

Dawson, Yukon
Bank of British North America
Queen Street, Southwest Corner Second Avenue

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The two-storey commercial block, known as the Bank of British North America, was constructed in May-June, 1899 as a combination bank, dormitory, assay office, and general office. The architect of the 1946 programme of general improvements was C.E. Pratt of Vancouver. The contract was supervised by Bob Hastie. The designer and/or builder of the original building is unknown.

External modifications include the addition of shutters (1900-1904), the widening of the Second Avenue leg of the balcony (ca. 1904), the addition of a flagpole (ca. 1904), the removal of the same flagpole (pre-1908), the demolition of the balcony (ca. 1918-20), the removal of the shutters (pre-1935), the demolition of the assay office annex (1948 or 1949), the replacement of the corrugated iron finish at the second floor by plywood (1962), and the replacement of the corrugated iron finish at the ground floor by bevelled boards (1964-1967).

Modifications to door and window openings include the blocking up of the general office door (ca. 1910), the conversion of the balcony door to a window (1918-20), two windows and a door blocked up to accommodate a vault (1946), and numerous other changes all dating to the last major alteration (1961-62).

In 1979-80 the exterior was restored to essentially its appearance in 1904.

Significant alterations to the interior room layout, joinery and furnishings were made in 1939 (banking area), 1946 (banking area, vault, dormitory) and 1961-62 (dormitory/apartment). In 1979-80 the second floor was renovated as living quarters for Parks staff. The ground floor was partially reconstructed to a conjectured 1904 appearance by Parks in 1984-85.

Environment Canada, the Canadian Parks Service is custodian of the building. It continues to provide seasonal accommodation for staff on the upper floor. The ground floor is currently not leased. See FHBRO Building Report 88-12.

Reasons for Designation

The Bank of British North America was designated Recognized because of the important theme it illustrates, the associations it had with an important individual, and the role it played in the development of the community.

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The superior functional qualities of the building, the integrity of its historic relationship with the street, the contribution it makes to the character of the historic district, and its strong identity within the community were also factors.

The theme most identified with the commercial block is the rather obvious one of financial services in the north. The Bank of British North America is a worthy symbol, being the first banking institution to locate in Dawson, May, 1898.

Setting aside the various bank employees, none of whom achieved particular notoriety, one has to acknowledge the association of Alex McDonald, once called the "King of the Klondike." Between 1899 and ca. 1908 he directed his numerous mining and real estate ventures from the general office within the building. The rebuilding of the Bank of British North America at the Queen and Second corner, in a very substantial style, after the disastrous fire of 1899, set a significant pattern for development on Second Avenue, which was soon taken up.

The banking area and general office areas, as reconstructed, represent a design which functioned successfully for about 40 years. Considering the enormous fluctuations in the Dawson population and type of accounts, it proved extremely adaptable.

The relationship of the building to the Queen and Second Avenue intersection is essentially the same as it was when built in 1899. Despite the undeveloped southeast corner, it continues to anchor an important commercial node, and brings life to the area, at least in the summer months. The location of a commercial tenant or tenants on the ground floor would contribute to the economic health of the area. The current recognizability of the building can be attributed to the prominent signage and the inclusion of the building on conducted tours.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of the building derives from the neo-classical architectural treatment given the elevations, particularly the triangular-shaped pediments, which close the ends of the gable roof (that facing Queen with a circular ventilator), the wide overhanging eaves, and the regular placement of windows.

Some of the more notable eclectic touches which contribute to the overall composition are the Victorian-style fancy front doors (one light capped top and bottom, two horizontal panels with heavy raised mouldings) set into the salient angle, and the corner balcony supported on slender, turned porch columns.

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The interior is notable for the traditional plan arrangement, which has second floor staff accommodation accessed by a straight flight of stairs rising from a single door on Second Avenue, a principal ground floor retail space served by a double door recessed into the salient angle, and a narrow secondary retail space served by a single door on Queen Street. The pattern is typical of many corner blocks which once dominated the Dawson business district.

The restoration/rehabilitation of the building and the occupation of the second floor has gone a long way to recapturing the visual character of this important building. Animating the ground floor in some manner would breathe some life into a rather cold and austere corner.

The historic relationship between the once bustling thoroughfares of Second Avenue and Queen Street derived, in part, from the proximity of the building to the lot lines and boardwalk, the overhanging balcony and sign boards, window curtaining/blinds, and window cards. The maintenance and/or development of these features would contribute to the Gold Rush character sought by the community.

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