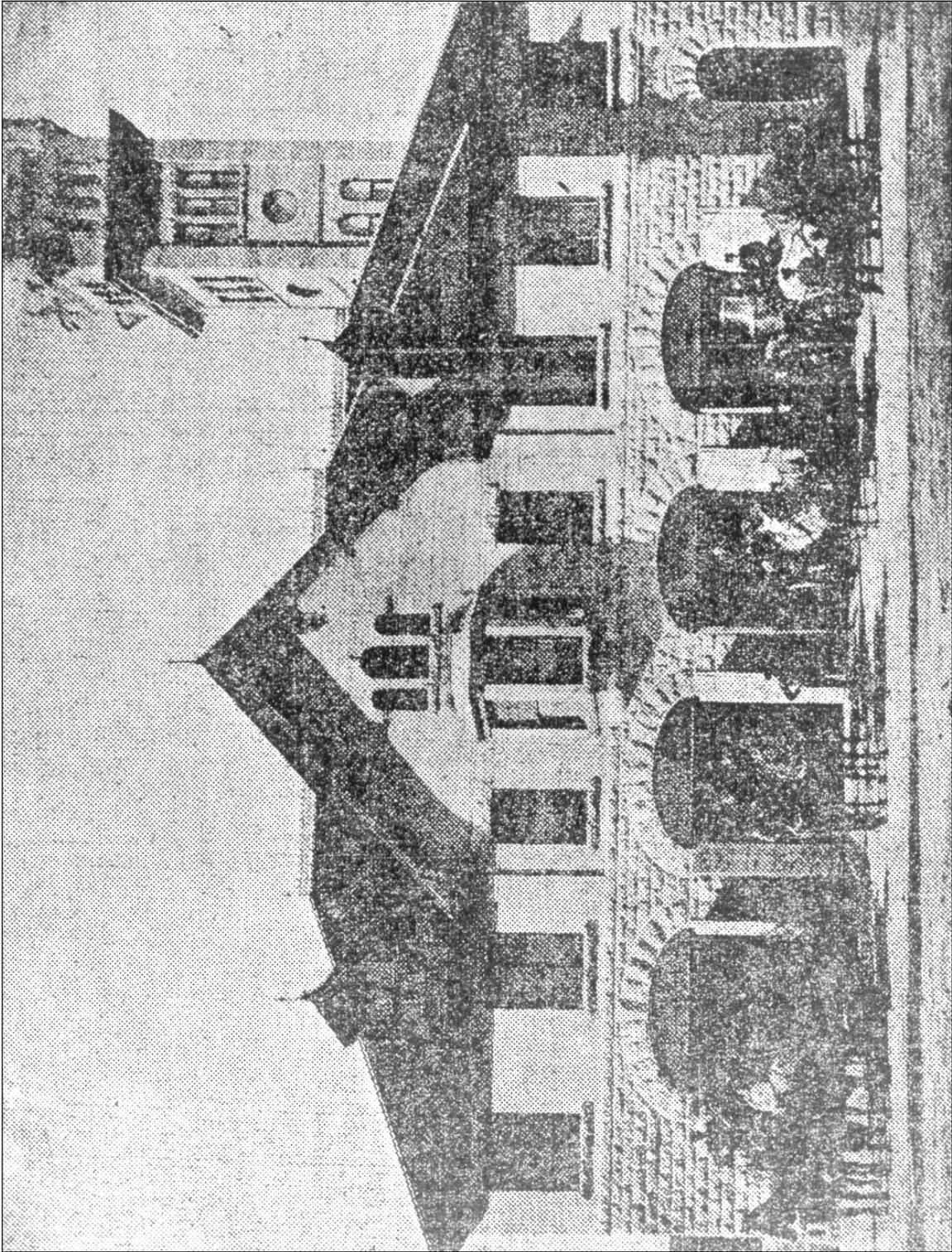


Plate 2 – Fire Hall No. 3, 1906. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

56 MAPLE STREET – FIRE HALL NO. 3 (FORMER FIRE HALL NO. 2)

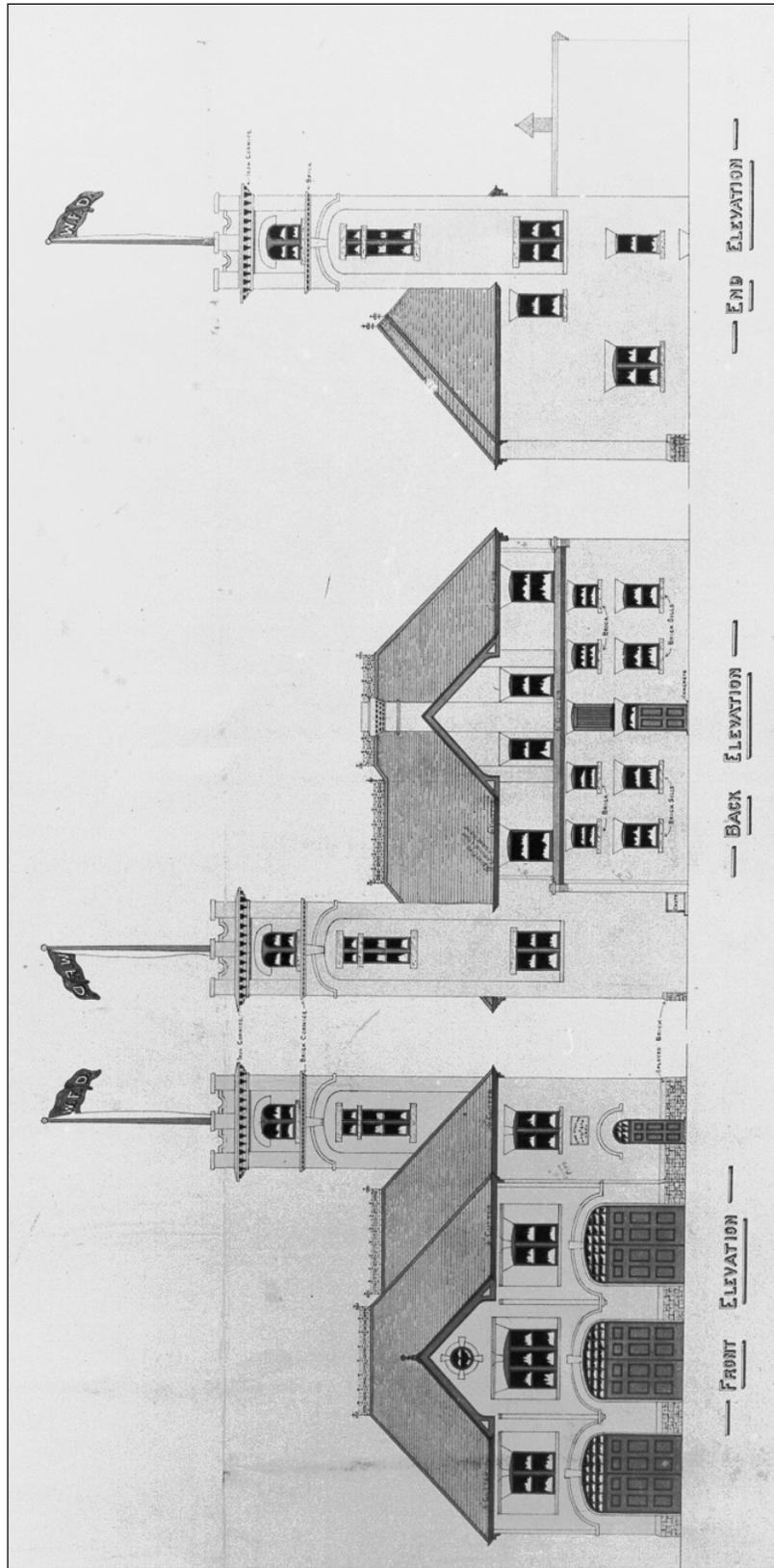


Plate 3 – Architect’s Plan of the Fire Halls, 1903 (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, 554-17528.)

56 MAPLE STREET – FIRE HALL NO. 3 (FORMER FIRE HALL NO. 2)



Plate 4 – Central Fire Hall, William Avenue, 1884. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Gisli Goodman Collection #4.)



Plate 5 – Fire Hall No. 1, Albert Street and Bannatyne Avenue, 1924. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

56 MAPLE STREET – FIRE HALL NO. 3 (FORMER FIRE HALL NO. 2)

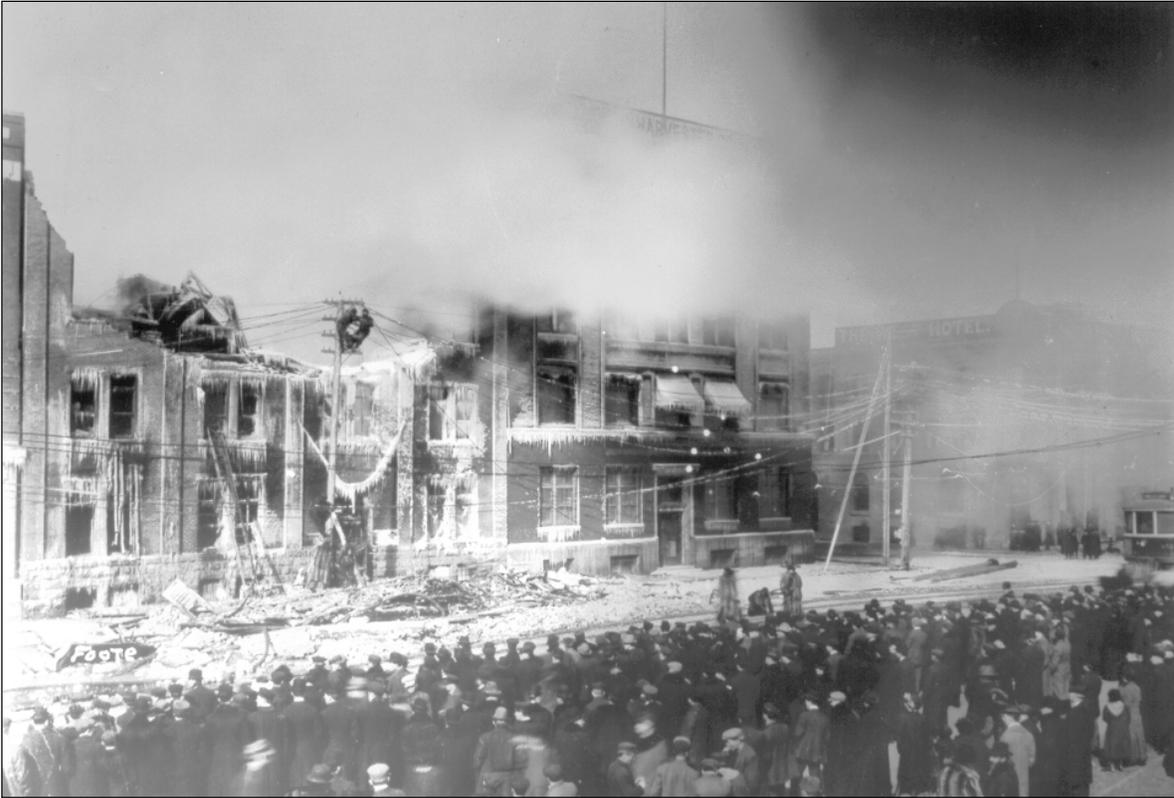


Plate 6 – Fire at the Radford-Wright Company Building, 776 Main Street, March 9, 1912. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection #231 [N1831].)