STREET PILLARS

OVERDALE STREET AT PORTAGE AVENUE

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee
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The early history of St. James, prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 18th and 19th centuries, saw the area’s seasonal use, especially along the banks of the Assiniboine River, by local First Nations bands for transportation, hunting and gathering activities and seasonal habitation.

Portage Avenue, the area’s main thoroughfare, originated as the main east-west overland trail connecting The Forks, an important hunting and meeting ground, and the western plains rich with herds of bison and other large game. As the fur trade in the region developed and expanded, the trail was an important freighting route for thousands of ox-carts transporting food and other goods. Modern development transformed Portage Avenue into the hub of commerce and transportation for Winnipeg and its western suburbs.

Permanent settlement of the St. James area began as fur traders retired from their years of service and sought to take up land in the vicinity of the Upper Fort Garry (Plate 1). The prevailing system of land organization was River Lots, thin parcels of land stretching back a distance of 2 miles from the river, giving the land owner important access to the water. An additional 2-mile strip beyond the lot could also be obtained. As settlement increased, additional River Lots were established, extending development further west along the Assiniboine.

In 1850, the Parish of St. James was created by a grant of land from the Hudson’s Bay Company and comprised property from Omand’s Creek (originally known as Catfish Creek and first bridged in 1860) to present-day St. James Street south of the Portage Trail. Here a group of Anglicans built St. James Church in 1852 (today its address is 540 Tylehurst Street and it is referred to as Old St. James Anglican).1 Around this structure the community grew. A school was built ca.1853.2 Early parishioners included Charles and Cornelius Fidler, James Spence, James Foulds, the Bourke family and Gavin Garrioch. The Parish population grew mainly because of the resettling of Selkirk Settler families from the Kildonan area after the disastrous

2 Ibid., p. 11. Honourable John Norquay, future Premier of Manitoba, taught at the school in 1857.
1852 flood. These farmers sought higher land to avoid future floods and much of the land along the Assiniboine River had remained dry.

After the creation of the Province of Manitoba in 1870, a number of municipalities were established, including the Rural Municipality of Assiniboia, incorporated in 1880, which encompassed the former parishes of Headingley, St. Charles, St. James and part of St. Boniface on both the north and south sides of the Assiniboine River (Plate 2). This large municipality was steadily decreased over the years as new government organizations were formed: the Rural Municipality of Charleswood (1912); Town of Tuxedo (1913); and the Rural Municipality of St. James (1921) – Plates 3 and 4.

The period between the Wars saw little development in St. James, however, the situation changed after World War II and St. James began to expand rapidly. New residential neighbourhoods emerged including Silver Heights, Birchwood, Westwood, Crestview, and St. Charles. Other important developments in west Winnipeg included the founding and expansion of Winnipeg’s airport in 1928 (originally Stevenson Field, renamed Winnipeg International Airport in 1958 and James Armstrong Richardson International Airport in 2006) and Polo Park, originally one of Western Canada’s premier horse racing facility (1925-1956) and now one of its best known shopping centres (built in 1959 and expanded several times since).

The Rural Municipality of St. James, ostensibly the urban part of the Assiniboine Municipality, became the City of St. James in 1956. In 1967 the Town of Brooklands merged with St. James as did the Rural Municipality of Assiniboia two years later to form the City of St. James-Assiniboia. It was this city that became part of the City of Winnipeg under Unicity in 1972.

At the beginning of the 20th century, as Winnipeg entered a sustained period of nearly unbridled growth, St. James became one of the areas of expansion, both residential and commercial. The extension of streetcar service from downtown to Deer Lodge in 1903 was an important factor (it was suspended in 1914 because of a lack of ridership), as was the opening of Assiniboine Park (originally City Park) in 1904.
In 1903, George A. Glines and Company, a local real estate firm, set out a comprehensive plan for a subdivision on the north side of Portage Avenue across what would become the footbridge for City Park. Known as Oakdale Park, the original plan saw a man-made lake and curved avenues (Plate 5). Lack of interest from the citizenry brought a halt to these plans, however, Oakdale Park re-emerged in early 1911. This time, the subdivision set out three streets – Overdale, Winchester and Linwood\(^3\) – with Overdale Street and its wide, treed boulevard being the main thoroughfare. Demarking the subdivision at Portage Avenue were five pairs of concrete and stone pillars, the taller units announcing the subdivision with the inscription “OAKDALE PARK” on its concrete cap. The pillar sets were completed in 1911.\(^4\)

**STYLE**

The original pillar sets were designed in an understated manner and would be considered typical for this period.

**CONSTRUCTION**

The pillar sets, as built, consisted of round field stones cemented together to form a cairn. Inscribed concrete caps with round balls finished each pillar.

**DESIGN**

The Overdale Street pillars were originally designed and built as paired units, one large and one small on both sides of the street. The five units were originally built on the north side of Portage Avenue at the corners of Overdale Street, Winchester Street (one block east) and one on the west

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\(^3\) Only the west side of Linwood Street was subdivided because Glines and Company did not own the property on the east side.

\(^4\) *Assiniboia General Correspondence*, Box 2, 1909-1910, File "G." Glines and Company sent a letter in April 1911 to Secretary of the Municipality of Assiniboia Frank Ness in which they stated the “stone pillars...will make the entrances to all of the property more attractive and more saleable and it will be in the interest of the Municipality to assist in every way in the development of this property.”
side of Linwood Street (one block further east). Only one pair was built on Linwood because the developers did not own the east side of the street.

Each unit consisted of one large and one small pillar – the large ones marking the edge of the roadway and the small ones placed to allow for a sidewalk to run between the two (Plate 6). At present, only the large pillars at Overdale Street remain from the original five pairs.

They continue to boast cement caps with balls (Plate 7 and 8). The original inscriptions, “OAKDALE PARK”, found on the south side facing Portage Avenue have been removed, although the words “OVERDALE AVE.” are found on the west side of the east pillar cap and the east side of the west pillar cap (Plate 9).

INTERIOR
N/A

INTEGRITY
The pillars stand on their original location, appear to be in fair structural condition and have not suffered extensive alteration.

STREETSCEAPE
The pillars are an important contributor to the Overdale/Portage streetscape (Plate 10).
ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS
It is unknown at the present time who designed and built the Overdale Pillars. The tender call for the construction of the pillar sets was under the direction of Frederick H. Stewart, a partner of Glines and Company in the Oakdale development by the early 1910s.5

PERSON/INSTITUTION
The new subdivision developed very slowly in the early 1910s, with only a few homes being built prior to the collapse of the Winnipeg land boom after 1912 and the start of World War I. After the War, development continued at this slow pace well into the 1920s. Much of the land was finally occupied by single-family dwellings built after the Second World War.

The pillars of Oakdale Park have experienced many issues since their construction. As early as 1928, Municipal officials reported that vandalism was occurring to the pillars, loitering youth had removed a ball and several stones from one pillar.6 More repair work was completed in 19317 and in 1936; the Chief of Police for the Municipality of St. James asked that the large pillar on the west side of Overdale Street be removed because it had become an impediment to Portage Avenue traffic.8 The solution was moving it three metres to the north.9

In 1948, the two small Winchester Street pillars were removed after a request from Jewel Stores Limited whose new building was scheduled to open on April 1st. The stone from these went to repair the two larger pillars which were in bad condition.10 By February 1959, the St. James Leader reported that the Overdale and Winchester pillars were “in somewhat dilapidated condition”.11

5 Manitoba Free Press, February 4, 1911, p. 6.
7 Ibid., August 18, 1931, p. 8, No. 713.
8 Ibid., January 14, 1936, p. 1, No. 59.
9 Ibid., April 14, 1936, p. 2, No. 590.
11 St. James Leader, February 19, 1959, p. 4.
EVENT

There is no known event connected with these pillars.

CONTEXT

These pillars were built to mark the boundary of a large residential development in the growing Municipality of Assiniboia and, in the words of its developers, make the property “more saleable”. They have become an important part of the neighbourhood as it has grown and matured.

The City has recognized the importance of these building types by designating three gates:

- Armstrong’s Point Gates, East Gate, Middle Gate and West Gate @ Cornish Avenue: built in 1911 and designed by H.N. Ruttan, these stone and iron gates mark the entrance to Armstrong’s Point, one of the City’s most exclusive residential districts of the pre-1915 era (Plate 11);
- Nanton Estate Gates, 229 Roslyn Road: these stone and wrought iron gates were built in 1900, designed by J.H.G. Russell for Sir Augustus M. Nanton, influential businessman as the entrance to his two-hectare estate and mansion (Plate 12); and
- Silver Heights Gates, Mount Royal Road at Traill Avenue: designed by William D. Lount in 1950-1951 to mark the southern entrance to his father’s new residential sub-division, Silver Heights, these modern gates are built of brick with wrought iron accenting and a concrete canopy (Plate 13).

LANDMARK

These conspicuous pillars are located on two busy corners of Portage Avenue and would be familiar in the neighbourhood. Because of their location across from the Assiniboine Park Footbridge, they would be well known to many people in Winnipeg outside of the immediate neighbourhood.
Plate 1 – The Honourable James McKay (1828-1879), ca.1870, one of St. James’ early and influential citizens. McKay was a member of the Council of Assiniboia in 1868, Manitoba Legislative Council, Minister of Agriculture and a founder of the Winnipeg Board of Trade (1873). His fine home was located on the site of the present-day Deer Lodge Hospital, 2109 Portage Avenue. (Archives of Manitoba)
Plate 2 – The municipalities surrounding the City of Winnipeg as they appeared in 1880. (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 3 – The municipalities surrounding the City of Winnipeg as they changed between 1910 and 1915. (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 4 – The municipalities surrounding the City of Winnipeg as they changed between 1915 and 1924. (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 5 – This 1903 advertisement shows the original plan for the Oakdale Park subdivision, with its man-made lake and curved avenues. (Manitoba Free Press, June 27, 1903, p. 9.)
Plate 6 – Advertisement for Glines and Company’s revised Oakdale Park subdivision, including an illustration of the paired pillars on the east and west sides of Overdale Street.
(Reproduced from Manitoba Free Press, April 18, 1914, p. 7.)
Plate 7 – Overdale Street Pillar, west pillar with Overdale Street in the background, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 8 – Overdale Street Pillar, east pillar, south and east sides, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 9 – Overdale Street Pillar, west pillar, cement cap detail, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)

Plate 10 – Overdale Street, looking north from the south side of Portage Avenue, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 11 – Armstrong’s Point Gates, West Gate and Cornish Avenue, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)

Plate 12 – Nanton Estate Gates, 229 Roslyn Road, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 13 – Silver Heights Gates, Mount Royal Road and Traill Avenue, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)