

Thunder Bay Hydro/ Whalen Building
34 Cumberland Street North



Year Built: 1913

Architect: Brown and Vallance of Montreal

Architectural Style: Chicago skyscraper

Notable Features: Carved ornaments; human faces, lions and shields, papooses and floral ornaments appear on the glazed terra cotta exterior cladding
Gothic and Classical carved detail in interior of lobby

Date of Designation: February 16th, 2004

Designation By-Law No.: 2004 - 28

Legal Description: Res A Pt S Cameron Pt Btwn Cumb & St Paul St from BRDY of Van Norman to S Limit of T/P S Cameron Lt 1 PCL31TBEF

Current Owner: City of Thunder Bay

Description:

James Whalen was ardently committed to transforming the small twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William into a metropolis. His dream of creating a “Chicago of the North” was one step closer to being realized in 1913, when the skyscraper building which he commissioned, was completed. The tallest structure in the area the time, the 8 storey tall Whalen building was built in the style of Chicago skyscraper and was said to be the “finest between Toronto and Winnipeg.” The total cost of construction was \$475,000, over \$50,000 more than originally estimated.

Whalen intended the building to be used for offices, commercial stores and a bank. His own business, the Great Lakes Dredging Company occupied the seventh floor. Not long after the buildings’ completion, Port Arthur City Hall moved their offices into the second and third floors, where they remained until amalgamation of the two towns in 1970.

Running into financial troubles in the mid 1920's, James Whalen eventually lost the Whalen Building to the city for Tax Arrears. In 1931, the City of Port Arthur bought the site from the bank for a mere \$175,000 and used it to house the Port Arthur Public Utilities Commission. The company renovated the interior of the building at this time. There was some public outcry once the site began to be referred to as the P.U.C. building, for many felt it failed to recognize the amazing work that James Whalen did for the city in commissioning the building. Upon amalgamation with Fort William, the Public Utilities Commission gave up ownership to Thunder Bay Hydro, which currently occupies the site.



photo courtesy of: Thunder Bay Museum

Architecture:

This eight bay, seven storey building which is faced with steel and terra cotta and has a granite base and is constructed in the Chicago skyscraper style. The east, south, and west sides are nearly identical. Of particular interest are the faces, lions, shields and foliage carved into the terra cotta.

The end bays are in shallow projections; they have one window per storey. On the ground floor they have compound, semi-circular, ornamentally carved arches; the windows from the second to the seventh storey are square-headed and the ones on the eighth floor are segmentally arched. The first two storeys of the end bays have fluted pilaster surrounded with carved ornaments; at the top of each pilaster there is a cartouche

and carved head with a niche above. The upper windows have recessed between-storeys. Both top storey windows have Gothic tracery in their transoms, and are flanked by double cavetto-like vertical mouldings. The end bays are topped by short parapets and short stub-like polygonal louvered projections (probably ventilation shafts) with finials.

On the ground floor, the five inner bays have square-headed openings that are defined by terra cotta piers. All of the first floor openings are filled with modern glass. There is a central entranceway on both the east and west walls.

The inner bays are divided by seven storey pilasters with carved carouches at the base and head of each one. Except for the top storey, all of the bays have square-headed, double windows; on the second storey the windows are all divided by carved central mullions. The other windows have steel paneled between-storeys each one of which displays a small central square-shaped ornament. The top storey has segmental arched triple windows under relieving arches. Under the sill of each top storey bay is a shield and carved ornament.

The rear, or north wall, centrally recessed, is regularly fenestrated. The detailing of the end bays on the other walls is carried right across the top storey of this wall and the whole ground floor consists of semi-circular arches. One of the bays consists entirely of blind windows. There is a metal fire escape towards the west end. The wall has no steel paneling.

The interior of the ground floor main hallway is done in terra cotta and marble, a profusion of Gothic and classical detailing. It has medieval paterae, torus mouldings with classical foliage, variations of consoles and spanning the elevator openings, is Perpendicular style rood screen treatment. Marble is used extensively through the interior.

The Architects:

Brown & Vallance was an architectural firm from Montreal, active from 1905 – 1920. They designed buildings across all of Canada, including the Medical Building for McGill University, the Children's Memorial Hospital in Montreal, and the campus for the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.

James Whalen:

James Whalen arrived in Port Arthur in 1875 at the age of six. Shortly after, 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 did all he could throughout his life to realize this dream. He was a man who recognized

opportunity and seized upon it, eventually building an empire. Putting “the PORT in Port Arthur,” Whalen establishing the Great Lakes Dredging Company and began the booming 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. “The type of citizen that Canada needs most in her present stage,” Whalen was “a man of sterling character, great perseverance, and had a broad viewpoint of our future.”

Not only was Whalen active in creating industry in Port Arthur and Fort William, he was dedicated to promoted 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 show that the twin cities possessed 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.

Despite his enormous business successes and unfortunate downfalls, 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 a beautiful house at 125 Algoma Street North (now the site of the HMCS Griffon) 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.



Whalen Building Terra Cotta Faces

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