0 MOUNT ROYAL ROAD

SILVER HEIGHTS GATES

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

December 1993 (Revised March 1995)
Silver Heights, on Lots 18-20, St. James, was an estate created by John Rowand, a Hudson’s Bay Company official, in the late 1850s. In the early 1870s, the Rowand Estate, then called Silver Heights, saw use for at least one summer as Manitoba’s first Government House. The area proved to be too outlying for official functioning, and thus Government House became fixed at Upper Fort Garry. In the meantime, the Silver Heights property was purchased by Donald A. Smith as a summer residence while he attended to his Hudson’s Bay Company duties at the Upper Fort. The Silver Heights house burned to the ground in 1892, though a farm house was built nearer to the Portage Road sometime later. As one of the wealthiest men in the world, Smith, later as Lord Strathcona, did not reside at Silver Heights after 1892. The Strathcona Farm proved resistant to the St. James subdivision frenzy of 1905-1911 and remained an undeveloped tract of land until the late 1940s. Indeed, the Strathcona Estate had passed into the ownership of the Rural Municipality of St. James some years earlier.

In the autumn of 1949, the 100 acres (40.5 ha) of Lots 18-20, St. James were sold by the Municipality to Frank R. Lount of the Frank Lount and Son Construction Company. A plan of subdivision was approved by the Winnipeg Town Planning Commission during that November. When registered in July 1950, this became known as Plan 5090, as Lount added another undeveloped tract, 17 St. James, to the other lots to the east. The tract stretched between Portage and Ness avenues, and along the avenues between Conway and Davidson streets. The main thoroughfare of Silver Heights was Mount Royal Road, with major intersections at Lodge and Bruce avenues. Between these intersections were found interior streets shaped as loops and

2 St. James-Minutes, 18 October 1949, no. 1151.
3 Ibid., 22 November 1949, no. 1398.
crescents and named for Hudson’s Bay Company officials of the nineteenth century.\(^4\) By 1952, more than 300 homes had been built in Silver Heights.\(^5\) Prior to this time, Block 12, Plan 5090, at the northeast corner of Mount Royal Road and Portage Avenue, was subdivided to accommodate the Silver Heights Shopping Centre and Silver Heights Apartments. This became Plan 5375 in the summer of 1952,\(^6\) and completed the prestigious Silver Heights subdivision.

None of Lount’s houses faced onto Mount Royal Road, which was in keeping with its nature as a thoroughfare. As a result, the residential portion of Silver Heights showed its back to Portage Avenue and its sides to Mount Royal. Front faces looked out onto quiet, tree-lined streets.\(^7\) To herald this development, the Lounts, during 1950-51, constructed a complex of pillars stretching between Portage and Traill avenues. At Portage Avenue, the “pillars” took the form of low stone and concrete ‘benches’ featuring multi-coloured limestone from the City of Winnipeg’s Stonewall quarry. At the time, this material was enjoying great popularity as a facing stone for various buildings, including Lount’s Winnipeg Clinic (1947). The stone was set in a random rubble pattern. The two corner units featured a stepped profile capped with concrete slabs, with the upper parts joined by wrought-iron work featuring a central crocus-flower pattern. The height of these units was about two feet (0.6 m).

Further to the north, at the southwest corner of Traill, was another, longer bench structure. This was nearly identical in materials and height, and again featured the crocus-pattern wrought-iron work. It is possible that one of these secondary “benches” also existed on the east side of the street, but later disappeared with changes in the Silver Heights Shopping Centre. These three (or four) low structures were merely a preview of what was built at the northwest corner of Traill and Mount Royal. The “bench” was reiterated here, but ended in a tall rectangular “pillar”

\(^4\) Lount had used the advice of the Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba in naming the interior streets. See St. James-Minutes, 22 November 1949, no. 1389. See also Ibid., 22 June 1950, no. 682.

\(^5\) “Silver Heights Development,” Western Construction and Building, November 1952, p. 15. Hereafter, cited as WCB.


\(^7\) WCB, November 1952, p. 15.
bearing the simple inscription in wrought-iron – “SILVER HEIGHTS.” The pillar here was about fifteen feet (4.57 m) high. About midway up the “pillar” was a concrete overhang or wing leading to a smaller, planter-like structure on the boulevard. More wrought-iron work supported the east end of this wing, the supports being decorated by a large wrought-iron crocus complete with leaves. Concrete was featured on all horizontal surfaces, while the handsome coloured limestone dominated the structures. The combined effect of limestone and concrete is reminiscent of the Winnipeg Clinic with its stone facing and gregarious, projecting balconies, or even the Saigon Apartments, 51 Roslyn Road (1951), which has smaller projecting balconies. Even Lount’s Silver Heights Apartments (1952-55) featured the coloured limestone/projecting concrete slab combination. All three structures were erected by Lount Construction, under the design direction of William D. Lount, a trained architect and son of the founder. W.D. Lount also played an important part in the design of the Silver Heights subdivision and was therefore responsible for the design of the Mount Royal gateway.

The structures on Mount Royal were the most elaborate such markers since the construction of the Armstrong’s Point Gates in 1911. Clearly, in forty years, the style of such markers had changed. In post-War Winnipeg, and especially among more modern architects such as W.D. Lount, there was less reliance upon traditional pillar styles as seen at Armstrong’s Point, Bruce Park or along Henderson Highway. While there was this break with past styles, a touch of tradition was seen in the use of the coloured limestone for this gateway, along with the wrought-iron crocuses.

Unlike many developments which impose a developer’s will upon a vacant or sometimes historic tract, the Lount subdivision was backward-gazing because of its use of historic names and symbols such as the crocus. Ultimately, on 28 April 1958, some of this history was recognized in the form of an Historic Sites Advisory Board plaque which was place beneath the arch of the Mount Royal gateway. Since the development of Silver Heights, the Mount Royal complex has become a local landmark and a symbol of the area. In terms of physical condition, the

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8 Leader, 24 April 1958, pp. 1, 8.
structures have stood up very well, considering there is a lack of maintenance and minor vandalism. Some concrete spalling (i.e., chipping or splintering) is visible, as are loose or missing stones.
Plate 1 – The Portage Trail at Silver Heights, ca.1900. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N4549.)

Plate 2 – Lord Strathcona’s Silver Heights residence, no date. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, A0054-01655.)
Plate 3 – Construction in Silver Heights, 1949.  (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

Plate 4 – Construction in Silver Heights, 1949.  (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 5 – Silver Heights Gates, no date. (M. Peterson.)