

Her Majesty's Canadian Ship GRIFFON
125 Algoma Street North



Year Built: 1895

Added to Heritage Register: January 25, 2010

Description:

If walls could talk, the building which houses the HMCS GRIFFON would probably have much to say. Throughout its history, two of the most prominent founding families occupied it; the family of Thomas Marks and later, that of James Whalen. The Whalen family sold the house in 1930 to the Sisters of St. Joseph, who used the site as a school. Changing hands again in 1943, the building became a part of the site of HMCS GRIFFON. Since then, more than 2400 officers and non-commissioned members have enlisted or received their initial naval training at that location.

Marks, who arrived in Port Arthur in 1849 was a key figure in many of the earliest mining and railway endeavours. He established a successful business with his brother at Bruce mines, backed Peter McKellar in his mining operations, partnered with Mr. McGinnity on a contract to build roadbed for the C.P.R. from near Niblock to Eagle River and organized the Prince Arthur Landing and Kaministiquia Railway in 1877. Marks went on to be the Director of the Thunder Bay Colonization Railway and later the President of the Board of the Port Arthur, Duluth and Western Railway in 1887. His ship, "The Kakabeka" was the first vessel to be registered at Port Arthur. He became President of the Thunder Bay Dock, Forwarding and Elevator Company in 1882, and backed J.G. King in the operation of the first grain elevator at Thunder Bay. His planning mill provided the power for the Port Arthur Light, Water and Power Co. lighting plant in 1888.

In recognition Mark's ability to lead and organize, he was acclaimed the first mayor of the Town of Port Arthur in 1884. The house at 125 Algoma Street North was built in 1895. Thomas Marks lived there for five short years before his death in 1900.

There are perhaps only a handful of early Port Arthur residents who could compete with the accomplishments of Thomas Marks, and one of those men inhabited his

house. James Whalen arrived in Port Arthur in 1875 at the age of six. Tragedy befell his family when his father drowned, leaving James as the eldest son to provide for his mother and younger siblings. Fresh out of public school, Whalen dove into the logging and railway contracting business with a “farsightedness” that established him as a “genius.”

Whalen dreamed of developing Port Arthur into the “Chicago of the North,” and worked throughout his life to realize this dream. He was a man who recognized an opportunity and seized it, eventually building an empire. Whalen was President and General manager of the Dominion Towing and Salvage Company, president of the General Realty corporation, President and sole-organizer of the Whalen pulp and paper mills in Vancouver, and Vice-President of the West Coast Navigation company.

He is said to have “put the PORT in Port Arthur” by establishing the Great Lakes Dredging Company and beginning the shipping industry in Thunder Bay. He was also involved in the creation of the Western Dry Dock & Shipbuilding Company, was foreman and eventual owner of a zinc mine, and established a logging operation in Northwestern Ontario, near Black Surgeon River. In 1913, Whalen commissioned the construction of an 8 storey ‘skyscraper’ on Cumberland Street. Upon opening in 1914, the Whalen building (now home to Thunder Bay Hydro) was considered to be “the finest between Toronto and Winnipeg.”

Not only was Whalen active in creating industry in Port Arthur and Fort William, he was dedicated to promoting the twin cities to the rest of the county. He was aware of the power and influence of the up and coming industry of film, and built the Lyceum theatre in 1908. The now defunct theatre houses commercial stores and stands across the street from the Prince Arthur Hotel. Whalen also purchased the Commercial Motion Picture Company of Montreal in 1911 to “show his vision of the area and promote his business interests.” Producing the “grandest booster film made to date at the Lakehead,” Whalen’s *Port Arthur and Fort William; Canada’s Keys to the Great Lakes* was an attempt to showcase the twin cities great economic and industrial potential.¹

Eventually moving to the West Coast, Whalen was president and general manager of the Dominion Towing and Salvage Company, president of the General Realty corporation, president and sole-organizer of the Whalen pulp and paper mills in Vancouver, and vice president of the West Coast Navigation company. Unfortunately, it was on the coast that Whalen lost his great fortune (he had held \$10 million worth of stocks in Whalen Pulp and Paper). In 1925, the company went bankrupt due to bad market conditions.

In addition to his enormous business successes, James Whalen remained a devoted father and husband. He married Laurel Conmee (daughter of Member of Parliament James Conmee) with whom he had 5 children. The family bought the 125 Algoma Street North house in 1902, and shared the property with chickens, cows and horses. The Whalen family is said to have anonymously delivered turkeys to those in need on Christmas Eve. James Whalen was truly a “valued citizen” of Port Arthur, and his death, on June 4th, 1929, was mourned by many. A half-day holiday was established to honour this great man.

¹http://books.google.ca/books?id=8OIFPkFh3x4C&pg=PA260&lpg=PA260&dq=Thunder+Bay+Hydro+portrait+of+James+Whalen&source=web&ots=aajk-_6JVb&sig=sx_rxBnbONoNB5Hc9wYqPSvAbtI&hl=en#PPA261,M1

The property changed hands once more in 1930, becoming a school operated by the Sisters of St. Joseph. This organization originally came to the Lakehead in 1881 to teach school and founded the St. Joseph's Hospital in 1884. They remained at 125 Algoma St. until 1943.

It was during this time, in the midst of the Second World War, that the house became part of the property of Her Majesty's Canadian Ship GRIFFON. The Naval Reserves needed a location from which to operate, initially leasing a garage in Port Arthur. The property was commissioned as HMCS GRIFFON in 1941. New barracks were constructed in 1943, and the Whalen house was incorporated into the property at this time. The facility had its own drill deck, parade square, rifle range and accommodation for 130 new recruits. Since HMCS GRIFFON was first commissioned, the "stone frigate" has become the point of initial entry and training for over 2,400 members of Canada's Navy.

Architecture:

This home could be considered a shingle style building because although the first floor is brick, the upper stories are shingled. It was considered "one of the best residential properties in the town" when the Whalen family bought it, for \$16,000, in 1902. Perhaps the most prominent feature of this lake facing house is the octagonal, three storey tower on the southeast corner. Other interesting architectural features include the steep hipped roof with dormers and round arches from the porch entrance. The porch itself is made of Verte Island red sandstone and has Ionic columns. The impressive detailing on the house, namely the small finials on the peaks of the roof, makes this building truly magnificent.