



**294 - 296 WILLIAM AVENUE
MASSEY-HARRIS BLOCK**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

Sheila C. Grover
20 April 1983

294-296 WILLIAM AVENUE
MASSEY-HARRIS BLOCK

The agricultural implements firm which constructed this set of buildings was founded in 1847 by Daniel Massey and his son, Hart A. Massey (1823-1896), at Newcastle, Upper Canada.¹ The elder Massey was noted for having imported one of the first threshing machines into Canada about 1830.² Taking control of the Company at an early stage, the son undertook the manufacture of such items as a combined reaper and mower (1856); and a self-rake reaper (1863), which was the first in Canada. During 1870, the firm made Toronto its new headquarters,³ and eight years later, the Company began business in the North-West, with the Winnipeg branch being established in 1881 by T.J. McBride.⁴

As the great land boom of 1881-1882 encouraged settlement in the North-West, more branches of the Massey Manufacturing Company were established in Manitoba. These were located in Brandon, Rapid City (1882), Pilot Mound and Nelsonville (1883).⁵ A business of that size required an appropriate regional headquarters, and thus, thirty feet of frontage on the Market Square was purchased from the agency of Conklin and Fortune. This property cost \$7,000 when the transaction took place in January, 1883.⁶ The architectural firm of Barber and Barber were commissioned to design a four-storey, 30 ft. by 100 ft. solid brick warehouse for the Company at the southeast of Princess Street and William Avenue.⁷ Though the building was estimated to cost \$30,000, it was not proceeded with at that time, and one can only reason that the depression of 1883-1884 caused that reversal in Massey's plans.

By 1885 the economic condition of the North-West had eased sufficiently to allow for the construction of the new building. However, it would appear that the plans of Barber and Barber were forgotten at that point, and those of a young architect, George Browne, Jr.⁸ given preference. Barber and Barber were probably rejected because of their connection with the scandal which concerned the erection of the Civic Offices in 1884. The Browne building was to be 30 ft. by 125 ft. 6 in., four storeys including the basement and was to be constructed of solid brick.⁹ The structure which was constructed during the summer of 1885 emerged as 30 ft. by 95½ ft. by 50 ft.¹⁰ being of

white brick with the principal entrance on Princess Street, and was considered to be "one of the most solidly constructed and handsome business blocks in Winnipeg."¹¹

The quiet state of the economy gave rise to a slower growth of population in the North-West in the latter portion of the 1880s. During 1890, the Massey Manufacturing Company had an output of 16,000 machines,¹² but the

unsatisfactory and critical state of the implement trade of Canada...[because of forty or fifty firms making mowing machines, and twenty-five to thirty companies making self-binders in Ontario] led to great over-production and was naturally accompanied by the keenest competition and forced sales...[thus resulting in] a great loss of capital, much distress among employees [because of a great number of business failures].¹³

Therefore, the Massey and A. Harris, Son and Company implement firms, being the largest concerns of that nature in the Dominion, merged to become the Massey-Harris Company (Limited) during the spring of 1891.¹⁴ All employees of the two businesses in Winnipeg came to work in the former Massey Block, and the Harris Block at 154 Princess Street was leased to the Cockshutt Plow Company later that year.

During 1901, the Massey-Harris Company spent \$15,000 for interior alterations to their building. The architect was S. Frank Peters, a man who had worked with George Browne on a number of other projects, and the "mechanic" (builder) was Robert Watson.¹⁵ By 1904, however, the expansion of business was so great because of the immigration boom, that the quarters at Princess Street and William Avenue became inadequate. As a result, two wooden buildings to the east of the block were razed, and new \$35,000 edifice was erected in the summer of 1904. Peters was again the Company's architect, with the firm of Waterworth and Fee being the builders¹⁶ under the general contract of John McQuarrie. It is notable that MacQuarrie had come to Winnipeg during 1904 and that the 40 ft. by 100 ft. warehouse was his first large contract in the city.¹⁷ The new building gave the Massey-Harris Company an 80 ft. by 100 ft. site, which was fairly extensive for the area. By 1912, the Company operated six branch headquarters in the West, furnishing employment at the

Winnipeg department for seventy-five workers and twenty-five travellers, while also maintaining two hundred and sixty-five local agencies.¹⁸ The year 1912 was also the peak year for Western Canadian economic expansion prior to the First World War.

The agricultural boom of 1900-1914 was interrupted by the Great War, and afterwards by an economic slow-down. The Market Square, where many implement firms had their headquarters, had begun to lose its prestige when the Grain Exchange moved to Lombard Avenue in 1908. Though most firms deserted the Square for larger and more commodious places of business, the Massey-Harris Company remained on their original site. As transportation facilities changed and agricultural equipment became larger, the William Avenue location became more inadequate. By 1937, the firm was attempting to sell their property to the City of Winnipeg. It was stated at the time that Massey-Harris had "for some time...been endeavouring to obtain a purchaser for this property, in order that the...Company may acquire a property more suited to their needs."¹⁹ The City of Winnipeg, though desperate for additional office space at the time, did not acquire the property.

In 1944, the Massey-Harris Company sold the William Avenue buildings for \$40,000²⁰ to the Dominion Soudack Fur Company, and moved their implements business to the edifice at 200 Princess Street.²¹ The fur company has continued to occupy 294 William Avenue since that time, with the facility at No. 296 being leased to the Manitoba Dairy and Poultry Cooperative Limited (1947 - c.1958); and the Home Welfare Agency (c. 1963-1973). In 1947, the external appearance of the building was altered when the cornice of 1885 was removed and the entire structure was painted white.²²

The Civic Assessments Division categorizes the complex into two buildings. Building `A' is the 1885 structure, while `B' is the addition of 1904. As early as 1937, it was noted that `A' had cracks in the west wall, with badly sunken basement floors, though the general condition was pronounced to be "fairly good". It was also found in 1941 that the floor on the third storey of `A' was "worn and in poor condition". Major interior alterations were performed on `A' during 1944 and 1945 when Dominion Soudack put in a vault and a concrete floor in the basement, new plumbing and new

wiring at a cost of \$37,000. It was found in 1947 that the second to fourth floors of 'B' were worn and sagged at the centre, and that condition remained the same until at least 1961. With good maintenance, the entire complex was clean and well-kept being in fair general condition in 1971, with full utility.²³ The interiors of the two buildings have had the following characteristics:

Building 'A' (erected 1885)

	FLOORING	WALLS	CEILING HEIGHTS
Basement	Fir on concrete	Stone	7½ feet
1 st floor	Maple	Brick	13 feet
2 nd floor	Fir	Brick	12 feet
3 rd floor	Fir	Brick	11 feet
4 th floor	Fir	Brick	10-12 feet ²⁴

The interior of the 1885 building possesses some very interesting wood-work. This includes 'V'-jointed board ceilings and panelling, a steam bent staircase railing and elaborate balusters, with most of the main floor still finished in stained and varnished woodwork. Even the name 'MASSEY-HARRIS' can be faintly discerned through the white paint on the west wall of the structure.

Historically, the Massey-Harris buildings are significant because of their association with a firm that was probably the largest manufacturer of farm machinery in Canada during the era 1880-1912. Also, members of the Massey family continued as community leaders, and one may cite the example of Vincent Massey (1887-1967), who was the Governor-General of Canada from 1952 to 1956. The fortunes of the buildings on William Avenue clearly reflect the career of the Market Square as its influence waned during the first half of the twentieth century. The change of function from one type of business to another was also typical of buildings in the area, as has been seen in many of the other reports in this series. The evidence from the Assessments Division would appear to suggest that the buildings had not been properly maintained during the years prior to the Massey-Harris exodus of 1944. Again, this was typical as a pattern of behaviour as the Central Business District lost its primary position as a retail area. Lastly, such premises eventually became unsuitable as the size and

style of farm machinery changed. An enclosed plant was no longer required; instead, firms such as Massey-Harris required large tracts of open space for storage of their equipment. In the heart of a city by the 1930s, there was no cheap vacant land remaining, and firms were forced to move or cut their expansion plans.

Endnotes:

1. J. Castell Hopkins (ed.), Canada: An Encyclopedia of the Country Volume V (Toronto: Linscott Publishing Company, 1899.) p. 533.
2. Loc. cit.
3. Loc. cit.
4. W.T. Thompson and E.E. Boyer, The Industries of Winnipeg (Winnipeg: The Commercial, 1886) p. 119.
5. F.H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba, Volume II (Winnipeg: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913.) pp. 601-602.
6. Manitoba Free Press, 19 January 1883, p. 8.
7. Sun, 31 March 1883, p. 1.
8. Free Press, 18 April 1885.
9. Loc. cit.
10. Civic Assessment Records (CAR).
11. Thompson and Boyer, *Ibid.*, p. 119.
12. B. Mercer Adam, Toronto, Old and New (Toronto: Mail Printing Company, 1891.) (facsimile ed. 1972), p. 185.
13. The Commercial, 18 May 1891, p. 878.
14. Loc. cit. The amalgamation included: The Massey Manufacturing Company of Toronto; Massey and Company, Limited, Winnipeg; A. Harris, Son and Company, Brantford; Patterson and Brother Co. Limited of Woodstock; and J.O. Wisner, Son and Company, Limited of Brantford. See Hopkins, p. 533.
15. Building Permit (BP) 262/1901, issued 30 May 1901.
16. BP, 951/1904, issued 27 June 1904.
17. Winnipeg Saturday Post, 8 June 1912, p. 36.
18. Schofield, II, loc. cit.

19. City Clerk's Office. Finance Committee file, F6630, letter 13, Smith Agency to the City Clerk, 22 June 1937.
20. CAR.
21. Henderson's Winnipeg Directory, 1945.
22. Ibid.
23. CAR, Building 'A', dated 29 August 1947, colour not specified.
24. CAR, dates as follows: 18 June 1941; 29 August 1947; 9 May 1961; and 23 June 1971.
10. Most information probably relates to the condition of the building during the Massey-Harris ownership.

294-296 WILLIAM AVENUE – MASSEY-HARRIS BLOCK



Plate 1 - Massey-Harris Block, 294-296 William Avenue, ca.1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N4173.)



Plate 2 – Looking west along William Avenue near King Street, 1887. The Massey Manufacturing Co. Building can be seen on the left (arrow). (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N909.)

294-296 WILLIAM AVENUE – MASSEY-HARRIS BLOCK



Plate 3 – Looking west along William Avenue, 1900. The Massey-Harris Block is at the arrow. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – Massey-Harris Block, west side (King Street) façade, 1970. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

294-296 WILLIAM AVENUE – MASSEY-HARRIS BLOCK



Plate 5 – Massey-Harris Block, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)