

BARBER AND BARBER, ARCHITECTS EXTRAORDINAIRE

Charles Arnold Barber
(c. 1847-1916)

Earle William Barber
(1855-1915)

During the late 1870s and throughout the greater part of the 1880s, Winnipeg's paramount architectural firm was that of Barber and Barber. The practice consisted of the two Barber brothers, Charles A. and Earle W. and was known under several names, including C.A. Barber (1876-1881); Barber and (James R.) Bowes (1881-2); Barber, Bowes and Barber (1882-83) and finally, Barber and Barber (1883-c. 1920). Charles Barber, the founder of the firm, was actively involved in its operations from 1876 to 1898, after which the outfit became a Superior, Wisconsin company run by Earle Barber and his descendants.

Charles Arnold Barber was born at Irish Creek, near Athens, Ontario around 1847. He was one of seven children brought into the world by William and Maria (Arnold) Barber. These siblings included Earle W., John G., Maria L., William E., Robert J., Ann J. and Albert E. Barber. Interestingly enough, the majority of Charles' brothers and sisters came to reside at Winnipeg and were involved in the building trades. Little is known of the Barber children, though the somewhat dubious Winnipeg activities of William might command attention at some future date.

Charles' early life remains clothed in mystery. Though at one point, he alleged that he had founded the firm in 1870, the Census of 1871 found him still firmly planted on the family farm as a carpenter. At some point, he journeyed across the St. Lawrence River and was apprenticed to a master-builder at Rome, New York, though no record is known of Charles' presence at that place. During the early to mid-seventies, he supposedly was involved with major railway and bridge-building works in the United States, though it is believed that he was employed in the position of a gang labourer or mechanic rather than in a professional capacity.

Barber came to Winnipeg "for his health" on board the "Dakota" in May 1876. He set out on an architectural career that would last until about 1898. During that time, he, or his firm was responsible for well over one hundred designs, a little over 80 of which were actually constructed. Though the bulk of his work was executed at Winnipeg, side-trips took his work to other Manitoba towns, viz. Emerson, where he designed the 1881 Town



Hall (Plate 1), and the Merchants Bank, Brandon (1882); and possibly other buildings that are presently unknown.

Clearly, the main point that emerges from an examination of Barber's career is that his firm was the most important of Winnipeg's early architectural groups. He came to the city at a time when Winnipeg was erecting its first substantial buildings, as his new home was just emerging from the isolation of its frontier existence. With the great boom that struck Winnipeg in the early 'eighties, Barber appeared to hit his natural stride. At the peak of his firm's fortunes (1883) he employed six draughtsmen, including the later famous George Gouinlock of Toronto.



Barber's buildings were eminently suited to Winnipeg's first period of growth. His chief style was that of the eclectic, with Italianate and Second Empire themes. The firm's Winnipeg City Hall (1883-86, Cover) remains as their best known work, though equally impressive designs were to be found in the Bird Block (1882, 1887, Plate 2); the Robertson Block (1880, Plate 3); St. John's College Ladies' School (1877, Plate 4); Pile of Bones Villa (1881,) and the North Ward School (1877).

To describe Barber as a "boom-town architect" is probably the most suitable appellation that may safely be attached to his work. His designs were flamboyant and proclaimed the existence of

his buildings in a very loud manner. Though this was his chief design characteristic, the materials he used for his buildings were more substantial than the wood that might be used by his more "fly-by-night" contemporaries. Working in brick, stone, and even cement, it is evident that Barber understood the nature of a "boom-town", but also saw that Winnipeg was more permanent a fixture on the plains than most of the American boom-towns of the seventies.

Unfortunately, as Winnipeg became more culturally established, Barber's designs became less contemporary, and worse, structurally outmoded. In 1884, the Barbers were dismissed from the City Hall project for alleged collusion with contractors, a charge on which they were later exonerated. The firm's fame was broken, however, and the Barber brothers transferred their operations to Duluth, Minnesota after 1887, establishing branches at Superior, Wisconsin and Marquette, Michigan. During 1891 Charles re-opened the Winnipeg office, commencing designs for a number of buildings, including the City's first Grain Exchange (1892). The number of commissions were reduced, however, and the 'nineties saw Barber as only a minor though well-known character on Winnipeg's architectural scene. His last building, the McIntyre Block (1898, Plate 6) gave broad hints about its designer when its demolition took place in 1979. Though the Barber designs had substituted the heavy stone facades of Richardsonian architecture for the heavily ornamented gingerbread of the 'eighties, the structure remained essentially the same as its predecessors. All were of load-bearing wall design -- especially telling in the late 'nineties when metal framing was in general use elsewhere. The McIntyre Block featured this wooden interior framing. It also featured fire or bearing walls every twenty feet, which reduced its chances of recycling, and showed the edifice to be a series of narrow buildings. This probably had been done to avoid a repetition of the fire which had destroyed the first McIntyre Block.

Though the Grain Exchange (1892) featured the novelty of a 65 foot clear columnless span on its main floor (using trusses), Barber appeared to have design problems with many of his heavy masonry structures. When confined to wooden or even brick-veneer edifices, Barber's considerable talents as a carpenter-cum-master builder-cum-architect emerged. In time, many of his masonry buildings developed structural problems, even at the age of six months in one case. It is true that little was known about the condition of Winnipeg's soil in the early years, and the structural problems can be adduced to this fact.