

City of Victoria, Statement of Significance

December 2010



Address: 645-651 Johnson Street
Community: Old Town
Names: Watson and McGregor Building
Cadastral ID: PID No. 009369775
Theme(s)

CANADA

Developing Economies: trade & commerce
 Intellectual & Cultural Life: architecture & design

Date(s): 1909-1910
Architect: A. Maxwell Muir
Builder:

VICTORIA

Gateway Economy: frontier boom town
 Cultural Exchange: architectural expression

Description

The Watson and McGregor Building is a two-story, buff-coloured brick building constructed to the property lines in the middle of a block in Old Town. The tripartite grouping of nine double-hung sash windows across the second-floor facade and the simple pilasters that frame the street-level display windows are representative of Commercial (Chicago School) style features. This historic place includes the building on its legal lot.

Heritage Value

The Watson and McGregor Building possesses heritage value because it illustrates two themes in the history of Victoria: it is a physical testament to the robust growth that occurred between 1881 and 1913; and 2) it exemplifies the work of architect Alexander Maxwell Muir, who practiced in the city between 1889 and 1922. The Watson and McGregor Building, constructed in 1909-1910, was built near the crescendo of the Edwardian boom in Victoria. This great period of population growth and building construction witnessed the expansion of the commercial district

and residential neighbourhoods, but also the raising of new commercial buildings on lots in the Old Town section and north in adjoining Chinatown. During this boom, Johnson Street, previously lined with predominantly wood-frame buildings that were separated by numerous empty lots, became a streetscape of brick buildings, one to four stories tall, built to their property lines. By World War I it looked much as it does nearly a century later.

George Watson and William H. C. McGregor, partners in Watson and McGregor, contributed to Victoria's growth in the early 1900s by constructing a new building for their business and others in the commercial district, and also by providing plumbing services and supplies to builders. Watson and McGregor kept busy completing sewer connections and supplying general hardware for both new and remodelled commercial and residential buildings. In 1914, a Victoria city directory advertised their business in large bold type and informed readers of their business' range of pursuits and products: "general hardware, tinsmiths and plumbers, heating plants installed" (Tregillus-Thompson, p. 923). Watson and McGregor eventually took on general contracting work, and became a firm of some prominence in Victoria. They remained in business, operating from 647 Johnson Street, into the early 1930s. The Watson and McGregor Building also housed other businesses during that time, with shops on the ground floor and offices above.

The Watson and McGregor Building is representative of the work of architect Alexander Maxwell Muir, who practiced in Victoria from 1889 until his death in 1922. In that time, he designed more than fifty buildings in British Columbia. First employed by notable Victoria architect John Teague, Muir opened his own office in 1892. He remained busy at first with commercial, institutional, and residential projects in Victoria and elsewhere in the province. His early commissions included the Victoria Board of Trade Building, courthouses in Vernon and Nelson, British Columbia, and Victoria residences, such as the one for the Naime family. Muir skilfully executed Queen Anne as well as other style design elements in his plans. In the early 1900s, Muir lost many competitions to Francis M. Rattenbury, but succeeded in gaining commissions to design modest commercial buildings, including the Chemainus Hospital (1903), and the Burnside Fire Hall in Victoria (1908). This commercial building is a testament to the work of Alexander Maxwell Muir.

Character-Defining Elements

The character of this building is defined by its:

- Location in the middle of the block in Old Town, without setbacks on the front and sides.
- Contribution to the Johnson Street streetscape of commercial buildings predominantly one to four stories high and dating from the early twentieth century.
- Scale and massing.
- Brick construction and buff-coloured cladding.
- Articulation of simple Commercial style features, including tripartite grouping of windows on the second-floor facade to create a grid pattern, and plain pilasters that frame the storefront display windows.
- Narrow alley running along the west wall.

Documentation Location

City of Victoria Heritage Planning file for 645-651 Johnson Street.

Goad, Charles E. *Insurance Plan of Victoria, British Columbia, Vol. II* (1911) Map. *Plan of Victoria, British Columbia, Including Esquimalt* (1891) Map. *Victoria, British Columbia, 1903* (revised 1905, 1909) Map.

Henderson's British Columbia Gazetteer and Directory: Including a Classified Business Directory of British Columbia for the Year (several years).

Luxton, Donald, compiler and editor. *Building the West: The Early Architects of British Columbia* (2003): 178-79.

Tregillus-Thompson. *Directory of City of Victoria* (1914): 923.