



219 BOULEVARD PROVENCHER

**L'HÔTEL-DE-VILLE DE SAINT BONIFACE
(ST. BONIFACE CITY HALL)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

5 SEPTEMBER 1981

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The location of the St. Boniface City Hall on Provencher Boulevard depicts the history of the early French settlement. Bishop Provencher arrived on the east bank of the Red in 1818 to establish a mission for the Métis and Indians who lived at the fork of the rivers. The mission was named for a German saint, St. Boniface, and gradually expanded with the arrival of other priests and sisters who established the churches, schools, and hospitals upon which year-round settlement was based. To Provencher's successors, particularly Bishop Taché, fell the task of attracting French-speaking Catholic settlers for the farms and villages of the north west. The urban settlement grew up apart from the city of Winnipeg, but by and large benefited in proportion with the boom of 1900-14, brought on by the expanding wheat market and the arrival of thousands of immigrants.

In 1900, the town of St. Boniface consisted of 1,000 souls generally centred around the Cathedral and north along Provencher Boulevard. Boom-time growth coupled with an aggressive campaign for industry boosted the population to 9,992 in 1912.¹ By offering tax incentives, cheap land and power, as well as good transportation facilities, the St. Boniface municipal council attracted several agricultural product processors (lumber and wheat mills and abattoirs) as well as Manitoba's first rolling mill. Despite the increasing tax dollars and municipal services such as graded roads, serviced lots could not keep up with the demand. The time had also come for a new town hall.

On 20 April 1905, the town of St. Boniface asked for tenders for a new town hall that should not exceed \$40,000.² In June, the tender was awarded to architect Victor Horwood, who in turn contracted to the William Grace Company for construction. With such established firms of French-speaking architects as Sénécal and Smith and A. Gilbert & Co. also tendering,³ the choice of an "outsider" was not particularly popular, and subjected the city council to considerable difficulties later on. Nevertheless, the sub-contracting of the heating and plumbing to the firm of Dallaire et Daoust went a long way to smoothing ruffled feathers.⁴

Horwood's design for the new town hall had been accepted on the basis of a water colour sketch that was in the genre of impressionism. In filmy colours, the town hall was large and impressive with an imposing entranceway topped by a domed tower. The walls were seemingly of stone, the details regularly punctuated by urns and statues.⁵ The effect proved irresistible to the council.

Construction began in the fall of 1905 and ended in April of the following year, the date on the cornerstone. Several times during the construction period, Horwood appeared before the town council to request more money. While half of these hearings were for changes to the original design, the other half were simply to plead the rising costs of the contractors. The Winnipeg Grace Company had originally contracted for \$29,926, which dovetailed with Horwood's tender for \$40,000.⁶ The finished product cost \$60,000,⁷ And the new building was considerably different from the water colour rendition. This discrepancy was probably caused by a variety of factors but Horwood's business ability was probably the biggest factor.

Victor Horwood was a good architect. He trained in art and architecture in New York and Ottawa before coming to Winnipeg in 1904. Among his works in private practice are the Waldron and Moxam courts, St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, the Collegiate Institute in Virden and several schools in the west. After his appointment as Provincial Architect to the Manitoba government in 1911, Horwood designed the magnificent Law Courts building on Broadway, the Agricultural College buildings (some remain as provincial government buildings on the Tuxedo site), and the Brandon Hospital for the Insane. These are solid achievements. However, it was this same man who recommended the changes in the foundations of the Legislative Buildings in 1913 which played into the hands of the contractors, and precipitated the scandal that threw the Conservative party of Sir Rodmond Roblin into a purgatory that lasted two decades.

Subsequent Royal Commission hearings and court proceedings uncovered a story of graft which quickly determined that Horwood, as chief architect, had not only known of the deal but had perjured himself in the early cover-up attempts.⁸ In the tradition of John Dean, Horwood bargained with the courts for his testimony which ultimately placed the blame in the laps of the Premier and three of his cabinet ministers. Horwood, although guilty of negligence and perjury,

was left off with dismissal from his government post. The rest of the government did not fare so well; it was banished from office first by the Lieutenant-Governor and then by the voters.⁹

To return to the St. Boniface town hall, Horwood's manipulation of the plans and his alteration of the construction costs may be attributed to bad judgement and unsound business principles, or to graft. Either way, it did not go unnoticed. Upon the opening of the new town hall, the French newspaper, Le Manitoba commented:

Les plans soumis au conseil avaient une toute autre apparence que l'édifice actual; ainsi, la tour était plus haute; ses colonnettes avaient du cachet; l'horloge qu' on y avait dessinée faisait bon effect à l'oeil; au lieu de cela on nous donne une espèce de ruche d'abeilles fermée hermétiquement.¹⁰

In effect, "this building is different than the agreed plan, the tower is different, there is no clock and the top looks like a beehive." It appears that as construction proceeded upward, Horwood cut corners, (while charging the town council more) and cheated outright on the tower as the money ran out.

Although the new town hall was generally acceptable to the citizens of St. Boniface, the original dome was not. Squat, plain and completely closed in, the tower so offended people that City Council (after 1908), insisted that Horwood rebuild the tower and dome closer to the original plans, with the existing tower as the result. One feels, by judging the elaborate and diverse ornamentation of the new tower, that Horwood was obsequious, if not vindictive, on this design.

While Le Manitoba grumbled that it did not know what style of architecture the new town hall could possibly be, it approved of the design generally, waxing lavish in its praise of the interior. It was, they stated, well laid out, with good natural lighting and furnished to give the impression of a small palace. The council chambers were magnificent and the prison cells in the basement were plain enough not to encourage people to stay there.¹¹

The structure is red brick with a limestone foundation and limestone trim. A three-storey rectangular block, the principal feature of the building, beside the controversial tower, is its

entrance. Heavy stone steps lead upwards to an entrance recessed behind attached columns. A carved lintel over the architrave reads “Hotel-de-Ville” and the date 1906 is set into the stone railing. Into the two sides of the steps are the openings to the basement stairs. The entire front piece is projected and topped with a pediment. The bracketed cornice continues in a low parapet. The tower with its four round openings was certainly designed to accommodate clocks that have never existed. The windows on the lower floor have a flat head but the third floor windows are rounded with brick voussoirs. The effect is quite massive and dignified.

Much of the interior layout remains with pressed metal ceilings and painted woodwork. A double return staircase terminates in columns. Originally, the main floor contained the office of the secretary treasurer, the town clerk’s office, with an open fireplace, school board offices, the mayor’s reception room and the mayor’s office. The woodwork of these rooms is British Columbia fir, stained for a ‘weathered effect’.¹² The furniture was of golden oak.

The second floor contained the council Chambers, which the Free Press reported to be modeled after the chambers of a “large city to the south.” The mayor’s seat was on a raised dais with a railing in front with councillors arranged on the floor in comfortable chairs with desks. Committee rooms and the offices of the police chief, engineer and town foreman filled the rest of the floor.

On the third floor were rooms occupied as residences by the chief of police and his assistant. The court room and 11 jail cells (two for the women and nine for men) shared the basement with the two boilers. The cells, which were made of steel, were especially designed to be sanitary as well as safe.

When the town hall was finished in 1906, the old frame hall was moved to the rear of the lot to become a firehall. The new Firehall No. 1 was built in 1907 but for the duration, the horses were stabled in the former council chambers.¹³

On 26 February 1908, the City of St. Boniface was officially incorporated. The city was divided into five wards, each electing two councillors for a total of ten. The mayor was elected at large.

This arrangement lasted, with modifications, until the formation of Unicity. By about 1910, the city had a solid growth rate that pushed out its boundaries regularly. The city of St. Boniface has maintained a strong Francophone element,¹⁴ but almost half of the growth was English-speaking. This change was reflected in the members of the city council over the years.

While the community served by City Hall grew, so did the range of services. In the 1930s, a Health Clinic and a Relief Office shared the municipal space until the whole building became hopelessly overcrowded. The police chief, J. Baudry and his family were finally moved from their home on the third floor in 1953, but even this did not give the city enough space. In 1966, a new Police Station and Law Courts were opened and in 1967, a new Health Unit was added, both east of City Hall.

The mayor in 1961 had fought to build a new City Hall, pointing out that the ravages that the previous decade of neglect had wrought.¹⁵ \$600,000 was actually approved towards a new complex but the money went instead to the two new buildings rather than to a new City Hall. Routine maintenance has upgraded the 76-year-old structure, which has managed to retain a surprising amount of its original interior as well as an exterior that has suffered few alterations.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Thomas Berry and J.P. Mayor, "The City of St. Boniface To-day," The Dominion, December 1912, p. 48.
- 2 Minutes of the St. Boniface Municipal Council, 25 April 1905, and the Winnipeg Telegram, 20 April 1905.
- 3 Ibid., Minutes for 25 April 1905.
- 4 Ibid., 11 September 1905.
- 5 "St. Boniface City Hall," The Western Home Monthly, July 1905, p. 12.
- 6 Minutes, op. cit., 11 September, 25 September, 13 November 1905; 8 January, 12 March 1906.
- 7 "St. Boniface City Hall," Manitoba Free Press, 6 December 1906, p. 2.
- 8 W.L. Morton, Manitoba: A History, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1957, pp. 341-42.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 343 and 347.
- 10 "Notre Hotel-de-Ville," Le Manitoba, 20 May 1906.
- 11 Loc. cit.
- 12 Free Press, op. cit.
- 13 Winnipeg Free Press, 26 February 1974.
- 14 Nearly 50% of the residents of St. Boniface in 1971 listed French as their mother tongue. Atlas des Francophones de L'Ouest, Winnipeg, 1979, p. 41.
- 15 "City Hall Stands 55 Years," Free Press, 13 October 1961.

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Plate 1 – St. Boniface City Hall, 219 Boulevard Provencher, 1907. This shows the original dome before it was rebuilt to its present form. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 2 – City Hall with its new domed tower, ca.1911. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection #2387 [N3021].)

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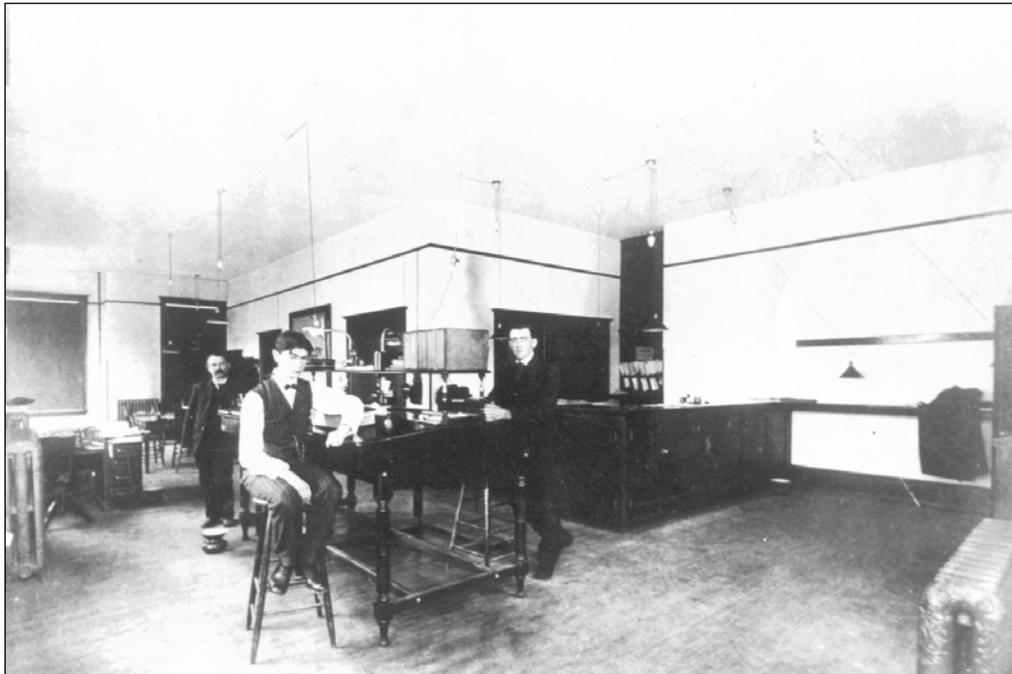


Plate 3 – The secretarial office, ca.1910. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – The visit of the Duke of Connaught and Princess Patricia in 1912. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection #259 [N1859].)

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Plate 5 – This shot shows City Hall in relation to No. 1 Firehall, 1916. The feature in the grounds to the left appears to be a band stand. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 6 – A reception for the Governor-General Bessborough on 19 August 1932. Note the landscaping of the grounds. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection #116 [N1716].)

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Plate 7 – St. Boniface City Hall, ca.1938. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)