

The Saskatoon Cenotaph

Introduction

The years following the Great War saw the building of numerous war memorials in centres throughout the world, including communities across Canada. Many of them were built on a design similar to the Cenotaph at Whitehall in London, designed by Sir Edward Lutyens¹ and built in 1919, which is famous to the present-day.

The City of Saskatoon was also graced with a war monument, also in the form of a cenotaph, constructed eleven years after the Great War and fortunately, undertaken before the onset of the Great Depression when the necessary monies would be difficult to allocate. As a symbol of sacrifice, its purpose was two-fold: to keep alive the memory of those from Saskatoon and surrounding area, who fought but did not return from the War; and to remind Saskatoon citizens of the civic duty owed their country even in peacetime.²

Plans for a war memorial were undertaken at the initiative of the Canadian Legion (Saskatchewan Command, Saskatoon Branch) and formally passed by a resolution of City Council on March 12, 1928.³ While its exact location was yet undecided at that time, the concept of a war monument with a clock, electrically operated and lighted—quite novel for its age—was already developed.⁴

It was hoped that a combination of City Hall funding and public subscriptions raised through the efforts of a Canadian Legion Campaign Committee⁵ would meet all construction expenses, estimated at \$15,000. A War Memorial Committee made up of both Canadian Legion and City personnel was formed to oversee the entire project.⁶

Built at a total cost of \$18,769.00, the granite Cenotaph was located first at 21st Street near 2nd Avenue, 1929-1957 and then relocated to the City Hall Square in 1957, where it remains. A familiar and beloved landmark of the city, it has been a focal point of civic commemoration and official gathering for nearly seventy-five years.

¹Sir Edward Lutyens designed the Whitehall Cenotaph as an empty tomb in 1919. While it was supposed to be a temporary monument, in 1920 it was redone in marble and became a permanent feature of Whitehall.

²“Beautiful Symbol of Sacrifice Is Unveiled Monday,” *The Phoenix*, 12 November 1929.

³“Citizens Asked to Give Aid to War Memorial,” *The Phoenix*, 28 May 1928. See also the extensive report on the Cenotaph by Ron Jaremko (“Cenotaph Hits Its 70th Anniversary This Year,” *Saskatoon Sun*, 5 December 1999).

⁴A clock was not typically a feature of war monuments, but the location of the cenotaph in the heart of the city allowed that practical feature; the clock was also designed to animate the structure, as well as to “voice the passing hour.” “War Memorial,” *Canadian Legion, B.E.S.L.* [brochure], August, 1928, p.34.

⁵The Legion Committee consisted of: A.E. Potts, P.J. Philpott, Dr. W.A. Carrothers, Frank McLorg, R.D. Roberts; subscription coupons were available in the *Star* and *The Phoenix*.

⁶The Committee consisted of: Mayor E.W. Norman; Aldermen George Murray, J.W. Hart, R.M. Pinder and Harris Turner; and Legion representatives, P.J. Philpott, W.A. Carrothers, R.D. Roberts, F.H. McLorg, C.H. Payton, A.E. Potts and M.C. Tomlinson.

Cenotaph Design and Construction

The Cenotaph Committee decided that the design of the cenotaph should be derived by democratic means, through a contest open to all British subjects, resident in Canada, and adjudicated by an Assessors Committee headed by Winnipeg architect, W. Percy Over.⁷ The prize would be the commissioning of the work plus a monetary award of \$250. A design contest was held between May 22 and August 6, 1928 during which time various submissions of drawings and models were accepted.⁸ A total of fifteen submissions were received, with no Saskatoon architect competing in the challenge.⁹ The winning design (Entry Number 10) belonged to Regina architect and ex-serviceman, F.H. Portnall, whose long architectural career in the Saskatchewan capital was still in its earliest stages.¹⁰

The war monument envisioned by Portnall was a four-sided, granite cenotaph and relief sculpture, with an integrated memorial plaque and timepiece. It would be constructed by Saskatoon general contractor, James Priel. David Webster, a local architect, would supervise the work locally on Portnall's behalf.

The surrounding steps and the shaft of the cenotaph were constructed of Vancouver grey granite obtained by the Western Granite and Marble Co. The shaft, which was affixed to a base of reinforced concrete, was built as a seven-foot square, tapering to six feet square at the top and finished with a pyramidal cap. The step base held the words, "In Memoriam."

Its main upper feature was a four-sided, bronze, electric clock, each face measuring thirty-six inches, specially ordered from Wm. Potts and Sons Ltd. in England.

⁷ "More Designs Are Sought For Memorial," *Star-Phoenix*, 2 August 1928. See also City of Saskatoon, Clerk's Files, City Clerk to F.H. Portnall, summary of expenses including W.Percy Over's fee for service, 28 January 1930.

⁸ Other members of the Assessors Committee were: Mayor G.W. Norman, Frank P. Martin, Professor A.E.Greig, Professor A.E. Potts (also a Lt.-Col).

⁹ "Regina Man's Design Wins," *Daily Star*, 9 August 1928. Also City of Saskatoon, Clerk's Files, Assessors Committee to War Memorial Committee, 8 August 1928.

¹⁰ F.H. Portnall was born in 1886 on the Isle of Wight. He was trained in London, and immigrated to Canada in 1906. He found employment in Winnipeg with the firm of Darling and Pearson, Winnipeg. In 1907, he was sent to Regina to supervise the building of Knox Metropolitan Church, and then moved to Regina in 1909, becoming the junior partner in the firm of F. C. Clemeshaw and Portnall, Architects. Prior to the Great War, the firm was noted for its work in domestic architecture. He saw active service in the 10th Brigade Machine Gun Regiment during the War and returned to marry Mabel Morgan of Qu'Appelle. returned He continued practicing alone from 1922 to 1945 and then was joined by Dan Stock until 1951. In 1958, C.Grolle joined him as partner, remaining until 1967. He was noted for the design of the Diocese of Qu'Appelle (Anglican) buildings, the First Presbyterian Church, St. Matthew's, Herchmore and Davin Schools, the Federal Building and the Regina Court House at 2425 Victoria Avenue (provincial). Portnall passed away in 1976. "Early Domestic Architects in Saskatchewan," [Exhibition Catalogue prepared by the Norman McKenzie Art Gallery]1982, p. 35-36. Obituary, F.H.Portnall, *Regina Leader-Post*, September 15, 1976.

Surrounding each dial were fretted panels which allowed the sound to pass, forming an outline of a Union Jack. Above the clock dial, a crown represented the war effort of the British Empire.¹¹ The clock was illuminated at night and had four chiming bells to sound the time, ranging in weight from 400 pounds to 90 pounds.

The lower portion of the cenotaph featured a bronze panel with the inscription: “In glorious memory of those of this City and District, who, at the call of King and Country, adventured forth and gave their all for the cause of Right and Freedom, 1914-1918.” A granite Coat of Arms of the city was placed above the bronze plaque. On either side of the plaque, draped flags carved in granite were positioned, the tops of which reached to the fretwork on either side of the clock face. A bronze door on one side of the clock gave access to the interior of the cenotaph, particularly to the clock works for maintenance and repair.

Location of the Cenotaph

While the general concept of a cenotaph for the city met with wide approval, its exact location was more difficult to determine.¹² When the contest was completed, the location had not yet been determined, and opinions were being solicited city-wide. Several sites were proposed in the months that followed, the chief ones being: the centre of City Hall Square; the southwest corner of City Hall Square; on 21st Street just east of 3rd Avenue, on 23rd Street at 3rd Avenue; and at 21st Street and 2nd Avenue.¹³ The issue was not settled until May 9, 1929 in favour of the 21st Street and 2nd Avenue location, located twenty feet east of the building line on 2nd Avenue.¹⁴

Construction

The work proceeded toward the unveiling of the cenotaph on Remembrance Day, November 11, 1929. The financing of the project had progressed as anticipated, with a city designation of more than \$13,000 and \$5,000 raised by public donation. A singular problem was that there were delays in the shipping of the clock, and it was not shipped until October 17, with arrival slated for early November. Further delays allowed the clock to arrive only one day before the unveiling of the monument. Despite work virtually around the clock by Henry Birks and Sons on Sunday, November 10, there were still finishing touches remaining. The clock, although assembled, was not fully operational for the dedication ceremonies the following day.¹⁵

¹¹ Assessors Committee to War Memorial Committee, op.cit., 8 August 1928.

¹² City of Saskatoon, City Clerk’s Files, Minutes of the Special Meeting of the War Memorial Committee, 28 November 1928.

¹³ Ibid, Minutes of the Meeting of the War Memorial Committee, 9 May 1929.

¹⁴ By late May, 1929, the 23rd and 3rd Avenue had been vetoed by the Fire Department as it was not possible for their trucks to turn south at that intersection and also, there was a sewer manhole in the centre of that spot. City of Saskatoon, ibid, Chief Constable to Board of Police Commissioners, 11 October 1928.

¹⁵ “Cenotaph Clock Will Toll Soon,” *Star-Phoenix*, November 13, 1929.

Dedication of the Cenotaph

The unveiling and dedication of the Cenotaph took place on November 11, 1929, as planned, despite the notably cold and blustery day.¹⁶ All members of the Legion were especially invited to attend the elaborate ceremony.¹⁷ The importance of the monument was underlined by the magnificent turnout: nearly 3,000 individuals, among them, many ex-servicemen and those representing all branches of active military service. The invocation was given by Dr. W.C. Murray, followed by Brigadier-General Hugh Dyer, Mayor Norman, and P.J. Philpot, head of the Cenotaph Committee. Prior to the laying of wreaths, the Cenotaph was formally unveiled from behind its ceremonial drapery.

The Cenotaph would remain a focal point of downtown Saskatoon, and a particular feature of 21st Street, particularly after the Bessborough Hotel was constructed. The combination of CN Station, Cenotaph and hotel would add a regal air to 21st Street and its environs for nearly three decades.

The 1957 Relocation

By the late 1950s, considerable changes had occurred in downtown Saskatoon, particularly in regard to its traffic. The Cenotaph had become a concern for proper vehicle movement and when the new City Hall was built, a logical decision was to relocate the Cenotaph there both as a desirable feature of the City Square and that it might receive the civic prominence it deserved.

On the night of August 15, 1957 it was dismantled and moved by the firm of Smith Brothers and Wilson Co., and then reassembled at its new home.¹⁸ At that time, a new clock mechanism was installed, synchronous clockworks purchased again from the English company, Wm. Potts & Sons Ltd., and the faces and hands regilded, all at a cost of \$2,084.¹⁹ The Cenotaph's incorporation into the whole design of City Square, with the Andrew Leslie Memorial Fountain, a stone retaining wall and courtyard with checkerboard concrete and grass was completed at a landscaping cost of \$31,000.²⁰

The cenotaph was rededicated on October 15, 1957 during a convention of the Canadian Legion (Saskatchewan Command), which brought together over two hundred Legionnaires. In total, approximately 1,500 Saskatoon citizens were on site for the rededication.

¹⁶ "Beautiful Symbol of Sacrifice Is Unveiled Monday," *Star-Phoenix*, 12 November 1929.

¹⁷ "Ceremony to be Elaborate," *Star-Phoenix*, 8 October 1929.

¹⁸ "Cenotaph Moves Tonight," *Star-Phoenix*, 15 August 1957.

¹⁹ "New Clock For Cenotaph," *Star-Phoenix*, 9 April 1957.

²⁰ "Landscaping at City Hall Beginning to Take Shape," *Star-Phoenix*, 24 August 1957.

Conclusion

The Saskatoon Cenotaph has served its original commemorative purpose, joining an estimated 1,200 other war memorials constructed in Canada, largely in connection with the Great War and the 1939-1945 War. In the course of years, the Cenotaph has developed a history of its own. It has served as a point of ceremony for many war-related events, including the Korean War, and as rallying point for civic events, including civil protest. Various famous Saskatoon individuals, such as nurse, E. Collins, known as “Mother Collins” for her nursing efforts and Poppy Fund drives have also been photographed there, and numerous tourist photographs have been taken with the Cenotaph in the background and The Cenotaph has found its way into Saskatoon’s musical past, serving as a illustration for the Saskatoon Symphony’s “War Requiem” in 1974.²¹

The Cenotaph has had a relatively rich anecdotal history as well. The person supervising its move on behalf of Smith Brothers and Wilson was Clifford Wright, later to be mayor of Saskatoon. A city “clockworker,” Bert Buckle, recalled the numerous times he had to be inside the clock, to ensure all was in order for the chimes at 11 a.m. on various Remembrance Days, or to turn off the chimes while Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth addressed the crowds at the opening of the Queen Elizabeth Power Station, and of course, entering to clean the clock on a regular five-year basis.²²

Prepared for the Heritage Office of City Hall
By Kathlyn Szalasznyj, 19 December 2001

²¹ “War Requiem,” *The Commentator*, 20 March 1974.

²² “Cenotaph Clock Part of Saskatoon Scene Since 1929,” *Star-Phoenix*, 7 April 1979. Also “The Faces of Time,” *Star-Phoenix*, 22 August 1973.

Heritage Structure Inventory

Section A:

1.

- a) City Hall and previously 21st Street and 2nd Avenue, Saskatoon.

2.

- a) Cenotaph
- b) Cenotaph; War Monument;
- c) Cenotaph;
- d) War Memorial

3.

- a) LHR, LH 743, City View – 21st Street East
LHR, A275, Remembrance Day Service, ca. 1940.

Section B:

Ownership: City of Saskatoon

Section D:

The Cenotaph was first located at 21st Street and 2nd Avenue, 1929 to 1957 and then moved to its present location, City Hall on 3rd Avenue.

Section E:

See report.

Section F:

See report

Section I:

Keywords: War monument, cenotaph, war memorial, Great War, City Hall, Canadian Legion, Mayor Norman. F.H. Portnall, James Priel Construction, P.J. Philpot, “Mother Collins.”