

544 WARDLAW AVENUE – WARDLOW (WARDLAW) APARTMENTS
J.D. Atchison, 1905



Winnipeg in the early years of the nineteenth century was a young city, the pre-eminent urban centre in a region undergoing rapid growth. As population and economic activity mushroomed, so too did the demand for physical development – for offices, stores, industrial plants, houses, roads, and other infrastructure.

Among the many professionals and tradesmen drawn to the city by these opportunities was architect John Danley Atchison (1870-1959) who opened a local office in 1905 after studying and practising in Chicago for several years. At the time, Chicago was in the forefront of building technologies, especially high-rise steel frame and reinforced concrete construction. It also was a source of indigenous architectural styles – namely, the Chicago and Prairie schools of design.

Atchison applied his experience over the next two decades to produce some of Winnipeg's finest commercial and institutional structures, such as the North-West Commercial Travellers' Association, Canada Permanent, Maltese Cross, Great-West Life, Boyd, Union Trust, Curry, and Bank of Hamilton buildings in the downtown and the Manitoba School for the Deaf in Tuxedo. By the mid-1920s, he had left the city for more lucrative professional prospects in California.

One of Atchison's first projects, the Wardlow Block in Fort Rouge, was an early local example of the Prairie School of design. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright of Chicago had introduced this style at the turn of the nineteenth century. It was intended to reflect and complement the environment of the American Midwest. Its houses and other structures were characterized by low, spreading proportions, horizontal lines, gently sloped roofs with deep eaves, flat wall surfaces, minimal ornamentation, terraces that merged with gardens, windows with glazing bars set in angular patterns, informal floor plans, and use of natural materials.

At the Wardlow, this approach resulted in a subdued, three-storey apartment building with a low-pitched hip roof, broad eaves, exposed rafters, porches with removable windows (first and second floors), and open balconies (third floor). Natural lighting was enhanced by the presence of numerous windows. Horizontal emphasis was achieved through the use of stone sills, lintels, a continuous upper-storey belt course, and the placement of some windows in pairs and trios.

The block, which is on the southwest corner of Wardlaw Avenue and Nassau Street North, has concrete footings, a stone foundation, solid brick walls, and common clay brick finish. The roof originally had red Spanish tile, but now has an ordinary cover. Basement windows are oriented horizontally. Most other openings are vertical rectangles that vary in size and placement as singles or groups.

A pavilion and a massive smooth-cut stone entrance arch dominate the symmetrical front (north) façade. The arch is round, layered and delicately carved. It encompasses squared columns, a lintel that doubles as a nameplate, an arched transom set within additional carved floral designs, and a single door. Porches mark both ends of the pavilion. On the first and second floors, these elements have engaged stone columns between their glass openings. Windows in plain

surrounds now enclose the third-floor balconies. A continuous stone belt course doubles as a sill as it extends under the windows along the top floor of front and side façades.

No belt course is found on the rear (south) elevation. As well, the openings on this wall have segmental arched brick heads instead of stone lintels. Modest bay windows provide additional light to interior dining rooms. There also are rear metal staircases to the suites.

The Wardlow was built for \$25,000 by the Davidson Brothers Co. and T.E. Ames. Designed as a luxury block, it contained only six rental units (two per floor), plus a janitor's suite in the basement. Each unit was about 160 square metres or some 1,720 square feet in size. Each was divided into a reception hall, drawing room, library, dining room, two bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, and maid's room. The first four spaces could be converted into one large room for entertaining. Other amenities included fireplaces, built-in china cabinets and large pantries. Hardwood floors, oak panelling, burlap, and mahogany were among the finishes. The main lobby was given a terrazzo floor, marble baseboards and oak wainscoting.

The Wardlow was built by William Hespeler (1830-1921), a businessman and German Counsel for Manitoba and the North-West Territories. He emigrated to Canada West (Ontario) from Germany in 1850. He and a brother operated a distillery until 1868 when the business was sold to the Seagram family. Hespeler subsequently became a Dominion government immigration agent and, from 1873 to 1883, commissioner of immigration and agriculture in Manitoba. As such, he was instrumental in encouraging the prairie settlement of several thousand Mennonite farmers from Russia. He went on to manage the Manitoba Land Co., work as an agent for Seagram's Distillery, serve as a member and speaker of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, and promote the early development of the Winnipeg General Hospital.

Hespeler sold the Wardlow in 1911, but continued to live in the block until his death. The new owners were agents Alcide Sebilleau and Max Krolik, then from 1919 to 1956, Sebilleau only. The property changed hands a few more times before it was converted to condominium ownership in 1981.