



393 WELLINGTON CRESCENT

FORTUNE HOUSE

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

September 15, 1981

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FORTUNE HOUSE

This large and beautiful house occupies a major riverbank site which tiers down in lawns and brush to the water's edge. It was designed and erected in 1910 for the Mark Fortune family. The house is the work of the Irish architect William Wallace Blair.

Blair was trained in the old British tradition at the Academical Institute in Belfast before he immigrated to Ontario in the early years of the 1870s. He worked in Toronto and Hamilton for several years, and even designed a warehouse and office building in Winnipeg, before returning to Ireland to superintend the construction of a massive waterworks system. Returning in 1898, Blair re-located his practice to Chicago until he moved up to Winnipeg in 1905.¹ With these considerable influences behind him, Blair set to work on such prestigious projects as the Warwick Apartments (1908) on Central Park, the Kenmore (now Princeton) Apartments (1909) on Broadway, the Roslyn (1909) and the Victory Building (1910), formerly the Farmer Building, since demolished. Blair's buildings were all heralded in glowing terms in contemporary accounts, with the Roslyn generally accepted as his major Winnipeg work.

Blair retired to Victoria shortly after the construction of this house in 1910 and of the Victory Building in 1911. Victoria was able to offer the climate and milieu that an older British gentleman might appreciate. There, in 1912, he built a large house on an expensive piece of waterfront property which has a current price tag of nearly two million dollars.² The house is remarkably similar to the Fortune house at 393 Wellington Crescent, which Blair designed two years earlier. Large and rambling, the house has stone on the ground floor with half timbering on rough cast plaster and prominent gables above. Large stone gateposts with wrought iron gates mark the entrance to each property, and both make maximum effect of their waterfront site.

Blair's house on Wellington Crescent is 59 feet by 55 feet, two and a half storeys on a limestone foundation with footings of concrete. The building cost \$30,000,³ which was a staggering sum in 1910, four years before the embryonic and 'temporary' income tax was introduced. At \$3,000, the

garage with its chauffeur's quarters overhead was more in line with typical domestic dwelling prices at the time.⁴

Blair's Victoria house has recently been called "Scottish Baronial" in style but with its prominent chimneys, half-timbering, gable emphasis and grouping, the Wellington Crescent house is more reminiscent of Queen Anne revival. Three chimneys contained several fireplaces, all of which have now been closed off. An especially large chimney at the rear was made as a design feature of the façade. The main floor rooms were all on a grand scale, beautifully finished in solid woods and suitable for a wealthy family's lifestyle. On the east side is a sunroom which opens onto an enclosed terrace for use in the summer months. The second floor contained the private sitting rooms and bedrooms, while extra rooms and servants' quarters occupied the third storey.

Mark Fortune moved his wife and the younger of his six children into the new house in 1911, but he was not long to enjoy it before his untimely death in April 1912. Fortune was Ontario born and educated until locating in Winnipeg as a young man in 1874. Contracting was soon cast aside for land speculation as Fortune joined with another chap named Conklin to buy and sell in city and farm lots.⁵ In 1882, he built the twin Fortune Block at 226-230 Main Street, immediately selling the south half of the building and retaining the north portion for his real estate office.⁶ He speculated heavily in lots on Portage Avenue, and after the boom found himself property poor. Fortune kept several of these lots and managed to make a comeback on his own after 1889.⁷ As a respected member of the 'old guard', Fortune was also extensively involved in Winnipeg sport and social centres as well as fraternal and church work.

Reputed to be a real family man, Fortune had his wife and younger children on European holiday when they set out for home on the maiden voyage of the Titanic. Mrs. Fortune and her two daughters were rowed to safety, but Mr. Fortune and his son went down with 1,300 other souls on the ship. Those who drowned were generally regarded as heroes, and Fortune and his son were so prominent that a great deal was made of the event.⁸

Mrs. Fortune stayed on in the big house for several years after, selling in 1920 to the W.P. Riley

family. Riley was an American, educated at Cornell College in Iowa, and experienced in the lumber and grocery businesses before he moved to Canada in 1906. In Port Arthur, Riley built up his own grocery wholesale company until he sold out to Alexander Macdonald of Winnipeg. Macdonald ran a large grocery wholesale in his own name in the southern portion of Mark Fortune's 1882 block on Main Street. When Macdonald bought out the Port Arthur firm, Riley moved to Winnipeg and assumed the position of general manager of the larger company but in 1913, he bought out the firm and changed its name to Western Grocers Ltd.⁹ With W.P. Riley as president, the firm grew even larger and exists today as one of the major supply wholesalers in western Canada.

Besides his own company, Riley held many major directorships, including the W.H. Malkin Co., Gateway Grocers, the Canadian Bank of Commerce, Monarch Lumber and the Dominion Fruit Co. From 1921 till 1943, Riley was on the board of Great West Life Assurance Company and became president from 1943 to 1951.¹⁰ When he died in 1954, W.P. Riley had a personal fortune of \$1.1 million and only a portion of which was still involved in his own company.¹¹

The Rileys raised three sons in their large riverbank home. In 1948, Mr. and Mrs. Riley moved to another house on Wellington Crescent, leaving their home of almost 30 years vacant. In 1950, the house was sub-divided into six suites which necessitated massive interior alterations but left the exterior unscathed. Predictably, the suites were also quite sumptuous and attracted a professional group of people. Typical among the early tenants was the vice-president of Beaver Lumber and a professor at the University of Manitoba.¹² The most recent tenants complimented this pattern.

The Fortune House, the Ashdown House (now Khartum Temple), the demolished Osler and Richardson houses were the norm for this district of the city's wealthy elite. The buildings were intended not only to provide shelter but to give a message of the dominance of the business man in pre-war society. These families had nothing to hide and no financial encumbrances, with a suitable display of wealth and power as the result. This house remains as a symbol of that era.

FOOTNOTES--

1. "W.W. Blair" Winnipeg Saturday Post 8 June 1912.
2. "Blair House" Vancouver Island Home Finder August 1981 p. 5. Thanks to Randy Rostecki of the Manitoba Historic Resources Branch.
3. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 904 29 April 1910.
4. Ibid., No. 2993 21 October 1910.
5. Winnipeg and Her Industries Steen and Boyce Winnipeg January 1882, p. 25.
6. "Building Boom" Winnipeg Sun 31 August 1882. See also, Henderson's for 1883.
7. Frank Schofield The Story of Manitoba Volume III The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co. Winnipeg 1913, p. 43.
8. "Brief Sketches of Winnipeggers Who Were Titanic Victims" Manitoba Free Press 20 April 1912.
9. "Grocery Executive, W.P. Riley Dies" Winnipeg Tribune 15 May 1954.
10. The Canadian Who's Who 1936-37 The Times Publishing Co. of London Toronto 1936, p. 919. See also Ibid., Tribune 25 June 1954.
11. "Riley Leaves \$1,131,945 in Estate" Winnipeg Tribune 25 June 1954.
12. Henderson's Director for Winnipeg 1952 and 1957.

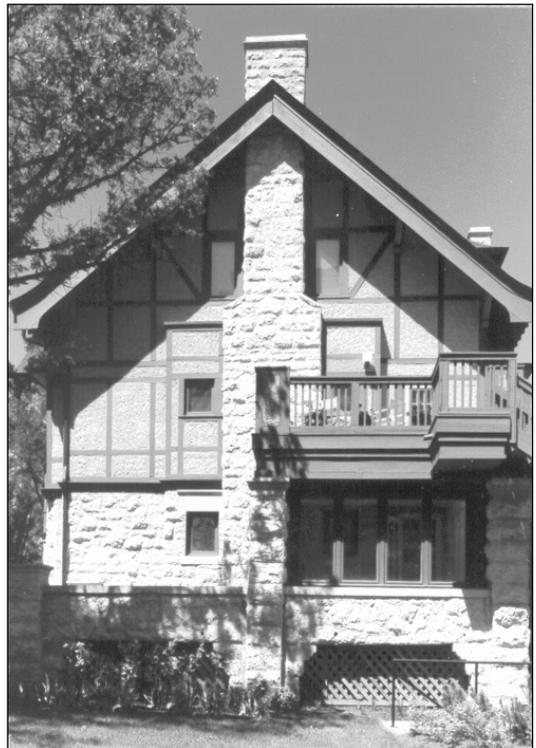
393 WELLINGTON CRESCENT – FORTUNE HOUSE



Plate 1 – Caricatured of Mark Fortune, 1908. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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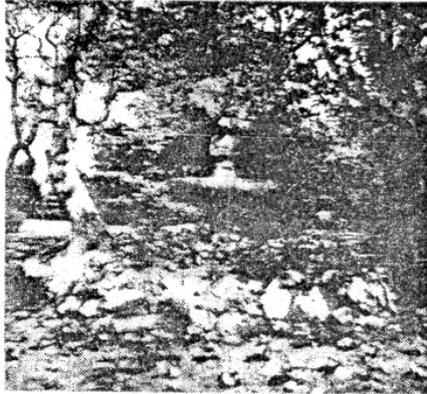
Plates 2-7 – 393 Wellington Crescent, Fortune House, no date. (M. Peterson.)



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The following description of Blair House is from the Vancouver Island Home Finder August 1981.

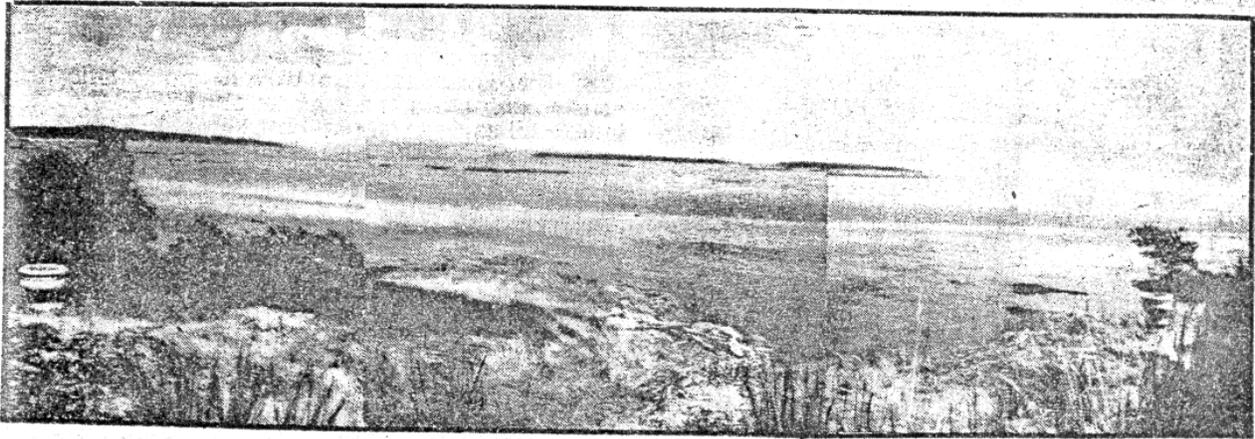
One of Victoria's most Prestigious Waterfront Estates



Blair House

A 1912 Scottish Baronial Mansion complete with carriage house in the most exclusive area of Victoria's Oak Bay. The architect-builder, William Wallace Blair set his home amongst 2.25 acres of majestic trees and shrubs imported from many parts of the world. The 600 foot irregular shoreline includes a small cove with its own private beach. This estate is a one of a kind for those seeking the ultimate location in Victoria on the waterfront.

\$ 1,750,000



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