

224 NOTRE DAME AVENUE – ARGYLE BLOCK
Paul M. Clemens, 1908



Commercial development in downtown Winnipeg occurred first along Main Street – the old fur trade route that connected Upper and Lower Forts Garry. Early hotels, stables and retail establishments built on both sides of the wide street to take advantage of the traffic. This would all change in the early years of the 20th century when the T. Eaton Company announced it was building a mammoth department store on Portage Avenue. Land values on the avenue and its cross streets skyrocketed and local investors moved quickly to take advantage of the guaranteed increase in pedestrian and vehicular traffic on the thoroughfare.

Notre Dame Avenue, downtown's other major route, quickly began filling with speculative ventures, many of them office buildings or mixed-use retail/residential structures. One of the most unique was the Argyle Block, built in 1908 to fill its entire lot and requiring two public façades – facing Notre Dame Avenue and Garry Street.

The Argyle Block is a rare example of the Romanesque Revival style applied to a commercial

building, the style, especially in Winnipeg, usually reserved to warehouses. Popular in North America starting in the 1880s, it is identified by its use of rough materials – brick and rusticated stone – quoins, belt course and flat, unadorned rooflines. The most distinguishable element is the arch used for window and door openings. The Lake of the Woods Building, 212 McDermot Avenue is another of the handful of commercial examples in the city.

Its architect was Paul Melsted Clemens (1870-1966), another of Winnipeg's Icelandic-born builders/designers. He arrived in the late 1890s and worked in the city for nearly two decades mostly known for modestly detailed apartment buildings. Other major works by Clemens are: Victoria Court Apartments, 471 William Avenue (1910); Waldorf Apartments, 634 Broadway Avenue (1911); and John Moyse House, 838 Wolseley Avenue (1913) – Grade III.

The Notre Dame Avenue elevation features a severely altered main floor with large display windows. The upper three floors are in a much more unaltered state and are constructed of rust-coloured brick with stone accenting. The upper floors are divided into two vertical bays by brick pilasters (single at the corners and paired in the middle) with carved stone heads and bases. Within the bays, window openings are paired in rectilinear openings on the second and third floors (with wide stone heads) and arched openings on the top floor set below arched bands of brick with large metal bracket-like keystones. A complete metal entablature engraved with the word “ARGYLE” and a heavy overhanging cornice complete this façade.

Many of these design elements are also found on the Garry Street façade, which also features a renovated ground floor and a more original upper three floors (Plate 11). Instead of two bays there are three, the southern-most holds doors leading to the metal fire escape.

The west elevation, although covered by the Lindsay Building, 228 Notre Dame Avenue, features several angled light wells providing the interior suites with fresh air and natural light.

The interior is a mix of altered spaces (main floor retail and west end of second floor) and original (upper two floors). The original space features small suites located on the west side of the building accessed by a mid-building wood accented staircase and a hallway along the east wall. Common

toilet/bath facilities are located on each floor and wood accenting, doors and hardware and finishes appear to be original.

The original owner of the block was the Argyle Land Company, organized in 1905 by David R. Wood, although it was quickly sold to Frances Thomas “Frank” Lindsay (1854-1940) in 1909. Lindsay was an Ontario-born businessman who arrived in Winnipeg via Minnesota in 1884 and became the owner of several local hotels by the turn-of-the-century. Lindsay would ultimately sell the Argyle Block and the neighbouring Oxford Hotel to James Richardson, influential grain dealer, in 1923.

Early commercial tenants of this block included Oxford Billiards, Thistle Renovating and Tailoring Company and the Maple Leaf Wine Company. Building designer P.M. Clemens had his offices on the building’s second floor. The third and fourth floors were residential suites which, according to City of Winnipeg records, were closed in the 1970s. Today, many of the suites are rented to artists and musicians as workspace.

Elements of the building that would require approval if alterations were planned are:

Exterior-

- Four-storey brick and stone building with flat roof located mid-block on the south side of Notre Dame Avenue, its main façades facing north onto Notre Dame Avenue and south onto Garry Street and its east and west façades hidden by the neighbouring buildings;
- The Notre Dame façade with its upper floors divided into two bays by single and paired brick pilasters with carved stone heads and bases, rectilinear window openings with stone sills and heads on the second and third floors and arched openings on the fourth floor topped by arched brickwork and large metal bracket-like keystones, a complete metal entablature engraved with the word “ARGYLE” and a heavy overhanging cornice;
- The Garry Street façade with its upper storeys divided into three bays, the east bay holding doors for the open metal fire escape, the other bays with paired windows, rectilinear on the second and third floors and arched on the fourth floor, oversized metal keystones, a complete metal entablature engraved with the word “ARGYLE” and a heavy overhanging cornice; and
- Light wells in the west wall

Interior-

- The third and fourth floors with side hallways with doors and transoms, glass/wood fire escape vestibules, suites, common bathrooms, Murphy beds and decorative wood finishes.