

639 PORTAGE AVENUE

MONTE CASSINO COURT

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee
Researcher: M. Peterson
June 2018

This building embodies the following heritage values as described in the *Historical Resources By-law*, 55/2014 (consolidated update July 13, 2016):

(a) This mixed use block, completed by 1910, is an excellent example of the type of pre-World War I development that occurred in downtown Winnipeg and the surrounding areas as the demand for modern commercial and residential space rose;

(b) It is associated with the population growth in Winnipeg and the evolution of Portage Avenue as one of its premier thoroughfares;

(c) It was designed by James Alexander Gauld, a local architect;

(d) Built of brick with stone accenting, the block is representative of contemporary construction methods;

(e) It is a highly conspicuous building located near a busy intersection; and

(f) The upper storeys of the building's main façade have suffered little alteration.

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The evolution of Portage Avenue into Winnipeg's primary commercial thoroughfare was a gradual process. Originally, commerce was concentrated at Upper Fort Garry, all trading taking place within its walls. Main Street was simply a trail, connecting this fort with the Hudson's Bay Company's other major post, Lower Fort Garry, before heading northward to the bay and ultimately to England. The real estate boom of the early 1880s led to an expansion of much of Winnipeg's society, including its retail sector. Logically, many business owners chose Main Street to sell their wares. Business blocks of all sizes and descriptions lined both sides of the street north of the old fort, and by the beginning of the 20th century, there were few empty lots between the fort and Portage Avenue.

But the new century brought dramatic change to the city. And this was keenly felt on Portage Avenue. The Clarendon Hotel, built in 1884 on the northwest corner of Donald Street, "stood out almost alone as a landmark on the north side of the avenue"[1] as one reporter described the area (Plate 1). Nearly 20 years later, the hotel was still one of the only major buildings on the street. But the rumour and then the 1905 completion of the T. Eaton Company store at 320 Portage Avenue changed everything. The avenue witnessed a dramatic increase in the amount of pedestrian and vehicular traffic and businessmen were quick to take advantage. Offices, retail stores and banks began to line the street and Portage Avenue slowly began to usurp Main Street as the commercial centre of the burgeoning capital city. By 1915, the Somerset Building (1906), Bank of Nova Scotia (1908), McArthur (Childs) Building (1909), Boyd Building (1912) and Paris Building (1915) had all been added to the growing stock of magnificent Portage Avenue buildings (Plate 2). When the Hudson's Bay Company completed its massive store at Vaughan Street in 1926, it marked both a symbolic and a tangible move away from Main Street for Winnipeg's retailers (Plate 3).

The improvement in roads, the extension of the street railway system and later the advent of the personal automobile all combined to foster development of areas farther and farther away from

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1 Manitoba Free Press, September 4, 1909, p. 5.

the city's central business district. In 1907, a local businessman built a modest, one-storey retail block for his venture and two other retail tenants but within three years, the building was redeveloped into a three-storey mixed-use structure that became known as the Monte Cassino Court.

STYLE

This building is an excellent example of the Two-Part Commercial style with classical detailing designed on a grander scale than normally seen (Plate 4). Found in most downtowns around the world, the style entails the vertical division of the exterior into two distinct sections, mimicking a similar division of use on the interior. The application of different materials is another method of heightening this separation.

The ground floor is often heavily ornamented and includes large windows for the display of retail goods. A belt course is often used to separate the ground floor from the upper floors, which are usually two to four storeys in height. The latter section is often much plainer than the ground floor. The rooflines of these buildings can include a cornice and other ornamental treatments. This block's style is similar to another large Two-Part Commercial structure across Portage Avenue, the Casa Loma Block (Plate 5), that was built a year prior to the two-storey addition to the Monte Cassino Court structure.

CONSTRUCTION

This block was built in two phases, the first phase saw a one-storey structure with three retail shops completed in 1907 (Plate 6). The structure measured approximately 15.3 x 24.4 metres, rested on a 45.7-centimetre rubblestone foundation[2] and cost $6,000 to complete.[3] In 1910, with business booming and Portage Avenue traffic increasing, both retail and vehicular/pedestrian, the owner gutted the original building, renovated the ground floor retail space and added two storeys of

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2 BP #512/1910.

3 City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #1606/1907.

residential space above – at a cost of $22,000.[4] The new structure's solid brick upper storey walls were accented with stone. It was a common construction method for the time period.

DESIGN

The front (south) façade features a ground floor with an original (1910) doorway (Plates 7 and 8) located just east of the only other entrance, a newer, metal opening that matches the renovated display windows that fill most of the rest of this area (Plate 9). Newer signage visually separates the ground floor retail from the upper floor residential space. These upper floors feature large, window in rectilinear openings with oversized stone heads, continuous stone sills and leaded glass transoms. The third storey openings are separated by connected brick columns with stone capitals and bases. A metal cornice and plain brick parapet complete this façade (Plate 10).

The west side abuts its neighbouring building for approximately half of its length. The visible portion at the rear features a windowless ground floor and a window well on the second and third floors with rectilinear window openings embellished with rough-cut stone heads and sills (Plate 11). Another similarly designed window well is found further south on this façade, hidden by the neighbouring building.

The east façade is also partially hidden by the building next door; the visible portion is similarly designed to the west wall, although only one window well was built on this side (Plate 12).

The rear of the building was originally included a full-width open porch (Plate 13), approximately 1.1 meters wide.[5] This element is no longer present; the rear (north) façade now features window with arched openings and an open metal fire escape (Plate 14).

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4 BP #512/1910.

5 Loc. cit.

INTERIOR

A site visit was conducted in June 2011 and another in June 2018.

The basement of the building has seen little renovation, interior walls are solid brick (aligning with the division of the ground floor retail space – Plate 15) and the rubblestone foundation walls are visible throughout (Plate 16).

The west end of the ground floor has been completely renovated into a pharmacy, the east end is vacant, some of the fine ornamental tin ceiling is visible above the acoustic ceiling (Plate 17). A small mezzanine, not original to the building, still exists at the rear of this level.

The east entrance and stairway have not been altered significantly and still exhibit high ceilings and ornamental tin cladding (Plate 18).

The second and third floors were designed with four, large residential suites per floor. Six of the eight suites were designed with different layouts and include some or all of the following features: formal dining rooms, parlours, interior hallways and two bedrooms (Plates 19 and 20). In 2011, some of the original layout and finishes remained in the second floor space, including wood baseboards, transom windows, ornamental tin and the ornate wooden staircase, but some of the space was renovated into offices (Plates 21 and 22). Today, almost none of the original interior partitioning remains and much of the original woodwork has been removed. Some of the ornamental tin ceiling remains (Plates 23 and 24).

The third floor had still retained almost its entire original layout in 2011 (Plate 25), including an unusual public hallway storage closet labelled “Storm sash” in the original plans. The space also included a skylight to bring sunlight to the staircase (Plate 26). As with the second floor, almost all of the original interior partitioning and woodwork has now been removed, ornamental tin ceilings remain in some areas (Plates 27 and 28).

INTEGRITY

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition for its age, although much of the interior finish is deteriorating. Alterations to the exterior have concentrated on the ground floor retail space; the upper floors do not appear to have suffered major alteration.

STREETSCAPE

The Monte Cassino Court is located on the north side of Portage Avenue just east of Sherbrook Street. It is part of a block of retail structures that includes its neighbour, 325 Sherbrook Street (built 1904), 635 Portage Avenue (1948), 633 Portage Avenue (1957) and 338 Furby Street (1912). It is an important part of this downtown streetscape (Plates 26 & 27).

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS

The architect of the 1907 building and its 1910 expansion was James Alexander Gauld (1860-1932).[6] Gauld was born and trained in Ontario and came to Winnipeg in 1901 (see Appendix II for more biographical information). This is the first building designed by J.A. Gauld evaluated by the Historical Buildings Committee.

The original owner, B. Persichini is listed at the contractor for both projects.

PERSON/INSTITUTION

Merchant Benedetto (also as Benedicto) Persichini (born 1859) and his wife Virginia (born 1873), operators of the Virginia Grocery, were the original owners of this property. In a 1904 directory, Benedetto Persichini, fruit and confectionery merchant, is operating a store at 421 Main Street. He lives at 156 Bannatyne Avenue with George Persichini (relationship unknown),

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6 BP #1606/1907 & #512/1910.

who operates a fruit store out of the same address.[7] In 1908, B. Persichini is occupying one of the retail shops at his new building at 637-641 Portage Avenue, along with grocer Alexander McDonald (the middle suite is listed as vacant). Persichini is listed as living on Furby Street. In 1911, they lived with their three children, Augustine (born 1891), Selina (born 1895) and John (born 1897) in Suite 1 of this block.[8] His son John works as a clerk for the R.G. Sinclair Company, clothiers.[9] Retail occupants include R.G. Sinclair Company, #637, and the Rome Café, Joseph Venier, proprietor, #639-641. The residential suites are occupied by insurance and real estate agents, clerks, chauffeurs and managers and their families.[10]

Over the next several decades, the retail shops were occupied by a variety of business including a Post Office Station, the MC Café, Virginia Grocery (John Persichini, proprietor), Chesterfield House, Papas Inn and The Capri Restaurant.[11] Tenant numbers fluctuated, from a low of 14 in 1931 to a high of 28 in 1944 and 1947.[12] Benedetto Persichini died in ca.1939; his widow remained a resident of the block until well after she sold it to dentist J.A. Bursten in 1947.[13] National Typewriter and Office Equipment bought the building in 1966. This firm was organized in 1956 by John Thiessen (1924-2007), who started the company from his basement and grew it to become one of the largest firms of its kind in Western Canada.[14] Shortly after moving into the Monte Cassino Court in 1967, the firm took over the entire building, using the ground floor for retail and repairs, a small portion of the second floor for offices and the remainder of this floor and the entire third floor for equipment storage. The business was sold in 1996 and the building has remained vacant since 1997.[15]

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7 Henderson's Directory, 1904.

8 Canada Census, 1911.

9 Henderson's Directory, 1912-1916. John Persichini is listed as the owner of this men's clothier shop in 1916.

10 Henderson's Directory, 1908-1912.

11 Henderson's Directory, 1916-1960.

12 City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 502820, Ward 2 (Old No. 8352, Ward 2), 1929-1984.

13 Ibid., 1940-1960; and Henderson's Directory, 1940-1960. Mrs. Persichini died in the 1950s. In 1960, John and Adele Persichini are listed as proprietors of the Manitoba Teachers College canteen.

14 Winnipeg Free Press, November 3, 2007; and interview with son Mark Thiessen, June 8, 2011.

15 M. Thiessen interview, op. cit.

EVENT

There is no known historical event connected with this building.

CONTEXT

The Monte Cassino Court is part of a number of important historical themes in the development of Winnipeg. Its original construction in 1907 illustrates the growth of the retail sector in Winnipeg after 1900 where local businessmen had enough success and capital to build their own store and, as was the case here, build a large enough building to include rental space. Its location near Sherbrook Street underlines the expansion of not only the Portage Avenue retail sector but the growth of the West Winnipeg residential district and the demand for local grocery/fruit retailers in the neighbourhood.

The large expansion of the structure in 1910 is another example of the comprehensive growth in the Winnipeg and Manitoba economies in the decade prior to World War I. To the modern retail space was added hundreds of square meters of residential space – the demand for which grew as the City's population soared. Winnipeg was unique in North America in level of support its citizens gave apartment living and the Monte Cassino Court was another of the many developments completed to meet this demand.

LANDMARK

Located near the corner of a very busy intersection, this structure, with its stained glass accents and other architectural details, is conspicuous on the street and well-known to many citizens of Winnipeg.

Historical Buildings & Resources Committee
THE CITY OF WINNIPEG

APPENDIX I

CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report
Assessment Record

Building Address: 639 Portage Avenue Building Name: Monte Cassino Court (Nat/Com Building)

Original Use: mixed use (retail/residential) Current Use: vacant

Roll No. (Old): 13050282000 (8352) RSN: 155483

Legal Description: 72/74 St. James, Plan 33428, Lot 3 (Plan 2359, Lot 349 & west 1' Lot 350)

Location: north side between Sherbrook and Furby streets

Date of Construction: 1907 (one storey) and 1910 (2 additional storeys) Storeys: 3 & basement

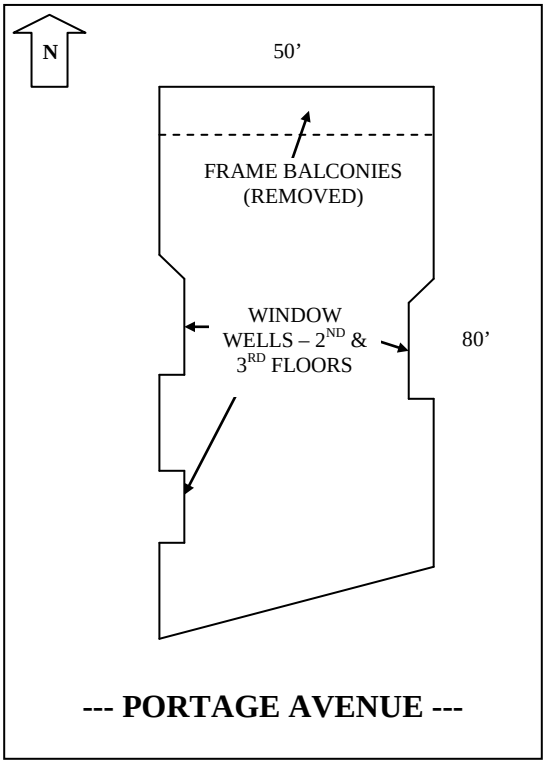
Heritage Status: **ON DOMINATED LIST**

Construction Type: Brick and stone and rubblestone foundation

Building Permits (Plans available: **[M]** Microfilm; **[CS]** City Storage):
- 1606/1907 $6,000 (original – 1 storey); 512/1910 **[CS]** $22,000 (two storey addition); 3437/1971 **[M]** $3,000 (alterations); 393/1982 **[CS]** $500 (interior alteration);

Information:

- upper floors vacant since 1997



ARCHITECT: GAULD, JAMES A. (1907 & 1910)

CONTRACTOR: GRAY, WILLIAM (1907); UNNAMED (1910)

APPENDIX II

James Alexander Gauld

J.A. Gauld was born in London, Ontario on October 22, 1859[1] and was active as an architect in that city from 1893 to 1900. He came to Winnipeg in 1901 with his wife Emma Rebecca Gauld and three children and set up a private practice.[2]

Over the next two decades, Gauld also worked in the engineering department of the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National (CNR) railways and as a railway surveyor for the CNR. At the time of his retirement in 1929, he was working at the CNR shops in Transcona, MB.[3]

In 1916, Gauld enlisted in Winnipeg for the Canadian Over-seas Expeditionary Force, Canadian Engineers as a sapper on March 29. He was accepted but discharged at "St. Johns" on October 22, 1916 for being "medically unfit."[4] He died in Winnipeg on March 20, 1932.[5]

The list of Winnipeg buildings includes:[6]

Cornish Avenue, bake over for J.A. McKerchar, (1906)
Fairbairn Block, 208 Selkirk (962½ Main Street) – 1906
Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue (1907 and 1910 expansion)
Pembina Highway, two single-family dwellings for A. Connery (1908)
Mansfield Court Apartments, 626 Ellice Avenue (1908)
Von (Royal) Theatre, 959 Main Street (1909 – demolished)
Imperial Bank of Canada Branch, 964 Main Street (1909 – demolished)
Pullen Paper Stock Company Warehouse, 396 Pacific Avenue (1910 – demolished)
J. Rogers House, Victor Avenue (1911)
Boyce Carriage Company Factory, 316 Ross Avenue (1911)
Banning Avenue, two single-family dwellings for J.E. Briggs (1912)

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1 Documents disagree on the year of his birth, some sources have 1860 for his date of birth including Census of Canada, 1901 but his tombstone at Brookside Cemetery has 1859. Information supplied by Robert G. Hill.

2 Ibid.; and Winnipeg Free Press, December 24, 1930, p. 14. Mrs. E.R. Gauld was born in 1856 and died in Winnipeg in 1930.

3 Winnipeg Free Press, March 21, 1932, p. 4.

4 Library and Archives of Canada, Soldiers of the First World War: 1914-1918, "Gauld, James Alex (505766)," RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3445 – 5, Item No. 408247.

5 Winnipeg Free Press, March 21, 1932, p. 4.

6 Compiled from City of Winnipeg, Building Permit Ledger Books, 1899-1926.

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Plate 1 – The Clarendon Hotel, northwest corner of Portage Avenue and Donald Street (#311), ca.1905. (M. Peterson Collection.)

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Plate 2 – Portage Avenue looking east from Hargrave Street, ca.1915. Eaton's (right foreground) and the Somerset Building tower over the smaller buildings on the north side of the street. (Archives of Manitoba, N12614.)



Plate 3 –Hudson's Bay Company Store, 450 Portage Avenue, during construction, August 23, 1926. (Hudson's Bay Company Archives.)

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Plate 4 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, front (south) and east façades, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)



Plate 5 – Casa Loma Block, 644 Portage Avenue (built 1909), 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)

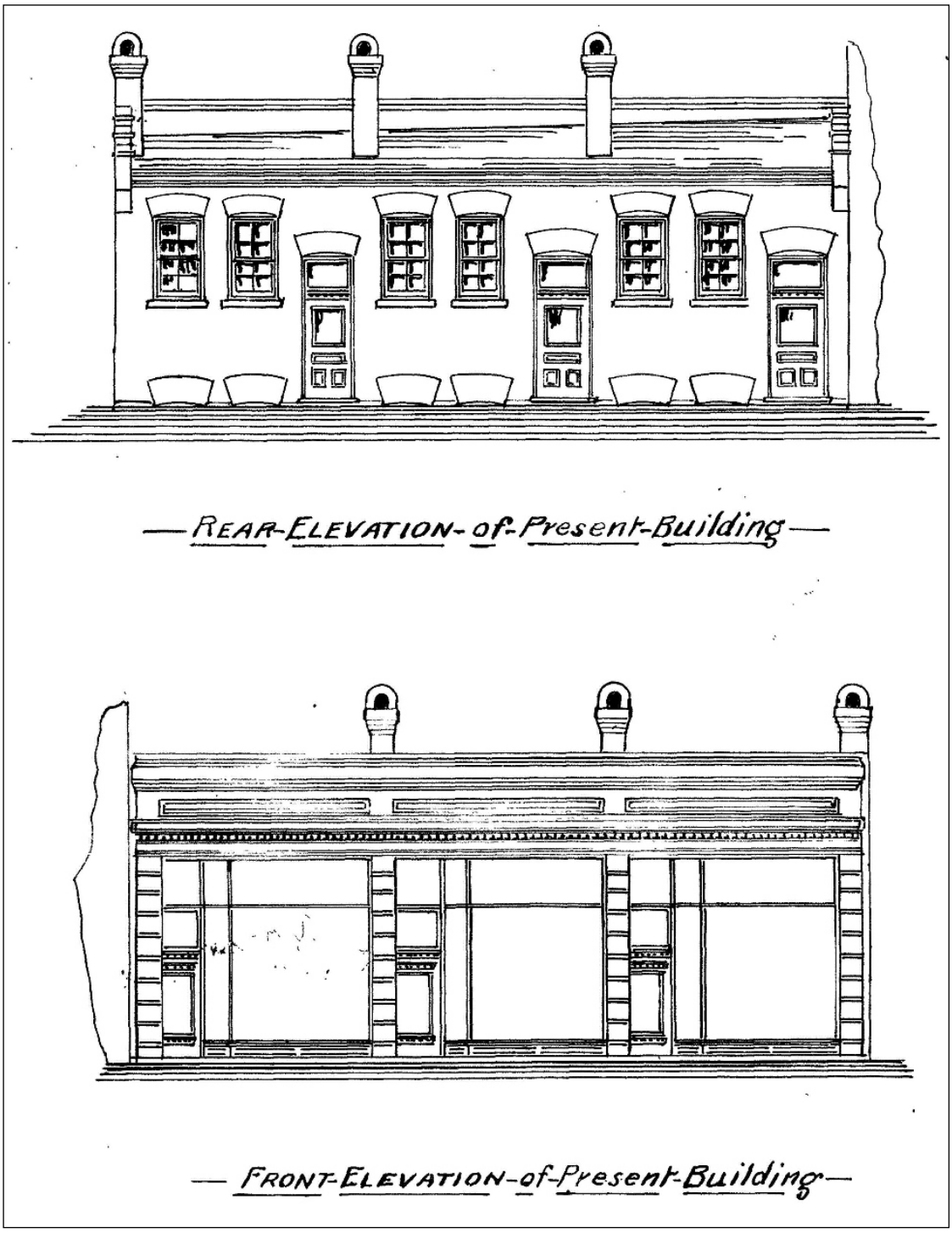

Plate 6 – Architect's plans for 637-641 Portage Avenue, as it appeared prior to its expansion/renovation in 1910. (City of Winnipeg Storage, Plan No. 512/1910.)

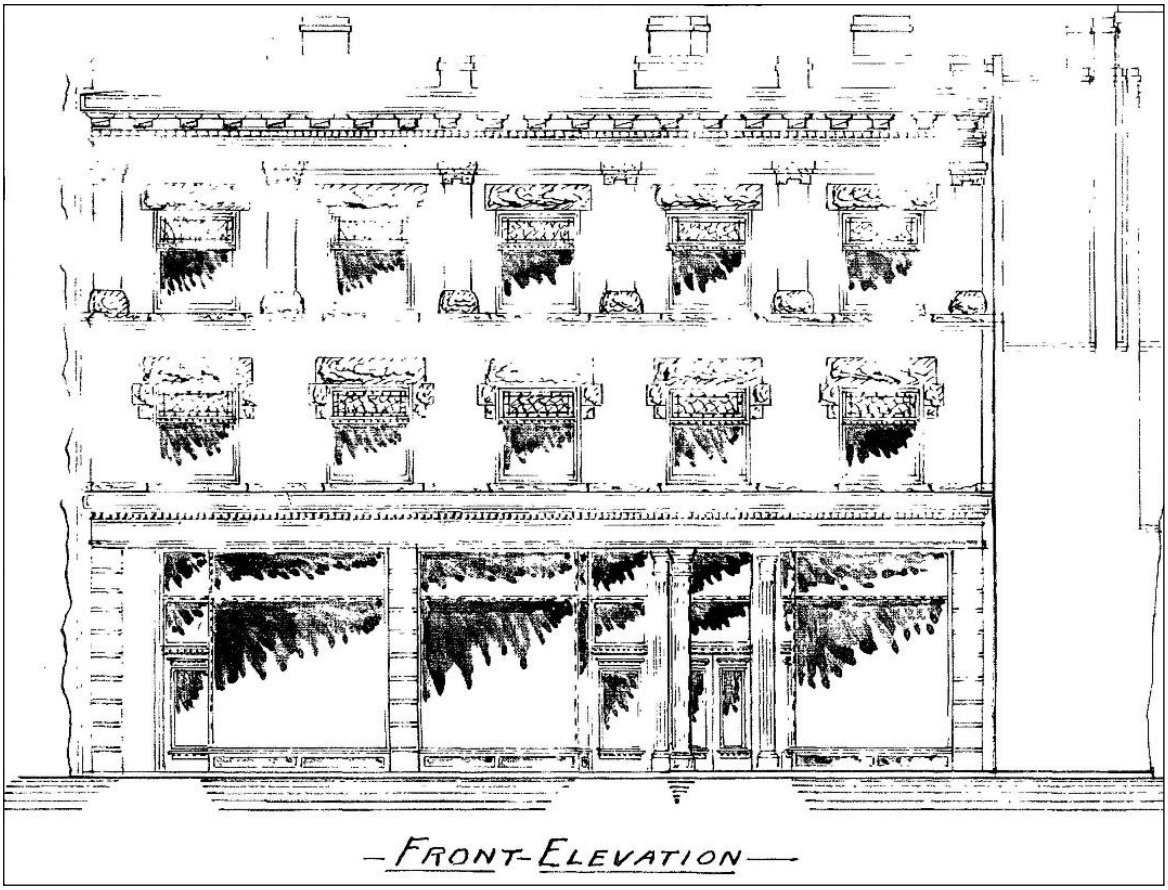

Plate 7 – "Front Elevation," architect's plans for 637-641 Portage Avenue, 1910. (City of Winnipeg Storage, Plan No. 512/1910.)

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Plate 8 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, original 1910 front (south) entrance, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)

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Plate 9 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, detail of front (south) ground floor, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)



Plate 10 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, detail of front (south) upper floors, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)

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Plate 11 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, west façade, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)



Plate 12 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, east façade, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)

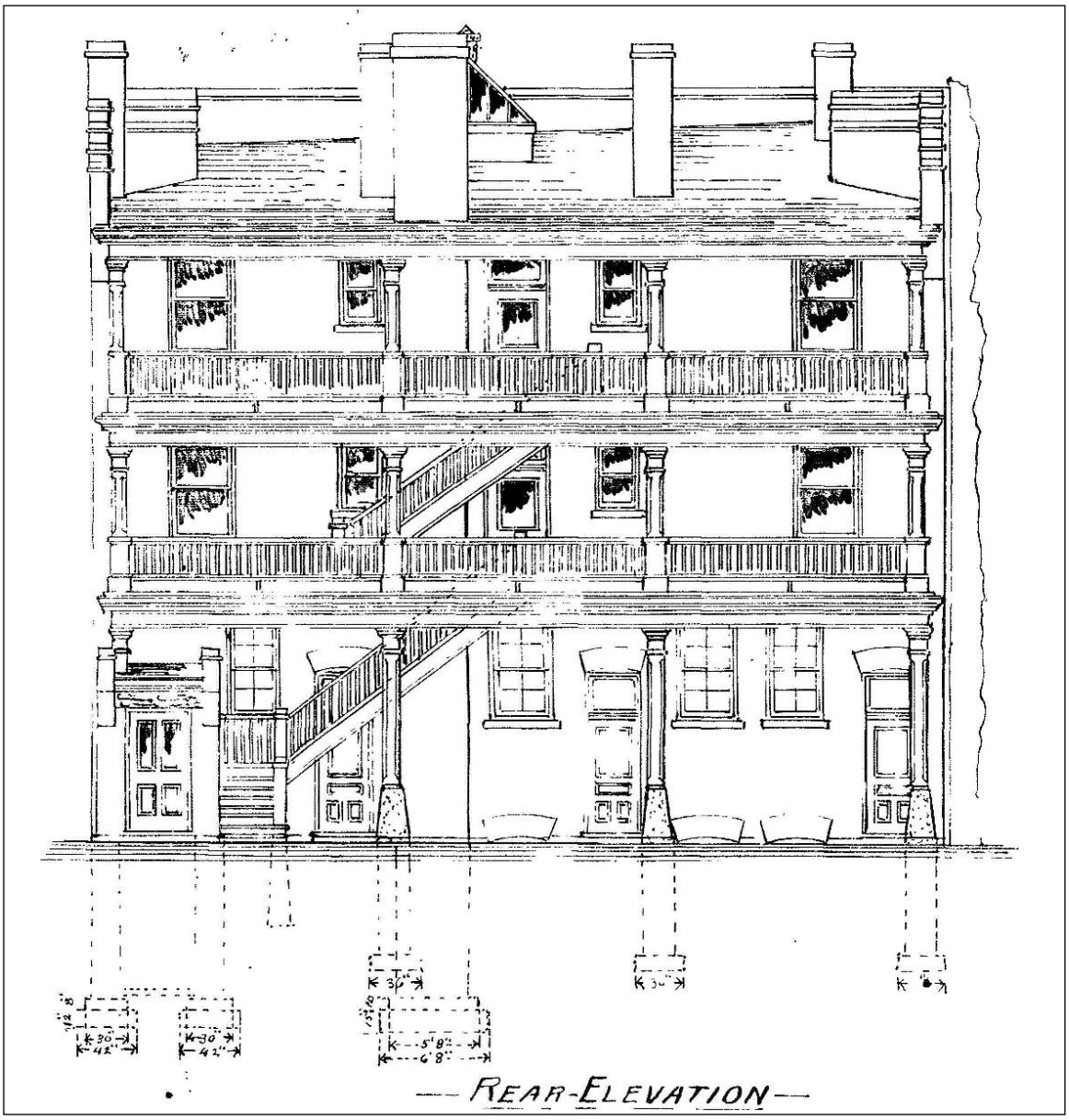

Plate 13 – "Rear Elevation," architect's plans for 637-641 Portage Avenue, 1910. (City of Winnipeg Storage, Plan No. 512/1910.)

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Plate 14 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, rear (north) façade, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)

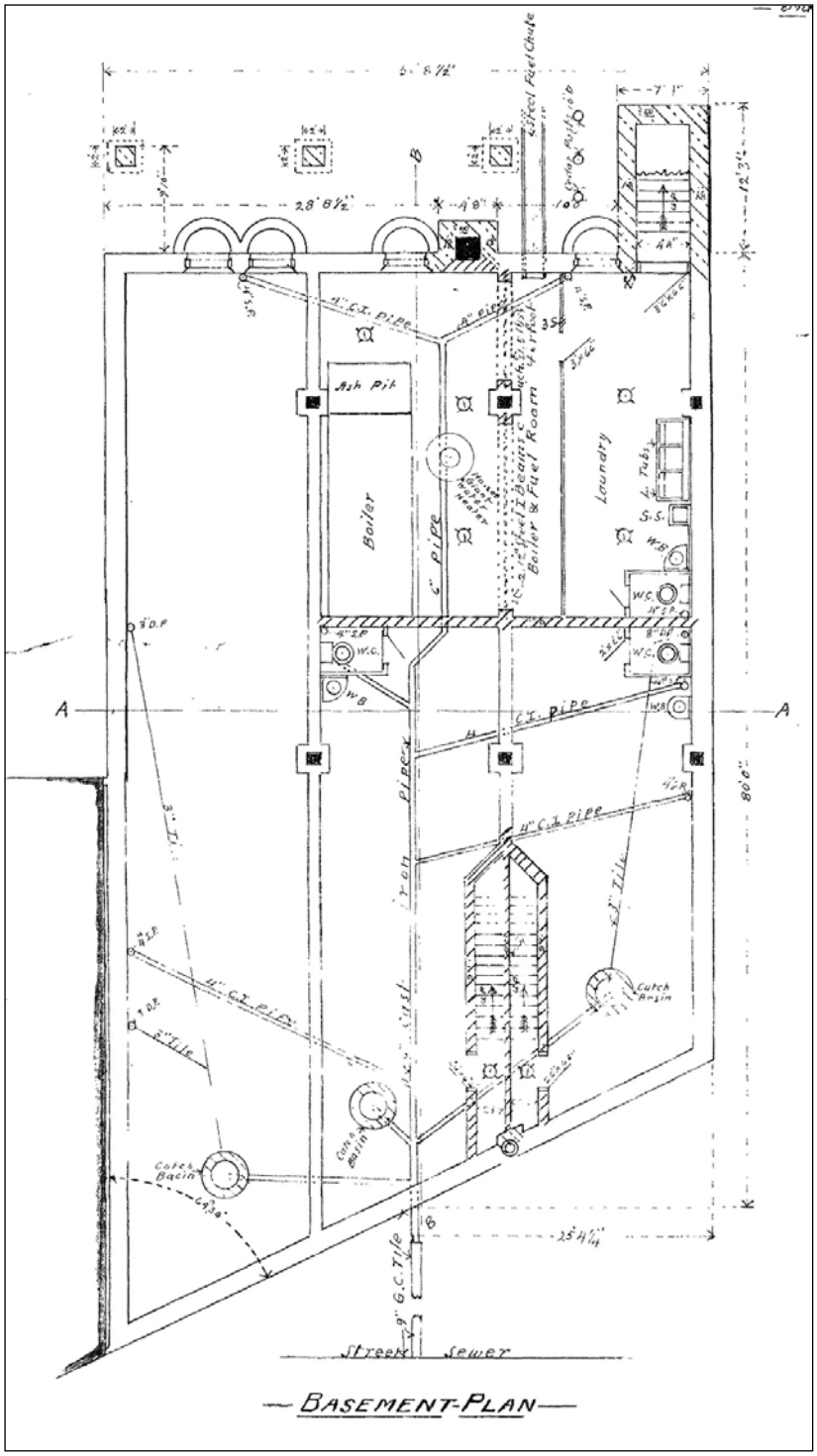

Plate 15 – "Basement Plan," architect's plans for 637-641 Portage Avenue, 1910. (City of Winnipeg Storage, Plan No. 512/1910.)



Plate 16 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, basement rubblestone foundation wall, 2011. (M. Peterson, 2011.)

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Plate 17 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, original ornamental tin ceiling, ground floor, east side commercial space, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)

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Plate 18 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, east end ground floor stairway, unchanged since 2011. (M. Peterson, 2011.)

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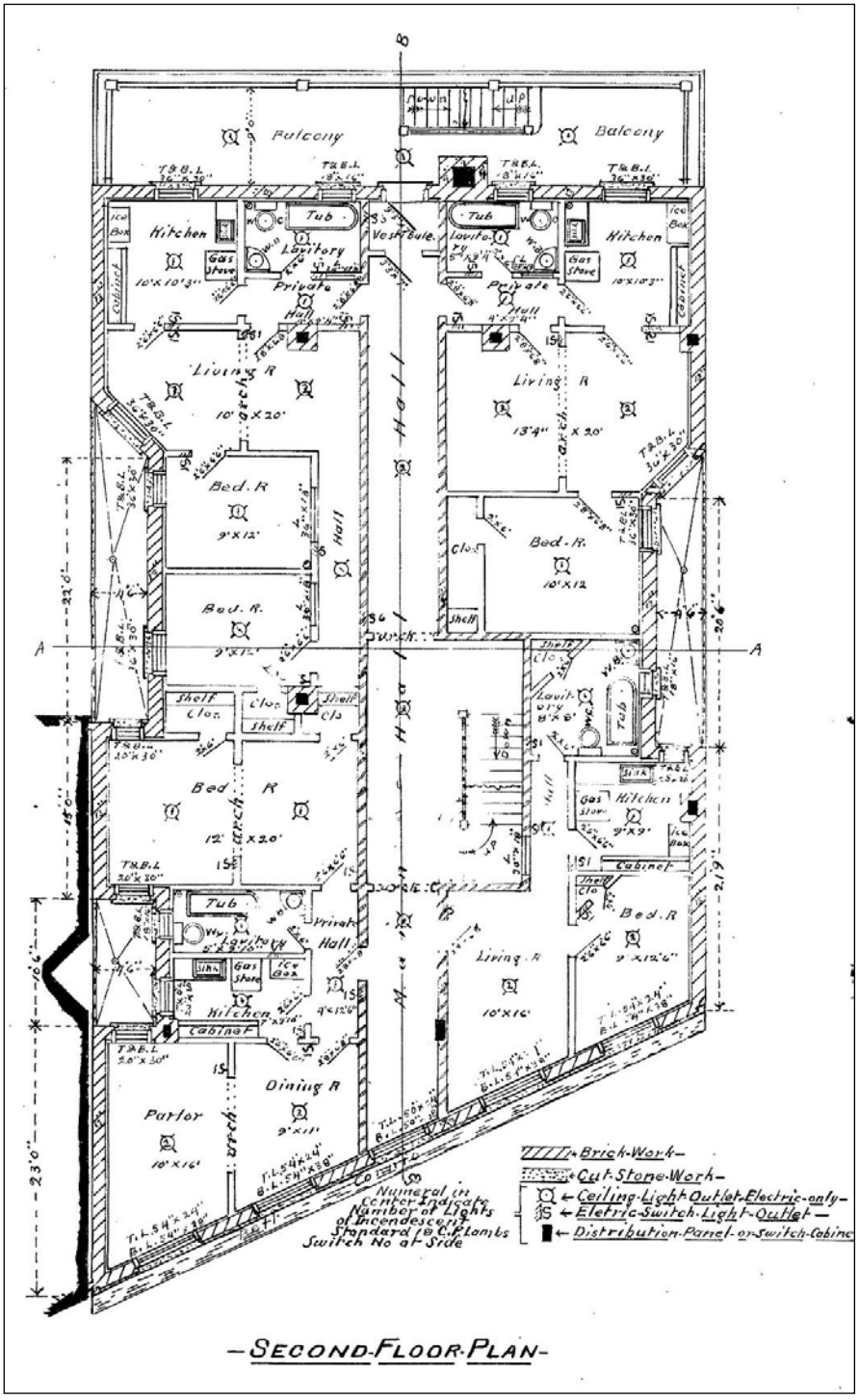

Plate 19 – "Second Floor Plan," architect's plans for 637-641 Portage Avenue, 1910. (City of Winnipeg Storage, Plan No. 512/1910.)

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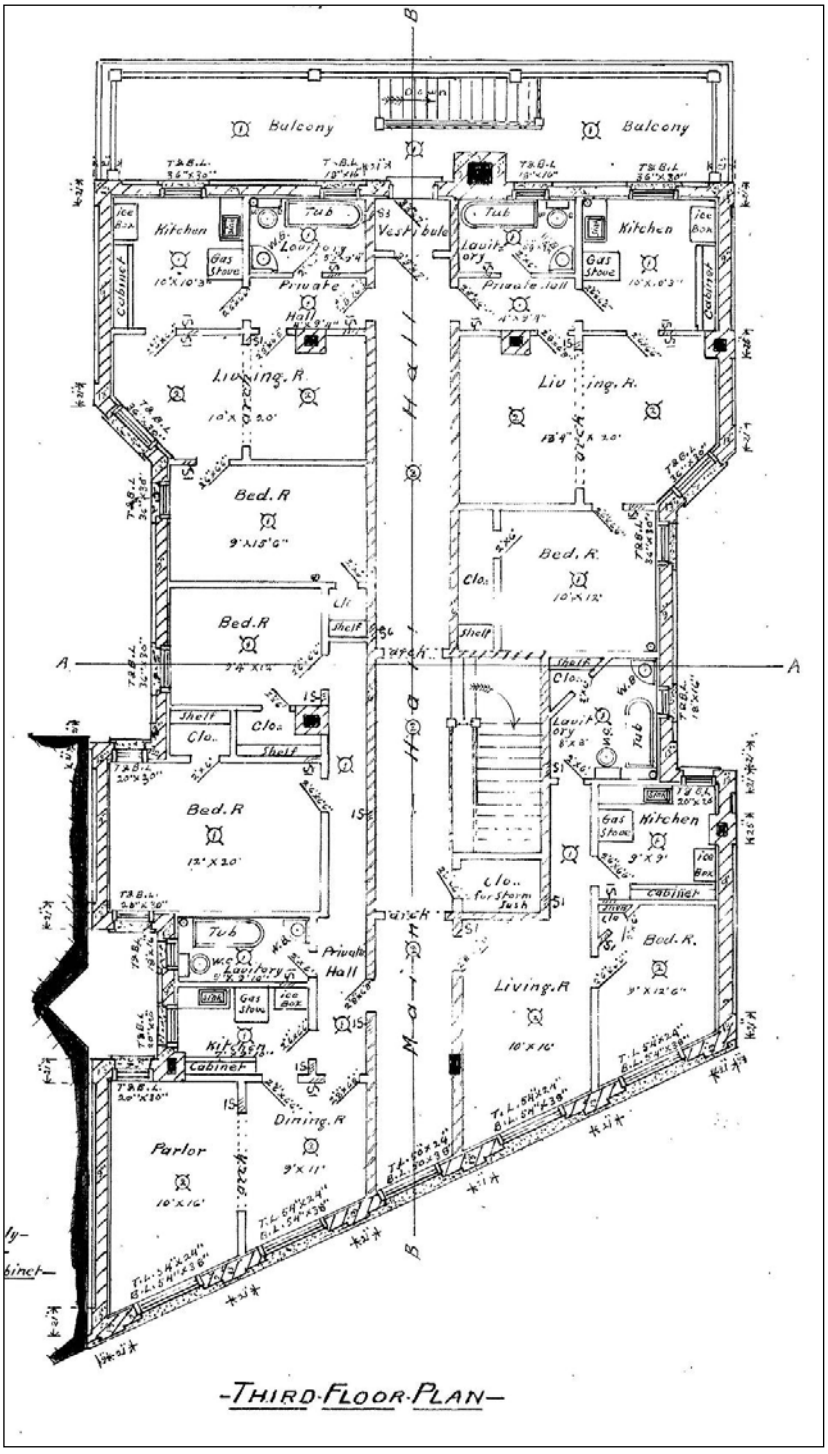

Plate 20 – "Third Floor Plan," architect's plans for 637-641 Portage Avenue, 1910. (City of Winnipeg Storage, Plan No. 512/1910.)

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Plate 21 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, second floor suite, 2011. (M. Peterson, 2011.)



Plate 22 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, second floor stairway, 2011. (M. Peterson, 2011.)

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Plate 23 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, second floor space, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)

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Plate 24 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, second floor space, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)

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Plate 25 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, third floor suite, 2011. (M. Peterson, 2011.)

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Plate 26 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, third floor skylight, 2011. (M. Peterson, 2011.)

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Plate 27 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, third floor space, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)

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Plate 28 – Monte Cassino Court, 639 Portage Avenue, third floor space, 2018. (M. Peterson, 2018.)

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Plate 29 – Portage Avenue looking east from Sherbrook Street, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)



Plate 30 – Portage Avenue looking west from Furby Street, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)