

# Thunder Bay's First High-Rise and its Terra-Cotta Symbolism

by Patricia Vervoort



Figure 1. The Whalen-Hydro Building, ca. 1930. (The Thunder Bay Historical Society Museum)



Architects Brown and Vallance of Montreal changed the skyline of the Lakehead<sup>1</sup> in 1913 with their design for the Whalen Building (now called the Thunder Bay Hydro Building), an elegant eight-storey skyscraper (figure 1). It is typical of Brown and Vallance's work in the gothic style, constructed of reinforced concrete and faced with terra-cotta panels judiciously enhanced with sculptures. While the works of Brown and Vallance in Montreal and in western Canada are well documented, the Whalen-Hydro Building in the Lakehead adds another dimension to their repertoire. This paper explores the origins of the building and its sculptural detail to demonstrate that the relief sculptures are an essential iconographic component of the design. The terra-cotta reliefs proclaim the Whalen-Hydro Building as being Canadian and part of the British Empire.

## Whalen and the Building's Origins

The building was commissioned by local entrepreneur James Whalen (1869-1929) and three associates, together known as the Commercial Exchange Building Company of Port Arthur.<sup>2</sup> In the newspapers, the group was referred to as the "General Realty Corporation of which Mr. James Whalen is the head ...."<sup>3</sup> On the building permit and in all subsequent news accounts, there was only mention of Whalen. The permit listed Brown and Vallance of Montreal as architects and the Canadian Stewart Company of Montreal as contractors.<sup>4</sup>

In 1912 the *Daily News* announced that Whalen was going to construct a large block in downtown Port Arthur. In successive announcements the proposed building grew from four storeys to ten, while its location and architect also changed.<sup>5</sup> On July 16 the Canadian Stewart Company submitted cost estimates to Whalen for a bank and office building of two, three, or four storeys.<sup>6</sup> The accompanying blueprint sketch of a four storey structure was not signed, but it closely resembled the J. F. Cairns Department Store in Saskatoon designed by Brown and Vallance.<sup>7</sup> By the end of July the proposed building, now identified as eight storeys by the *Daily News*, was about to be started: "Architect Brown is here from Montreal and is discussing with the promoters all details incidental to the completion of the plans."<sup>8</sup>

How Whalen first came into contact with Brown and Vallance is not recorded, but the architects had several offices in western Canada (Winnipeg, Saskatoon and Calgary) in addition to their home office in Montreal. The practice of selecting a non-local firm for major architectural projects was already a Lakehead tradition by 1912.

And Whalen, with his various business connections from coast to coast, was continually traveling and visiting other Canadian cities — he was reputedly involved in 77 different business enterprises.<sup>9</sup> Somewhere Whalen encountered buildings designed by Brown and Vallance and found them suited to his taste.

David Robertson Brown (1869-1946) and Hugh Vallance (1866-1947) were partners from 1905 until 1920. In the firm, Brown handled public relations and Vallance was responsible for the presentation drawings.<sup>10</sup> It was Brown who visited Port Arthur in 1912.

Contact between Whalen and the firm of Brown and Vallance was brief. There were only two references to the architects in the local press: in July 1912 when the plans were discussed with Whalen and in August 1912: "Messrs. Brown and Vallance of Montreal, architects ...

have notified Mr. James Whalen that tenders for the work will be opened Monday and the successful tenderer authorized to commence work on the foundation at once."<sup>11</sup> Brown and Vallance were never mentioned again in the local press. The blueprints were dated 22 October and 17 December 1912, with revisions on 11 April, 19 May, and 20 May 1913.<sup>12</sup> After Brown's initial visit in the summer of 1912, there is no further evidence of the firm being represented in Port Arthur. No "supervising architect" was appointed for the project.

The Canadian Stewart Company, Ltd., were the contractors; they maintained a local office in Fort William for their work in building grain elevators. Until the Whalen-Hydro Building, reinforced concrete construction had not been employed for buildings in the Lakehead other than for grain elevators. For Whalen, the Canadian Stewart Company compiled a step-by-step photographic record of the building's construction and identified themselves on the cover as "Canadian Stewart Company, Limited, Montreal, Toronto, Fort William."<sup>13</sup>

The site selected for the Whalen Building was the property bounded by Cumberland, Van Norman, and St. Paul Streets in Port Arthur. Formerly the "Old Car Barn Site" for the city's street railway, the property was sold by tender in June 1912. Whalen was the successful bidder at \$111,000.<sup>14</sup> Although purchased in his own name, Whalen transferred the property to the Commercial Exchange Building Company "in consideration of \$1.00" in August, 1913.<sup>15</sup> But at a special meeting of city council, Whalen convinced the councilors to accept only \$25,000 with the remaining amount to be paid next spring with six percent interest. At the same meeting, Whalen asked to be allowed the use of "reinforced concrete in construction instead of steel as the steel would be a long time delayed in arriving, it being very hard to get." Council agreed.<sup>16</sup>

To finance this new building venture, Whalen and the General Realty Corporation obtained a first mortgage of \$350,000 with the National Trust Company, Limited. In addition, they sold coupon bonds redeemable at six percent per year: 450 bonds were sold with 200 at \$500 each and 250 at \$1000. These bonds were "to mature in series annually beginning December 2, 1914 up to December 2, 1923." These bonds were registered in the Titles Office on the first of August 1913.

By August 1914, both the Canadian Stewart Company, Ltd. and Brown and Vallance of Montreal had filed substantial mechanics liens against the Commercial Exchange Company, Limited. The City of Port Arthur waited until April 1916 to file for its \$86,000 and interest from the four men involved in the Commercial Exchange Company. These liens remained until a vesting order in the Supreme Court of Ontario transferred the property to Burton Thomas, Esq. of the City of Chicago in January 1925.<sup>17</sup> In the vesting order, Canadian Stewart was not mentioned, but Brown and Vallance and John McMullen were listed as "carrying on business under the firm name of Brown and Vallance."<sup>18</sup> In 1931, the Whalen-Hydro Building was acquired by the Public Utilities Commission of the City of Port Arthur for the bargain price of \$175,000. It was renamed the Public Utilities Commission Building and subsequently became the Thunder Bay Hydro Building. Many local residents persist in calling it the Whalen Building.

The mechanics liens of 1914 indicate that neither the contractor nor the architects were paid. Brown and Vallance were still pursuing the matter in 1925, although their partnership had ceased in 1920, indicating that they did not collect their fee from Whalen. This may



account for the lack of publicity for the architects in the local newspapers and the omission of a “grand opening.”

The lack of payment no doubt discouraged Brown and Vallance from being on the site as the building was under construction. Although Whalen had the plans for the building, there is no evidence that he paid for the design. Brown and Vallance were exceptionally busy in 1913 with at least fifteen buildings under construction simultaneously from Calgary to Montreal. Thus, with only one building at the Lakehead and payment not forthcoming, the architects had other concerns and the “Port Arthur Building” was not a high priority.

### The Construction of the Whalen Building

Site preparation for the Whalen-Hydro Building was under way by October 1912 with the foundation being excavated and rock being removed.<sup>19</sup> The building permit was acquired on 2 April 1913. Canadian Stewart Company’s photographic record indicated the ground floor was poured by 7 July 1913 and the entire eight-storey frame completed by 7 October. By 3 November, the terra-cotta of the first three floors was in place and by 6 December, the turrets on the roof were being put into position. Photographs of the structure before the terra-cotta was applied reveal a stark grid of vertical and horizontal concrete members, all unornamented (figure 2). Load tests of the square and round pillars, called the “flat slab system of reinforced concrete” and “floor without column heads,” took place with panels 14 x 20 feet and achieved 325 pounds per square foot (figure 3).<sup>20</sup> Although not so identified, the construction method was similar to the Kahn technique.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout 1913, the construction of “the finest building west of Toronto,” the Lakehead’s “first skyscraper,” and the “mammoth skyscraper” were continually reported in the local press.<sup>22</sup> When the prominent New York architect Bertram Goodhue visited Port Arthur in December 1913, he remarked on the Whalen-Hydro Building: “This ranks with our best buildings in New York, but it is plenty high enough. In Port Arthur, you do not need skyscrapers.”<sup>23</sup> As with all of the news items printed at that time, it was the height of the building and the entrepreneurial James Whalen that received attention. A similar viewpoint is expressed today in recurring articles and editorials demanding the restoration of Whalen’s name to this large commercial structure.<sup>24</sup> But the press commentary, both old and new, is consistent in ignoring the architects, the novel method of construction, and the symbolism of the terra-cotta sculptures.

Whalen’s own business interests moved their offices into the new structure by 27 April 1914.<sup>25</sup> Soon afterwards, Port Arthur City Hall took possession of the second and third storeys; City Hall remained here until the end of 1969 when Port Arthur was amalgamated with Fort William. Thus, the building was sometimes called “City Hall.”<sup>26</sup> In July, there were still advertisements of offices available for rent.<sup>27</sup> But by July, the newspapers were also filled with war stories. World War I and Whalen’s financial difficulties coincided to prevent a grand opening for the Whalen-Hydro Building. The building permit had stated the cost as \$475,000, but when the building was completed, the actual cost was reported as \$555,000.<sup>28</sup> The public remained unaware of Whalen’s financial problems and the building continued to enthrall the local citizens. Every resident was familiar with the height of the new “skyscraper,” but remained unaware of the building’s designers and the iconography of the decoration.



Figure 2. Construction photograph of the Whalen-Hydro Building, 7 October 1913. (Whalen Archives, Norman M. Paterson Library, Lakehead University)



Figure 3. Test load of the reinforced concrete flat slab system at 325 pounds per square foot, 14 January 1914. (Whalen Archives, Norman M. Paterson Library, Lakehead University)



## The Whalen-Hyrdo Building and Works by Brown and Vallance

In isolation, the Whalen-Hydro Building appears to have a marvelous array of design features and a complex assortment of decorative sculpture. But as a comparison with other Brown and Vallance buildings demonstrates, the Port Arthur building can be seen to belong to a specific firm which re-used successful architectural features and sculptural designs from a variety of projects. Thus, while the Whalen-Hydro Building is unique in the Lakehead, it is easily identifiable as a Brown and Vallance design.

The firm of Brown and Vallance was well known for its use of gothic styling and terra-cotta reliefs to enhance their designs. Brown and Vallance's collegiate gothic design for the Medical Building at McGill University in 1908 proved instrumental in being chosen by the University of Saskatchewan to design the campus plan (1909) and fourteen major buildings.<sup>29</sup> Regina College, now part of the University of Regina, dates from 1912 and was constructed of brick in a similar style.<sup>30</sup> The Medical Building and many of the Saskatoon structures were of stone, but all shared the use of segmental arches over the upper-storey windows and the suggestion of crenellations at the roof-line.

Many of the Brown and Vallance buildings were enhanced with terra-cotta sculptures; for example, at the University of Saskatchewan there were gargoyles, shields, vines, and animals arranged around the entrances; these were indicated on the plans with model numbers.<sup>31</sup> Brown also asked for an illustration of a gopher "to include in the decorative features about the College Building," now the Administration Building, thus indicating a desire to have local interest displayed in the relief sculptures.<sup>32</sup> Shields, vines, and animals also decorate the Whalen-Hydro Building.

Specific symbols in terra-cotta were also designed by Brown and Vallance. Office buildings for the Canada Life Assurance Company in Calgary and Regina, constructed between 1912 and 1914, featured the corporate symbol of the pelican in the exterior decoration.<sup>33</sup> Pelicans also adorn the Whalen-Hydro Building. The Regina building, now known as the Saskatchewan Government Insurance Office Building, features on its facade terra-cotta medallions of the pelican.<sup>34</sup> The building, only seven storeys in height, also has a dramatic cornice. But once a Brown and Vallance design reached eight stories or more, as with the Whalen-Hydro Building or the gothic Southam Building (1913-14) in Montreal, the cornice was eliminated.<sup>35</sup>

Brown and Vallance did make one foray into the neoclassical style, when they entered the competition in 1912 for the Manitoba Legislative building. The firm was among the five finalists; their proposed building included a central tower with a small dome which functioned as a base for a sculpture whose pose closely resembles that of the "Golden Boy."<sup>36</sup>

Designs by the Brown and Vallance firm were flexible, allowing for different heights, materials, and degree of ornamentation. As the Whalen-Hydro Building demonstrates, the design features and sculptural ornament of Brown and Vallance structures were also interchangeable.

## The Whalen-Hydro Building

The overall design of the Whalen-Hydro Building displays great simplicity. Almost square in plan, the building measures 90 by 100 feet. Each face of the structure is designed to emphasize its verticality (cover). There is no cornice and the flat roof is concealed behind a low parapet ornamented with shallow segmental arches, crenellations, and sculptured turrets placed at regular intervals. The decorative turrets, identified on the plans as model number 1, feature open work and heavy caps.

At each corner of the structure, the end bay projects slightly from the main wall. Each of the projecting bays has an elaborate round arch at ground level and a segmentally-arched double window with tracery at the eighth floor level; the other six windows in the end bays are single and square-headed. Between the end bays on the east and west are five bays of paired square-headed windows. These windows are recessed and arranged in vertical bands. At the eighth floor level, the windows are tripled and enclosed under a tudor arch. Between these arches are relief sculptures of men's heads and shields; beneath the windows are shields flanked by birds. On the south side of the building there are only three bays between the projecting end bays and the eighth-floor windows are doubled, rather than tripled, but the ornamentation is similar to that on the east and west faces. In comparison, the north side is unadorned except for the eighth floor level and roofline, as though future expansion was contemplated.

## The Sculptural Ornament and Its Symbolism

The sculptured ornament on the Whalen-Hydro Building is concentrated at the ground level, at the corners, and at the eighth floor level. These locations indicate that the sculpture was not meant to be seen in its entirety, but rather to articulate the architectural features and to provide contrast with the smooth walls. The overriding theme of the terra-cotta reliefs is the British Empire, displayed by the enthusiasm for shields, lions, birds, banners, and floral designs. Provincial shields and individual human heads establish the Canadian references. Only "Whalen" and a series of roundels inscribed with a "W" found on the lobby staircase indicate a clear local connection. The combination of images suggests that the theme is Canada as a loyal member of the British Empire.

There is little evidence that many of the sculptures were specifically designed for the Whalen-Hydro Building, an assumption reinforced by the similarity of designs found on other Brown and Vallance buildings. Curiously, there was only a single mention of the terra-cotta in the local press: "Men are now engaged in trimming on the surface of the building, cementing the crevices between the terra-cotta blocks and finishing up the interior."<sup>37</sup> There was no discussion of the sculptures themselves or the meaning of the whole group.

On the blueprints, some of the sculptures were sketched in detail while others were only indicated by number. There was, however, a note: "All models to be executed by first class craftsmen and must be approved by the architect." Each sculpture on the blueprints was numbered and the numbers for the Whalen-Hydro Building were consecutive. It was evidently the custom of Canadian architects who used terra-cotta sculptures to design them for fabrication in American factories.<sup>38</sup> The terra-cotta for the Whalen Building was supplied by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company of New York City and manufac-



tured in their Number Two plant at Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

When a building was decorated with sculptures, the images usually related to one another and the whole group formed an easily understood message. This is not the case with the sculptures on the Whalen-Hydro Building, where many of the individual images are identifiable, but the relationship of these to one another is vague. The message simply identifies the Whalen-Hydro Building as Canadian and part of the British Empire. Nevertheless, the Whalen-Hydro Building displays a fascinating and unusual iconography.

## The Sculptures

The exterior surface of the Whalen-Hydro Building is completely paneled with terra-cotta. Plain blocks cover the main walls, but all of the specific architectural features such as pilasters, mouldings, and arches are also of terra-cotta. Sculptural reliefs of plants, shields, animals, and humans enhance the building.

At ground level on the east, south, and west facades there are two arches which originally formed corner entrances. The underside of each compound arch is in high relief and displays an intricate band of floral ornament. It is basically an inhabited vine pattern with squirrels and cat-like creatures entwined with the stems and leaves. These arches are labeled on the plans as model number 10 (figure 4). Similar floral ornament but without the animals, model number 9, functions as a string course separating the ground floor from those above (figure 5). Both spans of floral ornament, in the arches and in the string course, are interrupted by plain vertical panels which curve to suggest shields. Another narrow vertical band of the floral motif is used on the mullions separating the paired windows. More plants are found on the steel spandrel panels below each window, where each raised rectangular relief represents a different plant: the maple leaf, thistle, oak leaf, and a stylized rose.

The decorative motif used most extensively on the Whalen-Hydro Building is the shield. Although some are plain, others have ornamented surfaces; they vary also in size and shape. Groups of three shields, each surmounted by a crown, function as capitals on the pilasters at string course level. These are the coats of arms of the nine Canadian provinces in 1913. Not only proclaiming Canadian content, these shields maintain geographical unity by their groupings. Each group appears twice on the building: Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba; Prince Edward I. (no room for Island), New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia; Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. Alternating with the Canadian provincial shields are the shields of Scotland, England, and Ireland (figure 6).<sup>39</sup> The shields are labeled with model numbers 12, 17, and 18. To balance the shields there are tracery mouldings, model number 11, which appear once on the east and west faces and twice on the south. These provincial shields and tracery mouldings accentuate the eight piers or pilasters on the east and west faces and the four piers on the south side. In theme, these shields establish Canadian content and clearly convey the link with the British Isles. They are the most explicit of all the images depicted on the Whalen-Hydro Building.

Above each pilaster is a variation of the shield motif, an unadorned convex shield supported by a lion's head; each lion has its mouth open and literally holds up the shield which is flanked by a cascading ribbon (figure 7). These alternate with shields having a circular opening

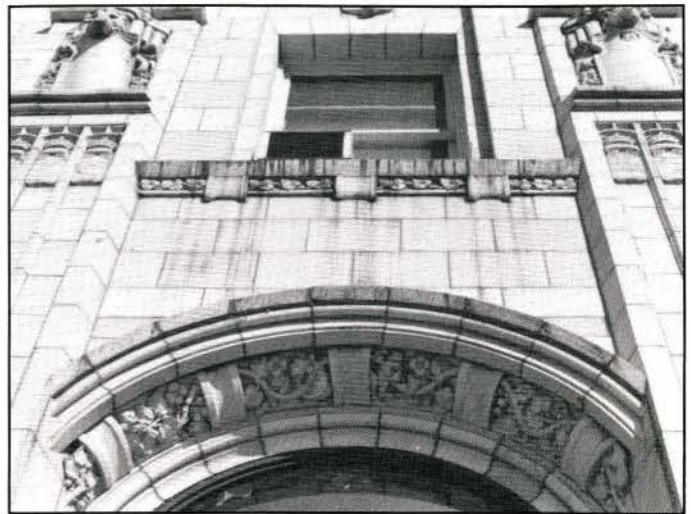


Figure 4. Arch with inhabited vine pattern, Whalen-Hydro Building, 1977. (Thunder Bay Architectural Inventory Project, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society)

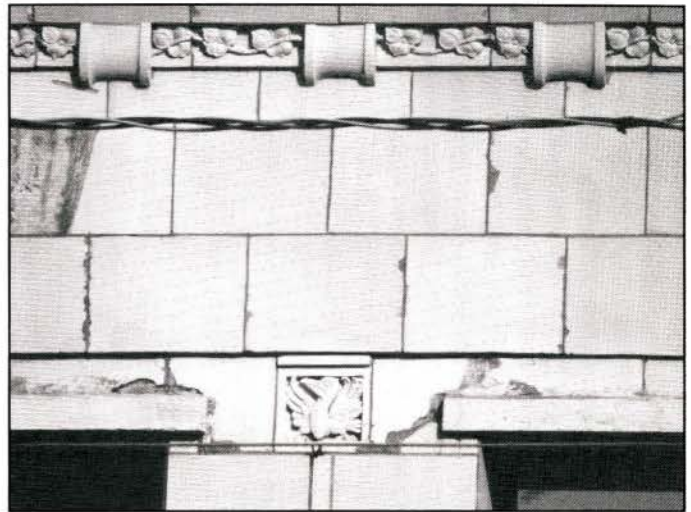


Figure 5. Horizontal band of floral ornament and pelican in reverse relief, Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photo: Ray Baker)

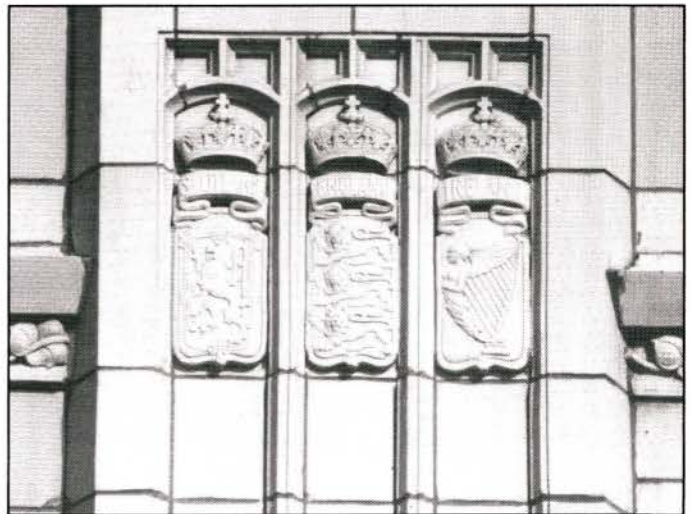


Figure 6. Shields of Scotland, England, and Ireland, Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photo: Ray Baker)





Figure 7. Shield with lion's head, Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photo: Ray Baker)

through which the beard and lower teeth of the lion may be seen; this detail adds textural contrast to the smooth surface of the shield (figure 8). Shields are important heraldic signs, but these have smooth surfaces as if awaiting the application of a coat-of-arms, the specific sign of identity. More shields are found between the eighth floor windows, but these are supported by human heads instead of lions. These curving shields are long and narrow in shape. And above the corner windows, more human heads support another variation of the shield. As plain unadorned shields, these reliefs contribute to the uncertainty of the meaning of the imagery on the Whalen-Hydro Building.

Another important sculptural subject is the human head. Although a variety of heads is represented, none is labeled for certain identification. A varied group of faces occurs at ground level, and heads wearing helmets or holding shields appear at the eighth floor level. The faces vary in size as well as degree of relief. A series of three-dimensional figures once adorned the niches in each end bay.

To the person on the sidewalk, the most clearly visible sculptures are the human heads, a series of eight expressive faces which are grouped in pairs with each pair repeated three times around the building. This repetition of sculptural ornament is one of the characteristics of terra-cotta construction.<sup>40</sup> Locally, these faces have been identified as "voyageurs" and also as "the people who settled Canada."

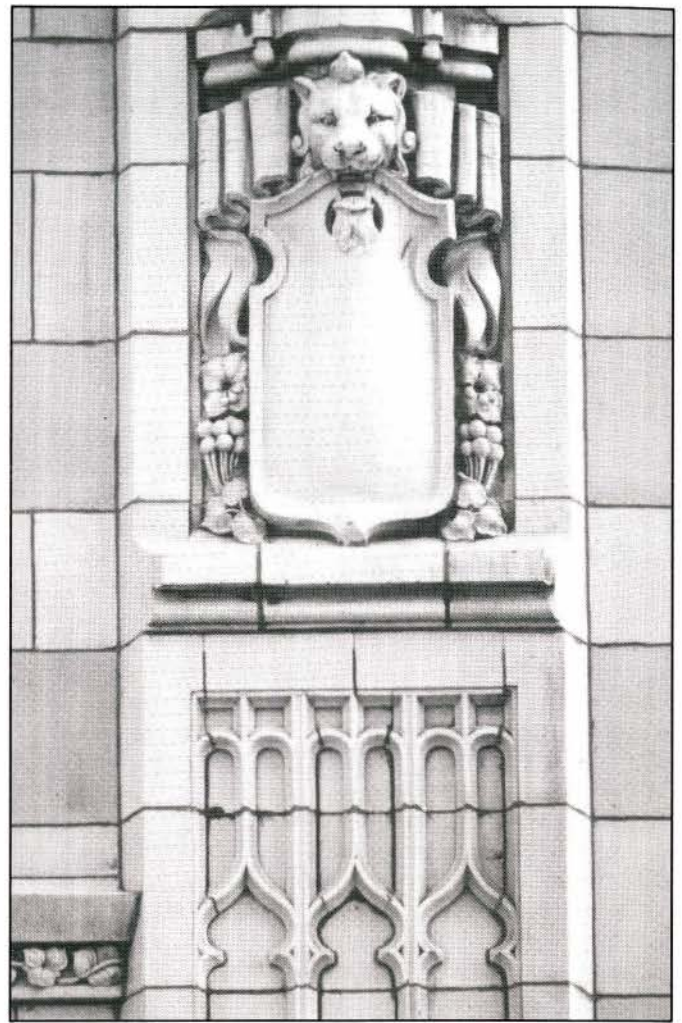


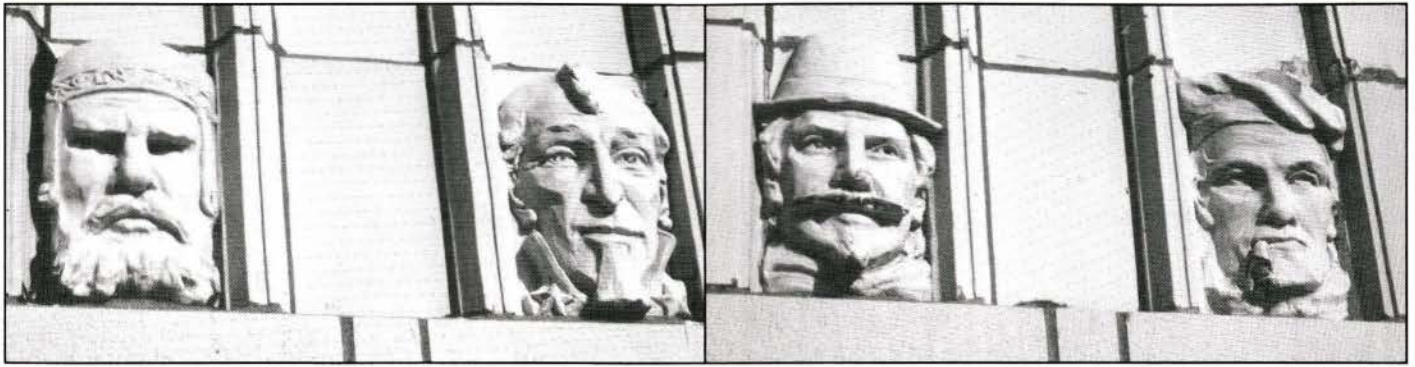
Figure 8. Tracery mouldings, pierced shield, and lion's head, Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photo: Ray Baker)

The variety of faces and the inclusion of a single woman's face suggest "the people" is the more appropriate identification. Wearing different expressions, the faces may suggest national origins and professions. A hatless man with a frown, goatee, and moustache, possibly "Uncle Sam," is grouped with a hooded man having a heavy beard and moustache; around the forehead is a decorative band. The latter has been identified as "the Scandinavian" (figure 9).<sup>41</sup> A man with a trilby on his head and a large moustache has been called "the Dutchman," whereas his companion, a man with a jaunty beret and a pipe, is known as "the Frenchman" or "the voyageur" (figure 10). A woman's face adorned with leaves is sometimes identified as "Eve" but is more likely to be a personification of agriculture, Ceres; she is paired with a smiling man with an upturned collar, "the Englishman" (figure 11). The man with a tam and a thistle near his chin is "the Scot," and his companion is a stern-looking "Irishman" with a frown (figure 12).

All of the heads are identified only by model number (19 through 26) on the blueprints, yet the numbering suggests they form a group. Only the woman's head lacks a national identification. These heads, by the way, are one of the few features found on the Whalen-Hydro Building which are not, to my knowledge, duplicates of sculptures on other Brown and Vallance buildings.

At the eighth floor level and thus hardly visible from the street are





Figures 9 and 10. Human heads: the "Scandinavian" and the man with a goatee; man with a moustache and man with a beret. Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photos: Ray Baker)



Figures 11 and 12. Human heads: Woman ("Eve") and the smiling Englishman; the Scot and the man with a frown. Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photos: Ray Baker and Patricia Vervoort)

a series of human heads wearing helmets. Placed between the window arches, each has rough and heavy looking facial features with mouths that gape to display chiclet-teeth and support shields. From street level, where only the overall shape is visible, these faces and shields have been identified as "papooses" or lions with shields. These reliefs articulate the wall surface, but their imagery is not easily deciphered. Additional human heads, but more finely featured, appear as pendants above the corner windows where they also function as keystones. Here the heads grasp flowing ribbons in their mouths; the ribbons in turn support shields (figure 13). Situated near the top of the building, these human heads can not be seen from the ground by the unaided eye; their forms create visual interest.

Now missing from the building is a series of small three-dimensional figures originally located in the niches in each end bay, at the corners of the building. These figures held lanterns on a staff, alternating right- and left-handed; the staffs have been described as "paddles," appropriate to the local "voyageur" identification. Yet on the blueprints (numbers 13 and 14) two of these figures were sketched in their entirety; these were a woman in long-flowing robes and a Scot in full regalia of kilt and sporran. Neither is in keeping with the concept of the voyageur. Two other three-dimensional figures were numbered 15 and 16 on the plans, but not sketched. All of these figures were removed from the building some years ago. They were the only three-dimensional sculptures which adorned the Whalen-Hydro Building.

One of the most unusual images found on the Whalen-Hydro Building is the pelican, which appears in three different forms: in reverse relief panels between the ground floor windows; paired and in high relief below the eighth floor windows (figure 14); and as flat

medallions on the lobby staircase. The variation in visual appearance, size, and degree of relief are typical of Brown and Vallance's versatility with sculptural motifs. But why the pelican is included in the decoration of the Whalen-Hydro Building is not easily explained. It is not a local bird. As a symbol the pelican has many meanings, among them Christian piety and filial devotion.<sup>42</sup> This would be in keeping with the relationship of Canada to Great Britain, the vague theme of the iconography. However, the pelican is not a common symbol on arms, or, for that matter, on buildings. This is possibly an instance of Brown and Vallance recycling the corporate symbol of the Canada Life Assurance Company; why Whalen accepted the pelican is unknown. Perhaps it was considered a bargain since it was already available in Brown and Vallance's sculptural repertoire.

The terra-cotta sculptural ornament is carried into the lobby of the Whalen-Hydro Building and down the staircase into the basement. The main entrance on Cumberland Street leads to a central lobby which is actually a wide central hallway leading to St. Paul Street. The vaulted ceiling is interrupted at intervals by segmental arches featuring floral designs in high relief; horizontal bands of similar design separate the ceiling from the walls. These floral bands repeat the ornamentation found on the exterior. Over the doors of the two elevators is a large panel of raised mouldings in a tracery pattern which again makes a visual reference to the exterior ornamentation. The lobby also features a short marble dado and marble risers on the stairs. This use of marble, limited as it is, reinforced legends of Whalen sparing no expense in his building.<sup>43</sup>

The most elaborate ornamental feature of the lobby is the staircase and its balustrade of terra-cotta (figure 15). The curved newel post is wide enough to proclaim "Whalen Building" in terra-cotta; the rubber





Figure 13. Southeast corner: rooﬂine turret, human head with ribbon, and window tracery, Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photo: Ray Baker)



Figure 14. Shield and pelican reliefs beneath eighth storey windows, Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photo: Ray Baker)

doormat immediately in front of the staircase says “Thunder Bay Hydro Building.” The baluster itself, paneled in open-work roundels of terra-cotta, alternate a pelican, a rampant lion, and a “W” for Whalen. As the balustrade curves toward the lobby, the terra-cotta records “A.D. 1913.” The staircase, although not wide or grand, is fitted with a polished brass rail mounted above the terra-cotta. The

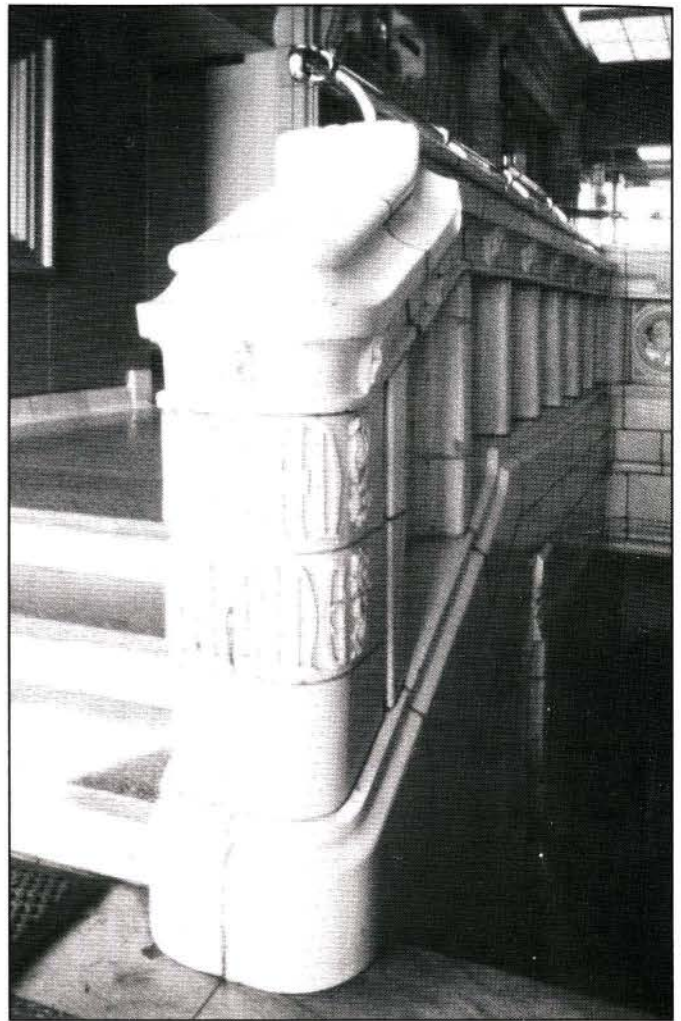


Figure 15. Lobby staircase, Whalen-Hydro Building, 1987. (Photo: Ray Baker)

steps descend in a single flight to the basement where the doorway to each room, including the boiler room, is ornamented with small panels of floral ornament matching that in the main lobby. On the ceiling of the basement hallway there are more shields and floral designs in terra-cotta. The plans of Brown and Vallance also incorporated a novel feature for Port Arthur in 1913: the basement level on Cumberland and Van Norman Streets extends out under the sidewalks, thus incorporating an automatic snow-melting device. Since these sidewalks were financed by Whalen, the entrepreneur then petitioned Port Arthur’s city council to construct a sidewalk along the St. Paul Street side of the building. The city granted his request.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

In the Lakehead the Whalen-Hydro Building, with its ornate terra-cotta cladding, is unique, but typical of the high-rise designs created by Brown and Vallance. With each of the sculptures identified on the blueprints by model number running consecutively from 1 to 37, the effect conveyed is a building-by-number. Yet many of the designs appear to have been recycled from other Brown and Vallance buildings, suggesting that the architects, extremely busy in the pre-World War I era, simply mined their own repertoire of architectural features and sculptural designs for application on their “Port Arthur Building.”



Since the architects had no known contact with the building after the plans were drawn, the local public received no official explanations of the designs. To compensate, the Port Arthur citizens attached their own identifications to the sculptures. The local news media concentrated its attention on Whalen and his new building, which in turn relayed an attitude of optimism and grandeur, implying that bigger and

better things were to come. But the Lakehead, like other Canadian cities such as Regina and Saskatoon, was not to repeat the building boom of 1912-1913 for years to come. Hence, the Whalen-Hydro Building, with its combination of sculpture and architecture, has come to symbolize an era. It remains one the Lakehead's most elegant buildings.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Lakehead is an alternate name for Thunder Bay, which was created in 1970 by amalgamating the cities of Fort William and Port Arthur.
- 2 "Start 50 Years Ago on Whalen Building," *The News Chronicle*, Port Arthur, 14 May 1963, p. 12. The associates were William Scott, a Port Arthur lumber baron, James Playfair of Midland, Ontario, and James Wallace of Cleveland, Ohio. "Personal," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 11 October 1913, p. 6. James Playfair was president of Northern Navigation Company which in 1913 took delivery of their flagship the *Noronic*, constructed by Whalen's Western Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company.
- 3 "Huge New Block to be Erected," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 29 May 1912, p. 1.
- 4 Building Permits, 2 April 1913, Thunder Bay City Hall.
- 5 "Mr. Whalen to Build a Modern Block," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 17 May 1912, p. 1. The architect was identified as Carl Wirth, a local man. "Huge New Block to be Erected," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 29 May 1912, p. 1: "An architect is expected here from New York ...." The architect was not identified. There is a gap in the newspaper microfilm from 1 June to 2 July 1912.
- 6 Whalen Collection, Lakehead University Archives, Chancellor Norman M. Paterson Library, Thunder Bay, Ontario.
- 7 Donald C. Kerr and Stan Hanson, *Saskatoon: The First Half-Century* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1982), p. 121.
- 8 "Work to Start on Eight Storey Building Soon," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 25 July 1912, p. 1.
- 9 "Howard Reid, Reflection on Industrialist," *The Chronicle-Journal*, Thunder Bay, 15 March 1979, p. 15.
- 10 Brock Silversides, "Saskatoon Architects 1905-1920," *Saskatoon History* 3 (summer 1985), pp. 31-32.
- 11 "New Block," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 17 August 1912, p. 1.
- 12 Blueprints owned by Thunder Bay Hydro and kindly made accessible by Graham, Bacon and Welter, Architects and Engineer, of Thunder Bay.
- 13 *The Whalen Building, Port Arthur, Canada: Reinforced Concrete and Terra Cotta. Eight Story and Basement Office Building Constructed for the Commercial Exchange Building Company, Port Arthur, Canada. Montreal, Toronto, Fort William: Canadian Stewart Company, 1914.* Whalen Collection, Lakehead University Archives, Chancellor Norman M. Paterson Library, Thunder Bay, Ontario.
- 14 "Sale of Old Car Barn Site," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 27 July 1912, p. 1. The cost of the site and the demolition of a previous structure discounts a later rumor which claimed "the Whalen Building had been a fantastic enterprise" since "the whole area being bush at that time." In "Start 50 Years Ago on Whalen Building."
- 15 Land Titles Office, Thunder Bay, District of Thunder Bay, Port Arthur Freehold, Parcel 153, Originally Parcel 1204.
- 16 "Sale of Old Car Barn Site," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 27 July 1912, p. 1.
- 17 Because the major bond holders were American, later oral legends contended that the building was American in design and construction, and that identical buildings existed in Minneapolis and Chicago.
- 18 Land Titles.
- 19 A film was made of the Lakehead throughout the spring and summer of 1913, commissioned by James Whalen from the Commercial Motion Picture Company of Montreal; it included a sequence of footage showing the excavation of rock for the foundations of the Whalen-Hydro Building. No actual construction work was filmed.
- 20 *The Whalen Building, Port Arthur, Canada*, op. cit.
- 21 Grant Hildebrand, *Designing for Industry: The Architecture of Albert Kahn* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1974), pp. 33, 46; see Ford Motor Company Plant, Highland Park, Michigan, under construction.
- 22 "First Skyscraper," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 21 January 1914. "Great Has Been the Amount of Building in Port Arthur ....," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 18 December 1913, p. 4.
- 23 "Follow Nature in Planning City of Port Arthur," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 15 December 1913, p. 4.
- 24 "Remember James Whalen," *The News Chronicle*, Port Arthur, 22 October 1954, p. 4. Aune Carelius, "Looking On ...." *The News Chronicle*, Port Arthur, 11 May 1963, p. 4. "The Whalen Name," *The Chronicle-Journal*, Thunder Bay, 24 October 1985, p. 4.
- 25 "Whalen Block is Now Occupied by the First Offices," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 27 April 1914, p. 1.
- 26 "New Skyscraper Will Be Ready to Open in March," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 20 January 1914, p. 1.
- 27 "Offices for Rent," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 11 July 1914, Building Supplement, p. 2.
- 28 "Building of Whalen Block Marks a New Era in Port Arthur History," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 11 July 1914, p. 2.
- 29 Donald C. Kerr, *Building the University of Saskatchewan* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1979), n.p.
- 30 J. William Brennan, ed., *Regina Before Yesterday: A Visual History 1882 to 1945* (Regina: City of Regina, 1978), p. 193.
- 31 Letter from S. D. Hanson, University Archivist, University of Saskatchewan, April 22, 1987.
- 32 Kerr, *Building the University*, op. cit.
- 33 "David R. Brown" in *Canadian Newspaper Service, Registered, Reference Book 1927-28*, 2nd ed. (Montreal, 1928), p. 53.
- 34 Deanna Christensen and Menno Fieguth, *Historic Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Oxford, 1986), p. 83.
- 35 Robert Lemire, "Tudor Gothic in Downtown Montreal 1900-1929," *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin* 12:1 (March 1987), p. 16.
- 36 Marilyn Baker, *Manitoba's Third Legislative Building: Symbol in Stone: The Art and Politics of a Public Building* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press Limited, 1986), pp. 32, 35.
- 37 "Whalen Building is Now Occupied by the First Offices," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 27 April 1914, p. 1.
- 38 Dr. Douglas Richardson, in conversation, 28 May 1987.
- 39 Conrad Swan, *Canada: Symbols of Sovereignty* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), pl. 14, showing the shields of Scotland, England, and Ireland as quarter-shields on the arms of Canada.
- 40 de Teel Patterson Tiller, "The Preservation of Historic Glazed Architectural Terra-Cotta" (Preservation Brief #7) (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, Technical Preservation Services Division, 1979), p. 2.
- 41 Gordon Fulton identified the "Uncle Sam."
- 42 Ivor H. Evans, ed., *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, Centenary Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 846.
- 43 Lon Patterson, "James Whalen's Mark Will Always Remain," *The Daily Times Journal*, Fort William, 16 May 1964, p. 10: "The two-tone grey marble slabs in the Vatican and in the Port Arthur City Hall were identical." And "Not only did the late James Whalen have this marble brought all the way from Italy for his building — but he brought out the artisans — a group of Italian masons — to set it in place." "The Whalen Name," *The Chronicle-Journal*, Thunder Bay, 24 October 1985, p. 4: "Mr. Whalen wasted no expense on the structure, importing its two-tone grey marble slabs from the same Italian quarry that produced the Vatican's marble."
- 44 "Local Improvements for Ensuing Season," *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, 19 May 1914, p. 1.