



**265 OSBORNE STREET**

**WINNIPEG ELECTRIC COMPANY  
OSBORNE STREET SUBSTATION**

City of Winnipeg  
Historical Buildings Committee

December 2012

## 265 OSBORNE STREET – WINNIPEG ELECTRIC COMPANY OSBORNE STREET SUBSTATION

Winnipeg's first experience with mass transit came on October 21, 1882 when the Winnipeg Street Railway Company (WSR), a private company incorporated in May, began a horse-drawn service along its newly laid tracks from the south end of Main Street to City Hall (Plate 1) with four cars and 20 horses.<sup>1</sup> The following year the track was extended north to Higgins Avenue and along Portage Avenue to Kennedy Street. The company owned 20 closed cars, 15 open cars, 4 sleighs (Plate 2) and over 80 horses. Equipment and stables were located on both sides of Assiniboine Avenue between Fort and Garry streets. From 1884-1890 this was Winnipeg's transit system, no extensions or upgrades were asked for or completed.

But in the late 1880s, electrification had been successfully introduced in North America and the WSRC, seeing its advantages, asked City Council for permission to operate a test route. Council told the company to "go across the river to the bush in Fort Rouge." The company proceeded to purchase land at the south end of what would become Osborne Street on both sides of the Red River, created Elm Park and River Park – destinations for its new electrified system.<sup>2</sup> Work began grading the roadbed along Pembina (Osborne) from Jessie Avenue to River Avenue and east on River to the Main Street Bridge. When power was denied by a local distribution company, the WSR built its own powerhouse on Assiniboine Avenue. The first electric car arrived from St. Catharines, ON in November 1890 and regular service started on January 28, 1891. The route was a huge success and during that year, the company expanded both its Fort Rouge lines and its horse-drawn system in the City (Plate 3).

But with this success came competition and a group of powerful eastern Canadian businessmen, led by railway promoters William Mackenzie and Donald Mann,<sup>3</sup> petitioned City Council and

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert W. Blake, The Era of Street Cars in Winnipeg, 1881 to 1955 (Winnipeg, MB: Author, 1971), n.p.

<sup>2</sup> John E. Baker, Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Busses (West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982), pp. 12-15.

<sup>3</sup> Mackenzie and Mann would be the partnership that years later built Canada's second transcontinental railroad system, the Canadian Northern Railway. The group also included William Van Horne (President of the Canadian Pacific Railway) and James Ross (railway contractor and industrialist).

were granted the exclusive right to operate an electric railway in the City of Winnipeg. The Winnipeg Electric Street Railway Company (WESR) was formed and started operations in July of 1892<sup>4</sup> alongside the horse-drawn cars of the WSR (Plate 4). The WSR took the City to court, claiming it had operating rights in the City of Winnipeg. The court case made it all the way to England and the Privy Council by the spring of 1894, where the lower court judgements against the WSR were upheld. Seeing no other options, the WSR approached the WESR which bought the entire WSR system (except for Elm Park) in May and retired the horse-drawn system.

Over the next decade, the WESR system grew and surrounding municipalities like Fort Garry, Assiniboia, Headingley, Tuxedo and St. Boniface all began to request their own service. The route along Osborne Street to the parks saw an increasing level of ridership and the tracks were doubled (Plate 5).<sup>5</sup>

In 1904, the WESR amalgamated with the Winnipeg General Power Company to form the Winnipeg Electric Railway Company (WER) and embarked on a massive expansion program, mirroring the expansion of all aspects of life in Winnipeg. This expansion included the construction of the Pinawa power plant and over 100 kilometres of transmission lines, the Mill Street Terminal Station, and the Electric Railway Chambers, 213 Notre Dame Avenue and the upgrading of rolling stock (Plate 6). After the outbreak of World War I, the WER experienced continued loss of revenue due to decreased ridership and increased maintenance costs on its aging rolling stock, although ridership did briefly rebound after the War, with a peak of over 65 million in 1920.<sup>6</sup>

In 1924, the word “Railway” was dropped from the company name, becoming the Winnipeg Electric Company (WEC). The late 1920s, the Depression-era 1930s and the War years of the 1940s were very difficult for the company, with ridership continuing to dwindle and seemingly never sufficient revenues to properly maintain the infrastructure and rolling stock (Plate 7).

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<sup>4</sup> J.E. Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 17. The WESR’s first line ran from Main Street at Higgins Avenue north to Selkirk Avenue and then west to Sinclair Street to service the Exhibition Grounds nearby.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-65.

Negotiations with the City for a municipal takeover occurred at various times throughout this period but no agreement could be reached. In 1931, the subject of trolley coaches – wheeled electric busses – was first brought to the WEC’s attention. Seven years later, the first trolley coach (six 40-passenger coaches were ordered from Allentown, Pennsylvania) was running on the Sargent Avenue line, a first in Western Canada (Plates 8 and 9). The new coaches were cheaper to maintain than the older streetcars and did not require tracks, although they did require new overhead lines and different power, which the WEC supplied by constructing several new substations along its busier routes, including the Corydon and Osborne lines.<sup>7</sup> In September of 1955, the last streetcar was retired (Plate 10).

In October 1952, the Manitoba Hydro Electric Board offered to purchase the WEC on the conditions that the gas and transit utilities be separated from the electric utility, that the transit operations be taken over by a new company and that the municipalities have the option to purchase this new company within a set time. The offer was accepted and the Greater Winnipeg Transit Company was formed in 1953. After an April referendum, the City of Winnipeg agreed to incorporate this company as the Greater Winnipeg Transit Commission, ending the private transit system in the City. The Commission oversaw the retirement of the streetcars and on December 31, 1960, as part of the City’s own reorganization, the Transit Department of the Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg was created.<sup>8</sup>

After careful study, the Department chose to replace the trolley coaches with diesel busses. Over the next decade, the trolley coaches were retired and the overhead lines removed – the Osborne Street overheads from Jubilee Avenue to Corydon Avenue were removed in the summer of 1966.<sup>9</sup> The official end of the trolley system came on October 30, 1970.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 133. The WEC found that for the cost of repairing tracks and pavement on Sargent Avenue, it could remove the tracks, repave the road, convert the overhead lines and replace an old streetcar with a modern trolley coach.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

In 1947, the WEC, as part of its conversion from streetcars to trolley coaches, built a unique electrical substation at the corner of Osborne Street and Jessie Avenue, coming online two years later, supplying electricity to the new system.

## **STYLE**

Purposely designed to disguise its industrial use, the Osborne Street Substation is a modest, residential-looking structure with classically-inspired details. This design was unique in the City and unlike another substation built two years previous, at the corner of Harrow Street and Grant Avenue (Plate 11). While unusual in the Winnipeg region, this disguising of power substations was utilized elsewhere in major centres across North America.

## **CONSTRUCTION**

The building measures approximately 10.2 x 10.4 x 9.1 metres and rests on 33.0-centimetre reinforced concrete foundation walls (see Appendix I for addition information).<sup>10</sup> Floors in the basement and ground floor are cement on concrete and the superstructure features layers of hollow tile and hollow brick covered by face brick. Ceilings, supported by a network of steel trusses, were originally 2.7 metres in the basement and as high as 8.2 metres on the ground floor.

## **DESIGN**

The front (east) façade is asymmetrical, with the entrance at the south end and two large, arched windows filling much of the remainder of the façade (Plate 12). The single entrance door, located atop a short flight of steps, is set in an ornamental wood frame with attached, fluted columns supporting a broken pediment (Plate 13). The hipped gable roof is embellished with dentilled eaves. Both the north and south façades are windowless and feature attached brick chimneys (Plate 14). The rear (west) façade includes a raised entrance (Plate 15). The only significant exterior alterations

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<sup>10</sup> City of Winnipeg Assessment Record, Roll No. 215130, Ward 2. Below as AR.

to this building (Plate 16) were the replacement of the rear door/window unit and the addition of basement windows, completed in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

## **INTERIOR**

As originally designed, the ground floor was filled with electrical machinery (Plate 17) while the basement was left empty (Plate 18). Today, the ground floor is used for offices, the original tile walls are exposed as are the steel trusses of the roof (Plate 19). The original staircase in the northeast corner of the building leads to the basement now used for meetings (Plate 20). The interior and exterior alterations were designed by the City's Engineering Department and completed by the Anders Construction Company.<sup>12</sup>

## **INTEGRITY**

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. The interior of the building has been significantly altered with the removal of the electrical equipment and conversion into offices and meeting space, although many of the original finishes remain intact. This has not, however, been reflected on the exterior, where most of the original elements and materials are unchanged.

## **STREETSCAPE**

The ground around this structure was built up to allow the substation to be built higher than the surrounding ground. The area in which it sits has seen significant changes during the past decades, with increased traffic along all the intersecting streets nearby. The recent construction of a new Osborne Street overpass and Rapid Transit Station has also made major changes to the streetscape.

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<sup>11</sup> AR.

<sup>12</sup> City of Winnipeg, Architect's Plans, No. 4309/1972.

## **ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS**

The noted partnership of Moody (Herbert Henry Gatenby, 1903-1991) and Moore (Robert E., 1909-?) was hired to design this substation. Moody and Moore had formed in 1936 and rose in stature to become one of the City's finest architectural firms (biographical information at Appendix II). This is the first Moody and Moore structure to be evaluated by the Historical Buildings Committee.

## **PERSON/INSTITUTION**

The Osborne Street Substation was an integral part of the WEC's conversion from streetcars to trolley coaches that began in the late 1930s. The building functioned to convert the electricity in the high voltage main lines into a lower, usable voltage for the trolley coaches.

In Fort Rouge, which had been the first neighbourhood in Western Canada to be served by electric streetcars, the conversion to trackless mass transit started when the Corydon Avenue tracks were removed and temporarily replaced by motorbus service in the spring of 1949. Once the new overhead lines were completed and hooked up to the Osborne Street Substation and repaving of Corydon Avenue was finished, the new trolley coach service was inaugurated on September 10, 1949. On Osborne Street, streetcars were stopped on June 30, 1949 and trolley coach service began on July 31, 1949 – still an important route feeding the parks on south Osborne Street.<sup>13</sup>

The switch to diesel busses meant the end of overhead power lines for the transit system and the obsolescence of the substations located throughout the City. The Osborne Street Substation, still owned by the City of Winnipeg, was converted into the offices of the General Council of Winnipeg Community Centres, which still operates out of the building.

## **EVENT**

There is no known event connected with this building.

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<sup>13</sup> J.E. Baker, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-138.

**CONTEXT**

This substation was built at an important evolutionary point in the furnishing of mass transit to the citizens of Winnipeg. The private company operating the system was slowly recovering from the financial strains of the Depression and increased ridership meant it had capital to modernize its system. The replacement of streetcars, so long a fixture on Winnipeg streets, was the first step towards this modern system, followed shortly thereafter by the removal of the overhead lines and use of busses. The Osborne Street Substation is one of the last remaining tangible reminders of Winnipeg's early transit system.

**LANDMARK**

Located near one of the City's busiest intersections, this building, because of its unusual design, would be familiar to many Winnipeggers, although its original use would likely not be known by most.



# APPENDIX I

## CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report Assessment Record

Building Address: 265 Osborne Street

Building Name: Winnipeg Electric Company Osborne Street Substation

Original Use: Electrical substation

Current Use: offices (General Council of Winnipeg Community Centres)

Roll No. (Old): 215130-2 (4718)

RSN: 141133

Legal Description: 31/35 St. Boniface, Plan 208, Block 15, Lots 9/11

Location: Northwest corner Jessie Avenue

Date of Construction: 1947

Storeys: 1 and basement

Heritage Status: **ON INVENTORY**

Construction Type: Solid brick on raised concrete foundation

Building Permits (Plans available: [M] Microfilm; [PPD] Department Storage):

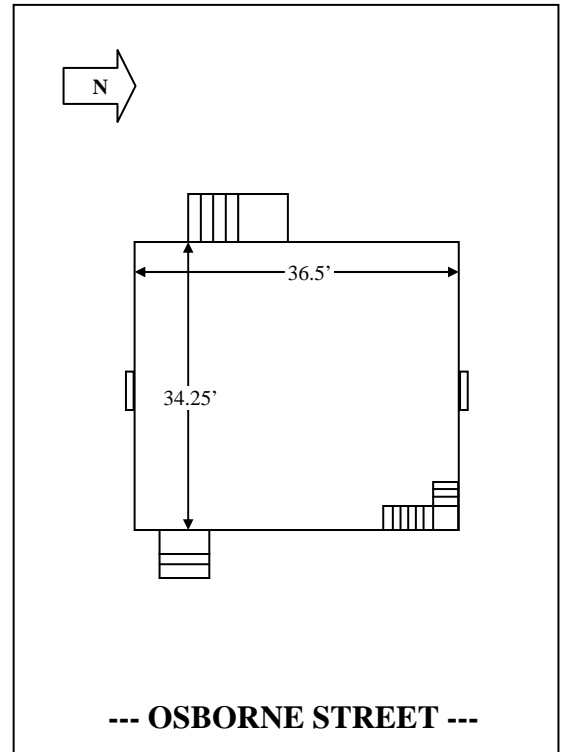
- 4111/1947 [PPD] \$20,000 (original); 4309/1972 [M-Roll 200] \$14,000 (interior & exterior alterations);

### Information:

- 33½ x 34 x 30 + = 34,980 cu. ft.
- 13" reinforced concrete foundation wall; 2" cement on 6" concrete floors in basement & on 1<sup>st</sup> floor
- superstructure- 4" face brick, 4" hollow brick, 4" hollow tile
- steel trusses; 9'+ ceilings (basement) & 4'-27' ceilings (1<sup>st</sup>)
- 1972 work: remove electrical equipment, partitioning, furnace & washrooms in basement, new cedar ceiling on 1<sup>st</sup>, new front & rear doors,

**ARCHITECT: MOODY & MOORE**

**CONTRACTOR: UNNAMED**



## APPENDIX II

### Moody & Moore

H.H.G. Moody was born in Winnipeg in 1903 and graduated with an architecture degree from the University of Manitoba in 1926. He practiced with firms in Boston and Toronto before returning home in 1933.<sup>1</sup> Three years later, he formed a partnership with Robert E. Moore which would last 40 years. Moore was also born in Winnipeg, in 1909, graduating with his architecture degree five years after Herbert Moody. He served a two-year apprenticeship in the offices of local architects Northwood and Chivers before registering as an architect with the provincial association in 1934.<sup>2</sup>

The partnership was split between Moody, the designer, and Moore, the office manager and the business operated for many years out of the building they designed at 295 Broadway. Much of their work was concentrated in the education and hospital/laboratory fields, including virtually all the buildings in the Health Sciences Centre complex. In 1969, the firm combined to form Moody Moore Duncan Rattray Peters Searle Christie Architects, Engineers and Planners (the other firm had been founded in 1963). Both Moody and Moore stepped back and became consultants to the firm.<sup>3</sup>

A partial list of prominent works of Moody and Moore would include:

Nurses' Residence, Grace Hospital, 210 Evanson St. (1941)

Red Cross Lodge, Deer Lodge Military Hospital, 2109 Portage Ave. (1945)

Winnipeg Electric Company Osborne Street Substation, 265 Osborne St. (1947)

Red Cross Building, 226 Osborne St. North (1948)

City of Winnipeg Offices, 100 Main St. (1948)

Winter Club, 200 River Ave. (1950)

Regional hospitals in Virden, MB and Morden, MB (early 1950s)

Women's Pavilion, Winnipeg General Hospital (Health Sciences Centre), Bannatyne Ave. (1951)

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<sup>1</sup> "Herbert Henry Gaten Moody, Moody Moore Architects, 1903-1991," in "Winnipeg Architecture: Oral History Project, Architectural Practitioners 1945-1975," Winnipeg Architectural Foundation, 2002, p. 1. Below as "Moody".

<sup>2</sup> "Robert E. Moore, 1909-c.1992," in "Winnipeg Architecture: Oral History Project, Architectural Practitioners 1945-1975," Winnipeg Architectural Foundation, 2002, p. 1. Below as "Moore".

<sup>3</sup> "Moody," op. cit.

Moody and Moore designs (continued):

Children's Hospital, Winnipeg General Hospital (Health Sciences Centre), Bannatyne Ave. (1952)  
Ashdown Store Annex, 480 Main St. (1952)  
Churchill High School, 510 Hay St. (1953)  
Harrow School, 550 Harrow St. (1954)  
Princess Elizabeth Hospital, Morley Ave. (1954)  
Sovereign Life Building, 287 Broadway (1956)  
Great West Life Building, 60 Osborne St. North (with Marani and Morris, Toronto, ON – 1956)  
St. John's College and Chapel, University of Manitoba, 92 Dysart Road (1958)  
National Revenue Building, 391 York Ave. (1958)  
University of Manitoba School of Dentistry Building, 780 Bannatyne Ave. (1959)  
Manitoba Hydro Building, 820 Taylor Ave. (1960)  
Manitoba Institute of Technology (Red River College), 2055 Notre Dame Ave. (1963)  
Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce Branch, 140 Princess St. (1969) – demolished  
St. Stephen's Broadway United Church, 396 Broadway (1970)  
Lockhart Hall, University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Ave. (1970)  
Medical Arts Building and Parkade, 233 Kennedy St. (1972-1974)  
National Research Council Building, 435 Ellice Ave. (1987)  
Can-West Global Park, 1 Portage Ave. East (1999)

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Plate 1 – A view of Main Street south from Portage Avenue in 1884 with streetcars on both major thoroughfares. (H.W. Blake Collection, reproduced from J.E. Baker, *Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Busses* [West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982], p. 13.)

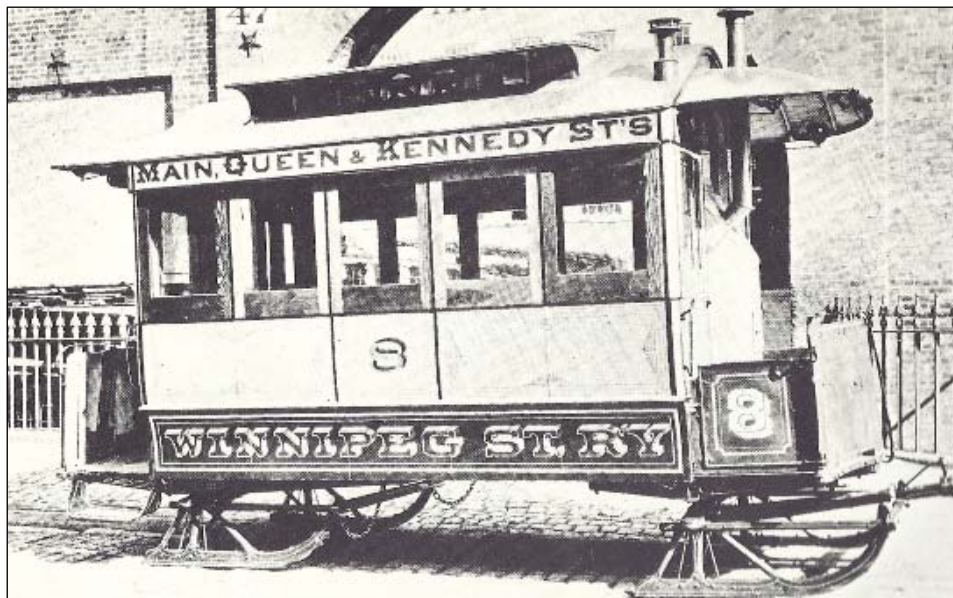


Plate 2 – Manufactured in New York, sleigh like this one were used in the winter by the WSRC. (H.W. Blake Collection, reproduced from J.E. Baker, *Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Busses* [West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982], p. 8.)

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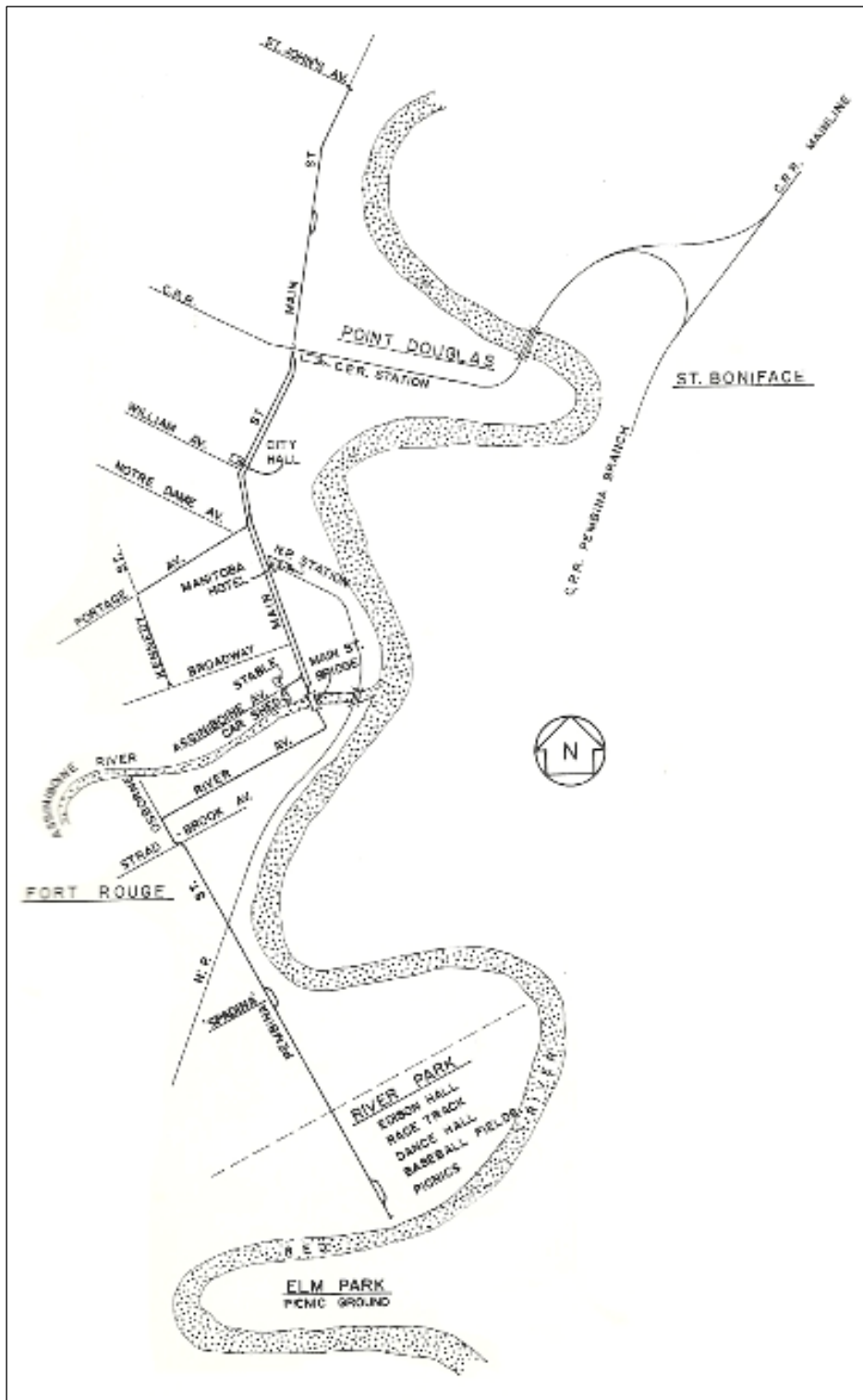


Plate 3 – Map showing the WSR system as it operated in 1894 in Winnipeg and Fort Rouge. (Reproduced from J.E. Baker, *Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Busses* [West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982], p. 13.)

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Plate 4 – Winnipeg’s dual streetcar system with a horse-drawn car on the left and electric cars above and to the right. ([Manitoba Archives.](#))

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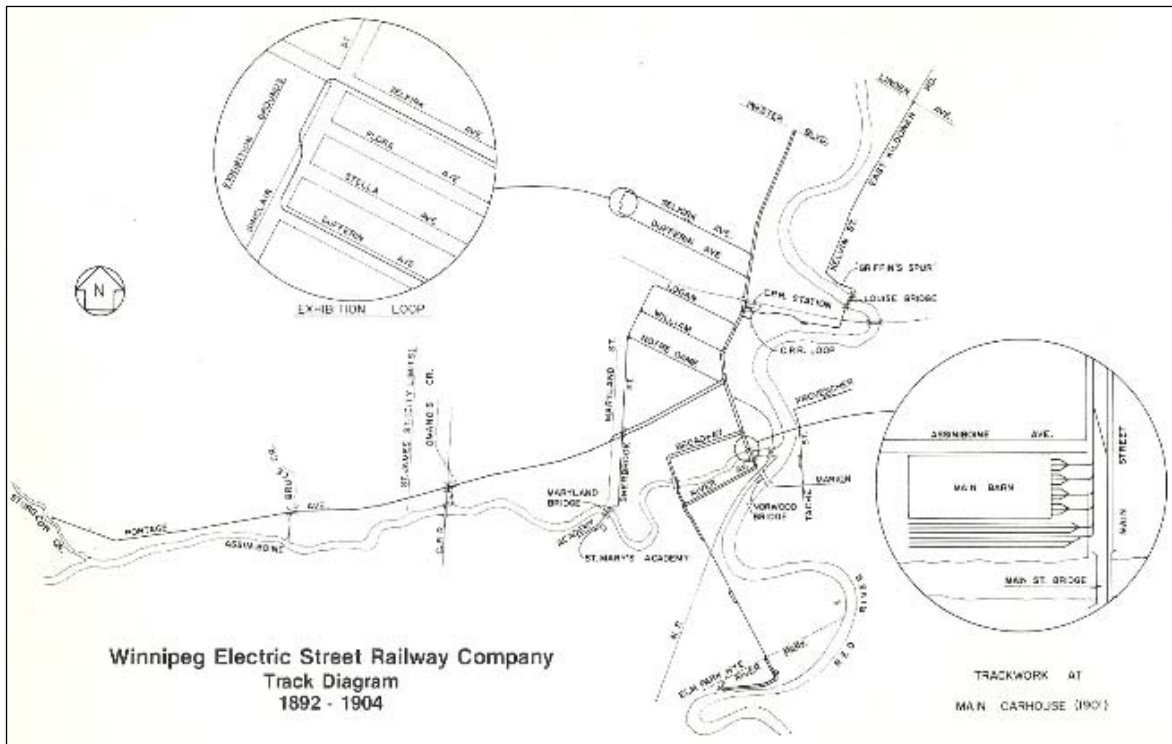


Plate 5 – The WESR system by 1904. The system included 37 streetcars and approximately 20 trailers. (Reproduced from J.E. Baker, *Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Busses* [West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982], p. 22.)

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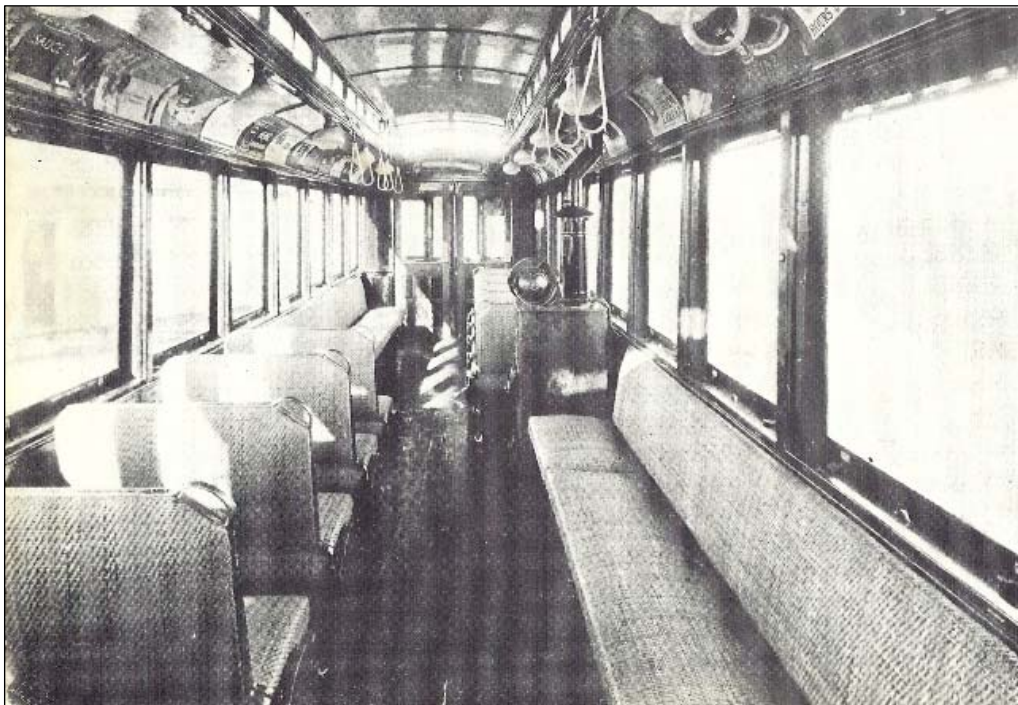
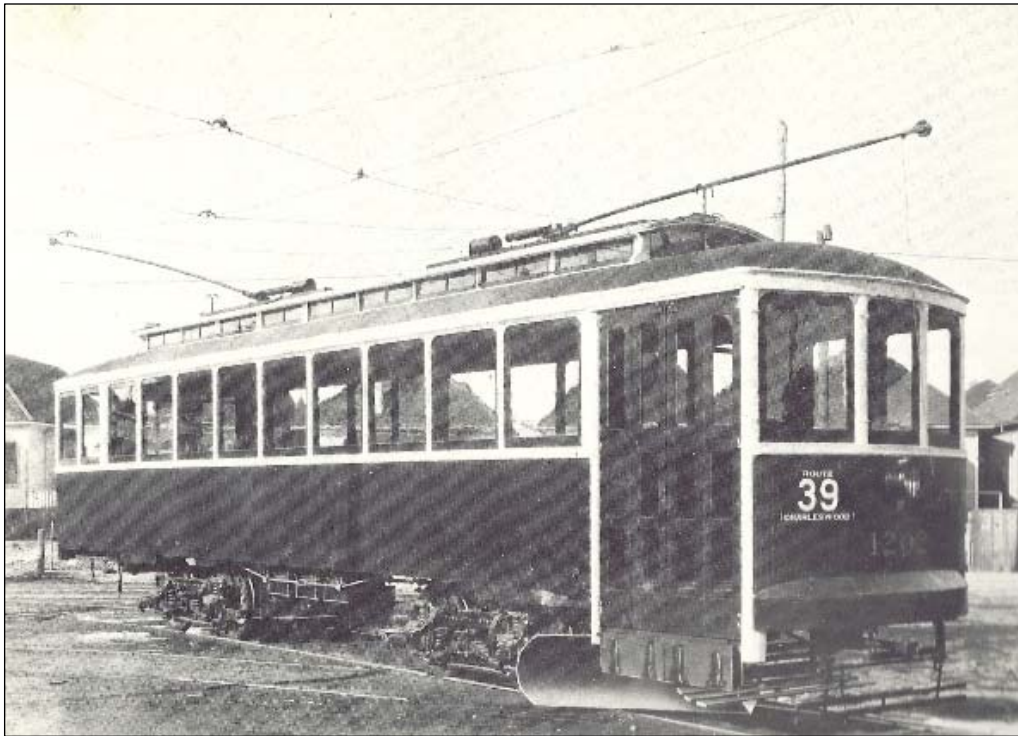


Plate 6 – The exterior and interior of a 1924 streetcar, note the heater located at the end of the bench. (Winnipeg Transit System images, reproduced from J.E. Baker, *Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Buses* [West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982], p. 62.)

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Plate 7 – Portage Avenue, looking east from Sherbrook Street in August 1930. The middle sets of tracks are being repaired/replaced, while the streetcars run on temporary tracks laid beside on the pavement. ( Foote Collection No. 1506, Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 8 – This ca.1950 image of Portage and Main shows a number of interesting items: trolley coaches turning south onto Main Street, a streetcar turning north onto Main Street and behind it, the median loading area for streetcar passengers. (Winnipeg Transit System images, reproduced from J.E. Baker, *Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Busses* [West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982], p. 102.)

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Plate 9 – A trolley coach on the Corydon route, April 1969. (Reproduced from J.E. Baker, *Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Buses* [West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982], inside front cover.)

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Plate 10 – A streetcar, nearing the end of its use in Winnipeg, Portage Avenue at Furby Street, May 1951. (William E. Robertson Collection, reproduced from J.E. Baker, *Winnipeg's Electric Transit. The Story of Winnipeg's Streetcars and Trolley Busses* [West Hill, On: Railfare Enterprises, 1982], inside back cover.)



Plate 11 – Former Winnipeg Electric Company substation, 951 Grant Avenue, opened 1947. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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Plate 12 – Former Winnipeg Electric Company Osborne Street Substation, 265 Osborne Street, front (east) and south façades, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)



Plate 13 – Former Winnipeg Electric Company Osborne Street Substation, 265 Osborne Street, front entrance detail, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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Plate 14 – Former Winnipeg Electric Company Osborne Street Substation, 265 Osborne Street, front (east) and north façades, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)



Plate 15 – Former Winnipeg Electric Company Osborne Street Substation, 265 Osborne Street, rear (west) and south façades, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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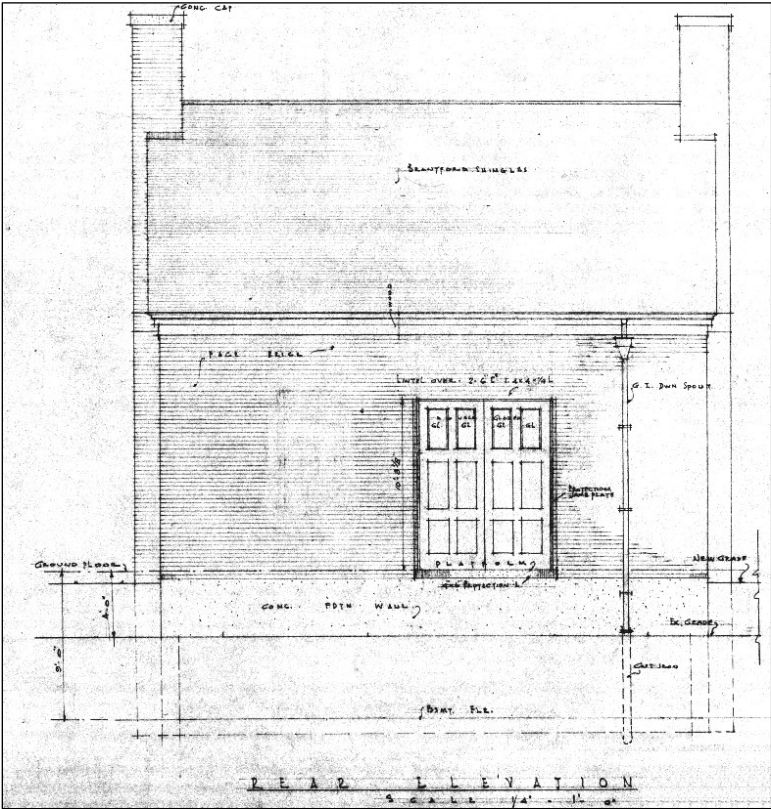
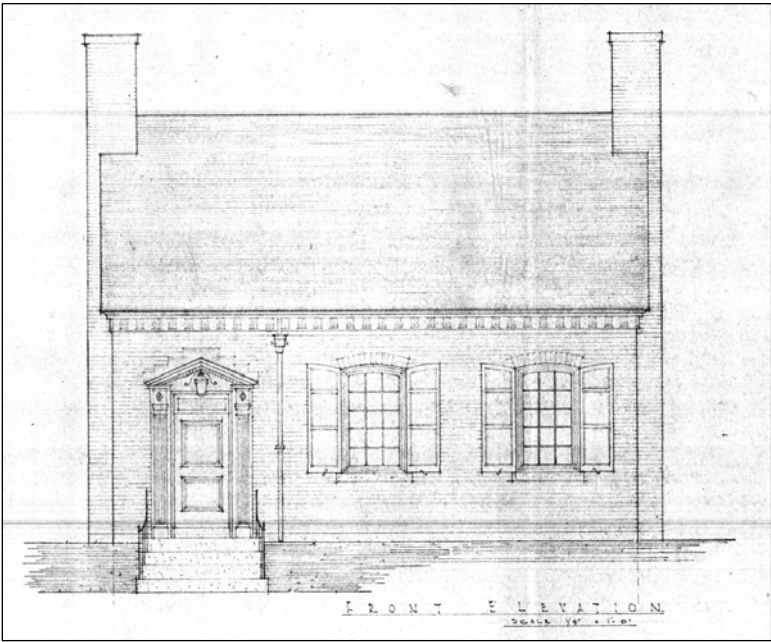


Plate 16 – Architect’s drawings, “Front Elevation” (top) and “Rear Elevation” (bottom), 1947. (Architect’s Plans No. 4111/1947, courtesy of City of Winnipeg.)



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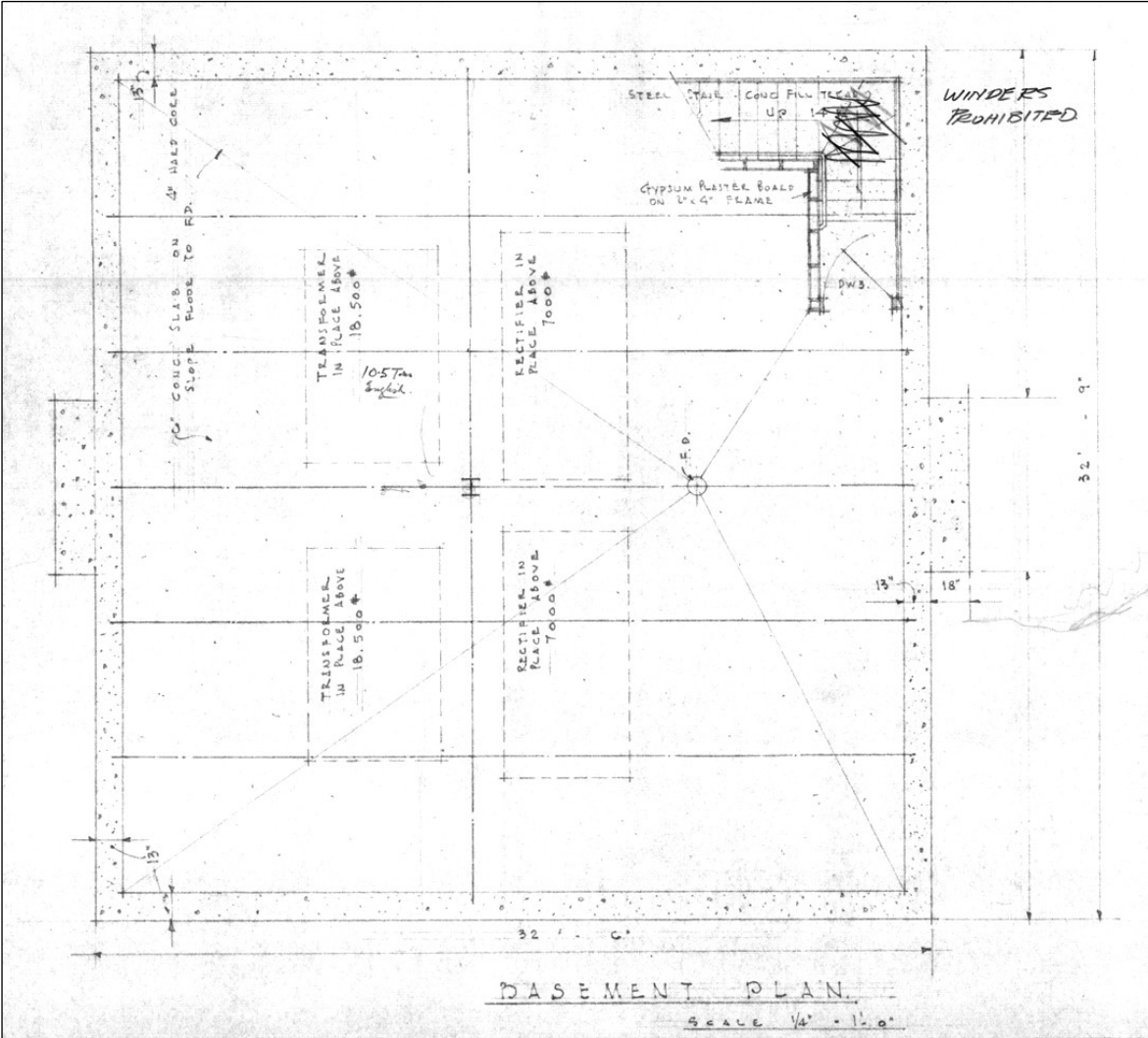


Plate 18 – Architect’s drawings, “Ground Floor Plan,” 1947. (Architect’s Plans No. 4111/1947, courtesy of City of Winnipeg.)

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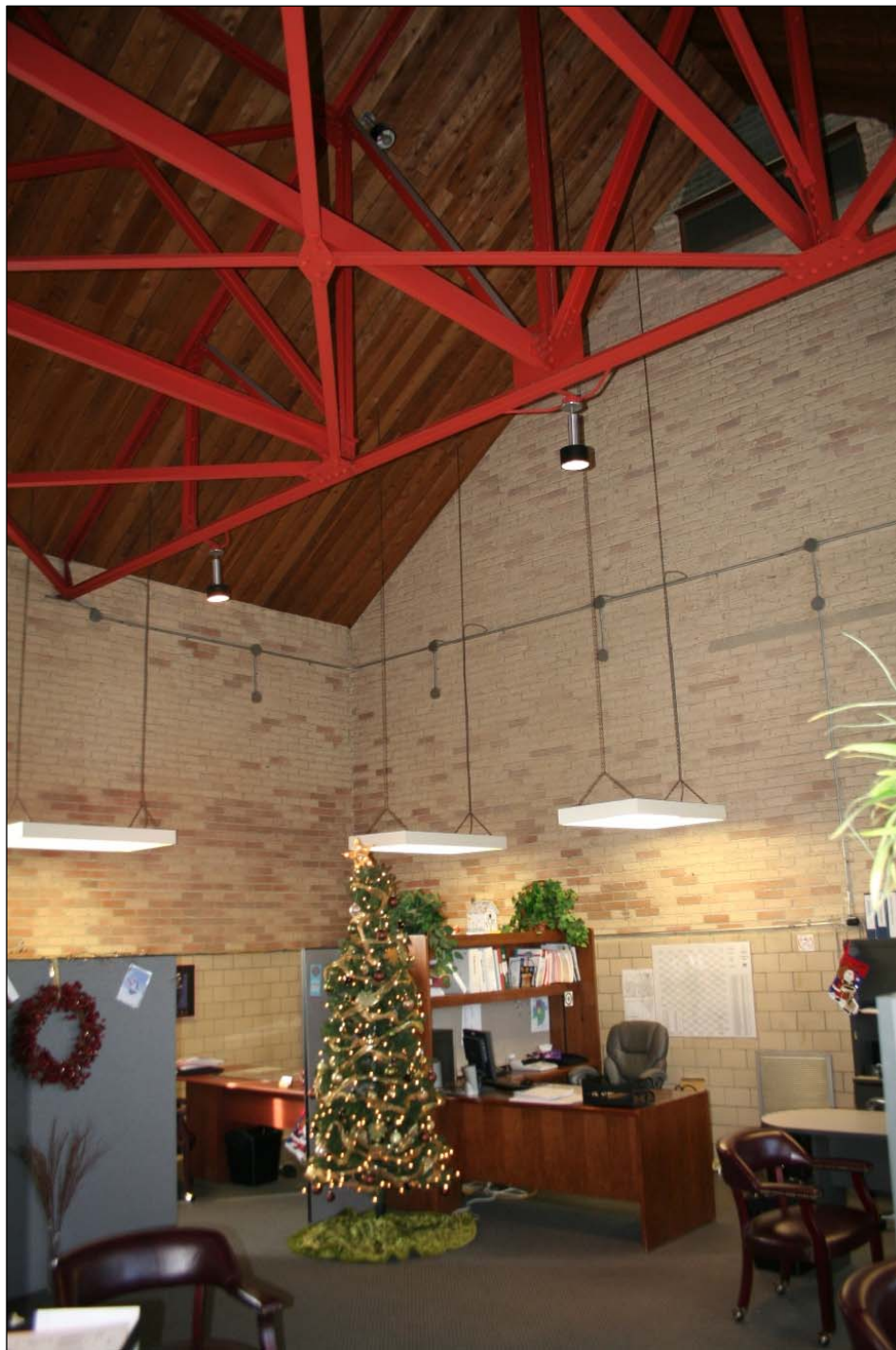


Plate 19 – Former Winnipeg Electric Company Osborne Street Substation, 265 Osborne Street, northwest corner, ground floor, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)

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Plate 20 – Former Winnipeg Electric Company Osborne Street Substation, 265 Osborne Street, basement, 2012. (M. Peterson, 2012.)