



235 NOTRE DAME AVENUE

ST. CHARLES HOTEL

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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At the time of the construction of the St. Charles Hotel in 1913, Winnipeg was just winding down from a phenomenal building boom. Located at the corner of Albert Street and Notre Dame Avenue, the new hotel was in the heart of a bustling commercial district that had grown in less than two decades from a pioneer town into the business and warehouse centre of the Canadian prairies. Hotels were a logical and lucrative adjunct to this booming growth, when the demand for accommodation of all kinds could hardly be satisfied. In fact, the trend at the end of the boom period was moving toward increased investment in property for housing and hotels rather than in speculation in vacant lands.¹

The St. Charles Hotel was constructed for owner Charles McCarrey. McCarrey was first and foremost the owner and proprietor of the St. Regis Hotel, but entered into some kind of partnership with George Skinner. Skinner in fact owned the St. Charles for nearly 20 years. His name was scratched out as the owner of the new hotel on its building permit in 1913² and he owned the hotel outright by the following year. As the driving force behind the early success of the St. Charles, Skinner kept both his name and that of his hotel prominent on the local scene as well as through his role on the executive of the Manitoba Hotel Association.³ He sold the hotel late in 1933 to join the service section of Canadian National Railways.⁴

The St. Charles Hotel was designed and constructed by Winnipeg's largest contractors, Carter, Halls and Aldinger. The firm included a large engineering department, which was capable of design work and was familiar with building specifications. The hotel is three storeys, built of reinforced concrete with masonry cladding. Built at a cost of \$122,000, the hotel went from a hole in the ground in early April to interim finishing work in June,⁵ a record aided by the fact that a decrease in construction projects that year had boosted the labour supply. In scale and materials, the hotel was designed to fit well into the warehouse district it served. The dark tapestry brick is set against the white limestone trimming which is used extensively in vertical bands between the windows and in the pedimented window heads of the upper two floors. A

sweeping bracketed cornice continues up the broad lines of the horizontal limestone bands that wrap around the façade and draw the eye to the corner of the building, its visual centre and the locale of its two name signs. Bands of stone and brick were alternated smartly along the ground floor, and broken systematically by the windows and doors to delineate the ground floor into sections according to use. The entrance to the hotel rotunda, for example, was set in the Notre Dame side, the cigar stand in a separate shop at the corner, and the dining room entrance in a third entrance along Albert Street. The two rear walls were constructed of common brick and punctuated by windows. With dimensions of 93 feet by 95 feet, the building is nearly square.

Inside on the main floor was a rotunda and office, kitchens and a large and elegant dining room. The owner took great pride in this dining room and it was clearly one of the main factors in the hotel's solid reputation. An early photograph shows a large floor space, supplemented by tables located around a mezzanine floor. Squared Ionic columns concealed the steel and concrete beneath, and gave a classical touch to the room. The ceiling was coffered with panels of back-lit stained glass. There may well have been a bar off to one side of the dining room.

In 1928, Skinner redecorated this room and renamed it the Empire Grill Room. The ceiling was lowered and the mezzanine sealed off. Mirrors on the walls opened up the broad, low room and the windows were overlaid inside with an arched head. The round lines of the windows were repeated in the round back of the chairs.⁶ In 1933, at the height of the economic depression, the Empire Grill offered sumptuous fare for the Christmas season for \$1.25 for adults and 75¢ for children. An article which compared the St. Charles' menu with the Fort Garry Hotel and Marlborough Hotel's dining rooms called the Empire Grill "well-known throughout the Dominion."⁷ Besides serving lunches and dinners, the Empire Grill Room also hosted supper dances, a Saturday night tradition for many years in Winnipeg.

Between dishing up delicious meals to the local population and providing good accommodation for the business traveller, the St. Charles Hotel did a thriving business for four decades before any major changes took place. A barber shop and cigar store supplemented the normal hotel trade and commerce.

During the 1950s, the St. Charles was owned by Nathan Rothstein, who also owned and managed the Marlborough Hotel at 331 Smith Street.⁷ In the early 1960s, Rothstein sold the St. Charles Hotel to Donald Stefanyk, who immediately made some major changes to the hotel. In 1965, the spacious dining room was eliminated. In its place a beer parlour was installed on the ground floor, with a coffee shop in the corner area and a greatly diminished rotunda. A banquet hall named the Blue Room was installed on the mezzanine floor after some strengthening of the floors was undertaken.⁸ While there had been a beverage room before this time, it now became the principal feature of the ground floor, thereby shifting the function and the clientele of the hotel. In 1967, a white tile was added to the façade of the ground floor and new signage was added in keeping with the new image of the revamped hotel. In 1970, a side entrance at 22 Albert Street was added and Vibrations Discotheque (now Wellington's) was installed in the basement.

While the interior alterations may have eliminated many of the original finishing and layout of the early years, the exterior has actually had very superficial alteration. The upper floors are nearly as they were when the St. Charles opened in 1913, while the striking bands of coloured stone and brick of the ground floor have only been covered over by the new tile sheeting.

This hotel is important to this corner and functions well visually in the buffer zone between the warehouse district down Albert Street and the commercial district to the south and west of Notre Dame. While compatible with other buildings in the warehouse district it serves, the St. Charles Hotel employs a distinctive architecture where decoration was equally important to its function of attracting clients.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Ruben Bellan, Winnipeg First Century, Queenston House Publishing Co. Ltd. (Winnipeg) 1978, p. 123.
- ² City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 24, 20 January 1913.
- ³ Skinner was Vice-President and a director of the Manitoba Hotel Association.
- ⁴ “Manitoba Hotel Activities,” The Hotel News, July 1934, p. 11.
- ⁵ Two photographs trace the progress of construction in the Manitoba Free Press, 5 April 1913 and 31 May 1913.
- ⁶ “St. Charles Hotel Empire Grill Room,” The Hotel News, January 1933, p. 23.
- ⁷ “Hotelman Rothstein Dies in Winnipeg,” The Winnipeg Tribune, 30 April 1969.
- ⁸ Permits, op. cit., No. 642, 24 February 1964 and No. 1496, 13 April 1965.

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Plate 1 – St. Charles Hotel, 235 Notre Dame Avenue, ca.1915. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, 1297-38828.)

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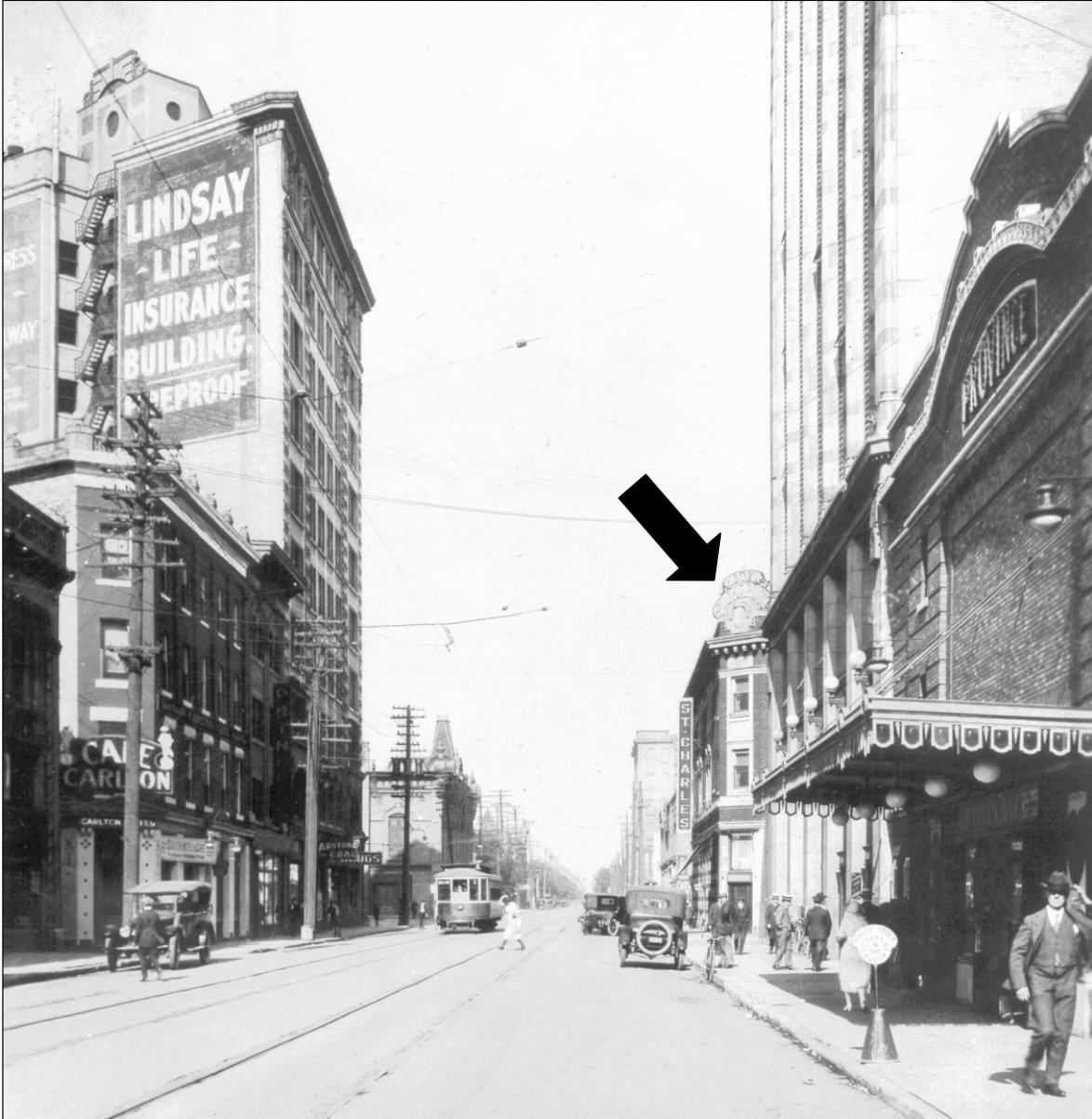


Plate 2 – Looking north on Notre Dame Avenue, the St. Charles Hotel is on the right (arrow).
(Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 3 – Dining room at the St. Charles Hotel, ca.1910. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N1104.)



Plate 4 – St. Charles Hotel Orchestra, no date. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, A0331-10639.)

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Plate 5 – St. Charles Hotel, 235 Notre Dame Avenue, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)