

Murphy House
431 Selkirk Street South



Year Built: 1912 – 1919

Architect: Unknown

Style: Combination of many, including English Gothic and Tudor

Notable Features: Symmetrical front façade with projecting portico

Four point arches over ground floor openings

Designation Date: September 24th, 1985

By-Law No.: 236 – 1985, amending 147 - 1985

Legal Description: Con 2 Pt Lot 2 W/S Selkirk

Current Owner: Bruce Valente

Description:

The Murphy house and grounds, which span the entirety of a city block, are “a sprawling reminder of the heady days of Edwardian commercial wealth.”¹ The house is a three and a half story “monolithic tribute in brick and stone,” and the wealth belonged to James Murphy, who first arrived in Fort William in 1884. Murphy earned his fortune by establishing the James Murphy Coal Company, after having gained valuable experience as a fuel contractor for the Canadian Pacific Railway. James Murphy Coal Co., which was created in 1903, shipped fuel throughout Northwestern Ontario and into Manitoba.

Members of the Murphy family remained in the mansion after the death of James Murphy in 1928, and the subdivision of the house into apartments in 1946. The youngest son of James, Mr. Frank Murphy, died in 1958; he was the last of his line. The house was left to Frank’s wife Charlotte Macgillivray who retained ownership until 1986 when the property was sold to Bruce Valente. The house remains subdivided today.

¹ Anderson, Scott. *Murphy House has outlived family that built it*. The Chronicle Journal, Friday, February 3rd, 1989

Architecture:

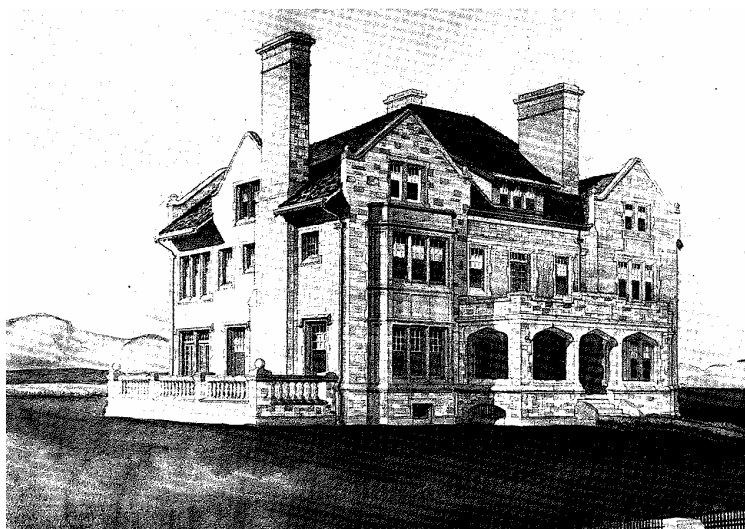
The James Murphy residence is situated on the West side of Selkirk Avenue, taking in the full City block between McGregor Avenue and Isabella Street. Begun in 1912, construction proceeded only to the completion of the first storey before being interrupted by the commencement of World War One. It was not fully completed until sometime during 1919.

This residence is of no particular architectural style, being eclectic in nature. The roof forms are reminiscent of French chateaus while the decorated ridge and eaves are more suggestive of the late English Gothic or Tudor styles. The four point arches over the ground floor openings also carry an English influence.

The front of the building faces East to Selkirk Avenue. It is a three-storey plus attic stone and brick structure, the entire first floor being of grey limestone quarried in the Dorion area. Most of the second storey and portions of the third are constructed of grey brick. It has a symmetrical front façade featuring a projecting portico leading to the main entrance. The portico, second-storey bay windows and the full height of the chimneys are also constructed of grey limestone.

The central recessed portion of the front façade is decorated above the portico with corbelled brickwork in an arcaded design. The second storey brickwork extends upwards to form the parapeted gable ends projecting from the roof at the third-floor level. The main façade has two gables on either side flanking a small rectangular dormer above the central entrance portico. The roof is finished with imported green-coloured Italian glaze tile roofing.

Used as a private home until 1946, the building was converted into apartments in the Spring of that year.²



² The Ontario Heritage Act, Public Notice. *The James Murphy Residence*. City of Thunder Bay City Clerk Archives

The Murphy Family:

James Murphy was born in West Liberty, Iowa in 1863 and arrived in Fort William with his pioneering parents in 1884. He gained experience as a fuel contractor for the Canadian Pacific Railway from 1887 to 1903, at which time he established his own business: the James Murphy Coal Company. With his increasing fortune, Murphy commissioned a residential mansion to be built on Selkirk Avenue, although it would be some time before construction of the house would be complete due to World War One.

A valued member of the founding Fort William community, James Murphy was noted for his charitable work and dedication to improvement of the city. He was involved with a wide variety of organizations, including the McKellar Hospital Board, the Catholic School board and the Young Men's Catholic Association. Murphy was apparently well known for his "good citizenship...and integrity."³

A very successful businessman, even above and beyond his endeavors with his coal company, James Murphy was chairman of the water and light commission in 1897 when these utilities were first made available at the Lakehead. He is largely responsible for bringing water and electricity to many homes before the turn of the century. Murphy was also politically active, serving on town council and as mayor in 1907 and 1908. He was president of the company which published the Fort William Times-Journal, and remained so until his death in 1928.⁴

James Murphy had three sons each of which followed in his footsteps as successful members of the community. E. Grimes was the eldest and he practiced law in Fort William until his father's death, at which time he managed the family businesses. E. Grimes also acted as an alderman and a mayor for the city. He died in 1933. James P. Murphy was the second son and he headed the firm until his death in 1939, when the legacy was passed on to the youngest son, Frank. Apparently well-known in local and national tennis circles, he was president of the Fort William Tennis Club and an ardent booster of the sport. Frank passed away, as the last of the Murphy line, in 1958. The house was left to Frank's wife Charlotte.

³ Thunder Bay Museum. *James Murphy 1863 – 1928*. <<http://www.thunderbaymuseum.com/murphy.htm>>

⁴ Anderson, Scott. *Murphy House has outlived family that built it*. The Chronicle Journal, Friday, February 3rd, 1989