



725 PORTAGE AVENUE SECURITY STORAGE BUILDING (KROMAR PRINTING BUILDING)

Date of Construction: 1929

Building Permit: 1061/1929 (Plans at City Storage)

Architect: Semmens, John Nelson

Contractor: Guay, J.L.¹

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

Functional rather than decorative, this structure, built as a public storage building, is very conspicuous because of its scale and unusual design.

The main ornamental feature of the building is the ground floor of the front (south) façade, clad in light coloured limestone to contrast the dark brick of the upper floors and the band of Italian marble at grade. The centrally located entrance is ornamentally complex, with stylized connected columns, a pointed arch with a quatrefoil embellished decorative band above. Delicate wood tracery highlights the transom above the door with was replaced with an aluminium element. Two carved dog heads, the company's logo, are also found on either side of the door and above the opening is a carved panel with the company's name and two shields with the date of construction, 1929. The façade is divided into five bays by means of giant order limestone pilasters with low relief embellishments and heads that end



Front (south) and west façades, 2008

above the roof line. This roof line is flat except for the raised section in the middle of the building. Windows on the ground were originally large, the upper storeys all feature small windows in each bay.

The east façade is covered by the neighbouring building; the west façade continues the architectural design of the front, with limestone pilasters, dark brick walls and small window openings. The rear (north) is plainly designed and now features a very large, one-storey addition.

According to a contemporary account of the grand opening, the president of Security Storage Company, George H. McKeag, and architect J.N. Semmens travelled to Chicago, Illinois to study the design and layout of that city's many modern public storage buildings.²

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. Alterations to the exterior have included the replacement and partial filling of the ground floor windows on the main façade and the painting of the limestone elements on the upper floors.

The building is one of Winnipeg's rare examples of a Depression-era Modern Gothic style building, a style popularized across North America from 1900 to approximately 1940. Architects used the basic components of the Gothic style – pointed arches, tracery, symmetrical massing, crenellated towers, buttresses, half-timbering and stucco – and translated them onto modern buildings. The effect was a more subdued ornamentation with simpler silhouettes. Most often used on churches and large school and university buildings, it was sometimes referred to as Collegiate Gothic. Because of economic realities, only a few office structures in Winnipeg's downtown were ever designed in this style.



Rear (north) and west façade, 2008

Architect Colonel John N. Semmens was born in Toronto, Ontario in 1880, the son of a pioneer Methodist minister. He graduated from Wesley College and received his architectural degree from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1910, he moved west to Winnipeg, opened a practice, and soon became associated with the prominent New York firm of McKim, Mead and White. While in its employ, Semmens served as local supervising architect for the Bank of Montreal project at the southeast corner of Portage Avenue and Main Street. During his career, he was twice president of the Manitoba Association of Architects, 1921 and 1941.³

In 1920 he was hired as a consultant for the Winnipeg School Division by J. B. Mitchell. In that role (which was expanded as Mitchell approached retirement in 1928), Semmens designed a great number of Winnipeg schools and supervised the planning of others. During World War II, Semmens organized the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadiers, but did not go overseas. He spent the remainder of the war as Commandant at Camp Shilo.⁴

In 1958 he moved to Victoria, B.C. and died three years later. A list of Semmens' major work in Winnipeg includes: Bank of Montreal, 335 Portage Avenue, (1911-13, Grade II, local supervising architect for McKim, Mead and White); Turner-Walker Block, 425 Henry Avenue (1912, Grade III); R.R. Scott House, 29 Ruskin Row (1914, Grade II); Sir Sam Steele, 15 Chester Street (1921, Grade III); and Wolseley, 511 Clifton Street South (1921, Grade III). He has been given 10 points by the Historical Buildings Committee.



Front (south) and east façades, 2008

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

Security Storage Company, the original and long-time occupant of the building, was organized in 1909 by I.M. Winslow in a small building at the corner of Vaughan Street and Graham Avenue. After several moves, the company purchased the warehouse and business of the Richardson Storage Company, 83 Kate Street, where they continued until the July 1929 move to their new Portage Avenue headquarters. In 1925, Winslow sold the company and G.H. McKeag became president, R.G. McKeag vice-president and W.A. Johnston secretary-treasurer.⁵ The company owned and occupied the building until 1956. Kromar Printing Limited has been the building's main occupant since the 1970s.



Main (south) entrance and detail, 2008

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

Under the Historical Buildings By-law, this building meets a number of important criteria:

- its historical importance- a rare, late-1920s era building completed at a time when the world economy was moving towards the Great Depression;
- its associations- N/A;
- its design- an excellent example of the Modern Gothic style;
- its architect- J.N. Semmens was a respected and important practitioner;
- its location- defines an important intersection and contributes greatly to its historic downtown historic streetscape; and
- its integrity- its main façade continue to display many of its original elements and design.



Front (south) façade, 1978

ENDNOTES:

- 1 Manitoba Free Press, July 23, 1929, p. 8.
- 2 Ibid., p. 8.
- 3 Information courtesy of the Manitoba Association of Architects, Winnipeg.
- 4 Winnipeg Free Press, November 5, 1961; and J. N. Semmens, "Typical Schools of Western Canada" in The Journal, The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Vol. IV, No. 11 (November 1927), pp. 401-406.
- 5 Manitoba Free Press, July 23, 1929, p. 9.