

Special Places

Birtle's Significant Heritage Buildings





A Project of the Birtle Heritage Advisory Group

The Birtle Heritage Advisory Group would like to acknowledge the support of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism in the development of this initiative, through a grant from the Heritage Grants Program and through ongoing guidance and support of the Historic Resources Branch.

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A SAMPLE PROJECT

A NOTE TO READERS:

This booklet has been developed by the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism to suggest how a Special Places project can be reworked into an educational and promotional document.

This kind of booklet could be presented in a local museum, school library, local library and municipal office to showcase significant individuals from a community's past, and to highlight important qualities and characteristics that continue to define the community.

This graphic presentation is only one of many that this information can take, and communities are encouraged to consult with local design professionals, or with high school students interested in this kind of work, to develop their own unique product.

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THE GREAT 19TH CENTURY English writer and historian, John Ruskin, observed about the subject of architectural heritage:

“Old buildings are not ours. They belong to those who built them, and partly to the generations who are to follow us. What we ourselves have built, we are at liberty to throw down. But what other men gave their strength, and wealth and life to accomplish, their right over it does not pass away with their death.

It is with this thought in mind that the Town of Birtle, through an ad hoc committee called the Birtle Heritage Advisory Group, has embarked on a project—in partnership with the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism (and also with the financial support of the Federal Government through its Historic Places Initiative)—to develop a major heritage initiative: *Special Places, Birtle's Significant Heritage Buildings*.

Birtle's Special Places project (one of several underway across Manitoba with the support of the Historic Resources Branch and Heritage Grants Program) has been developed with two goals in mind: to ensure that communities undertake the kind of comprehensive inventory of sites and rigorous analysis and assessment that allows for a selection of those few buildings with real claims for heritage significance; and also in order to study and explore the community's architectural history and by so doing to identify those physical and built qualities that combine to make Birtle an authentically distinct place.

THE TOWN OF BIRTLE has interesting and important historical claims, both in the context of Manitoba's past as well as in our own regional history. Birtle was a notable site in the late fur trade period of the early 1800s, a site where people of all kinds stopped for fresh water and where they camped on their way to a major fur trade post further west at Fort Ellice. We are well known as Manitoba's Horse Capitol – where this and that happened. And we have been home for some notable early citizens, including Lawrence Herchmer, an important government official who came to the Birtle area as the Indian Agent in 1876 and in 1886 became Commissioner of the NWMP.

We are a community that knows its history – through the development of research projects like Special Places. We are a community that understands its history – through an ongoing critical exploration of our past. We are a community that values and honours its history – through our museum, as well as through the conservation of an impressive collection of well-maintained buildings.

It is our fascinating historic buildings, and their memorable physicality that continues to inform and define our identity. These buildings and sites remind us of our origins, and continue on a daily basis to connect us to the past but also to the sense of purpose that defined our community from the very start.

We are especially aware of the legacy of granite. It's not only the material that defines this area geographically, it also forms our foundations and sometimes, unmovable, juts into our basement floors. It also has been broken, carried, chiseled and carefully hoisted into place to form the full walls of many houses and stores. The many fine granite buildings that still dot our community—at least one on every street—are remarkable achievements. We are also aware that, for a small town, our collection of Victorian and Edwardian-era houses rivals much larger communities. The impressive range of styles, materials and details combine on just a few streets—Main and St. Clare—to express the whole gamut of housing designs that defined residential life in Manitoba at the turn of the 20th century.

The following exploration of our built heritage has been organized by building type, a reasonable approach that allows for a focused reflection on the typical experiences of daily life in Birtle, now and 100 years ago: the domestic routine in houses, the experience of teaching and learning in schools, the give and take of commerce in stores, the spiritual refreshment found in churches. There are also sections on structures and sites and a concluding entry that highlights preliminary research done on Birtle's early construction practices and the craftsmen who actually made our buildings.

But we start with the topography and layout of our community, for it is these qualities that inform all else.

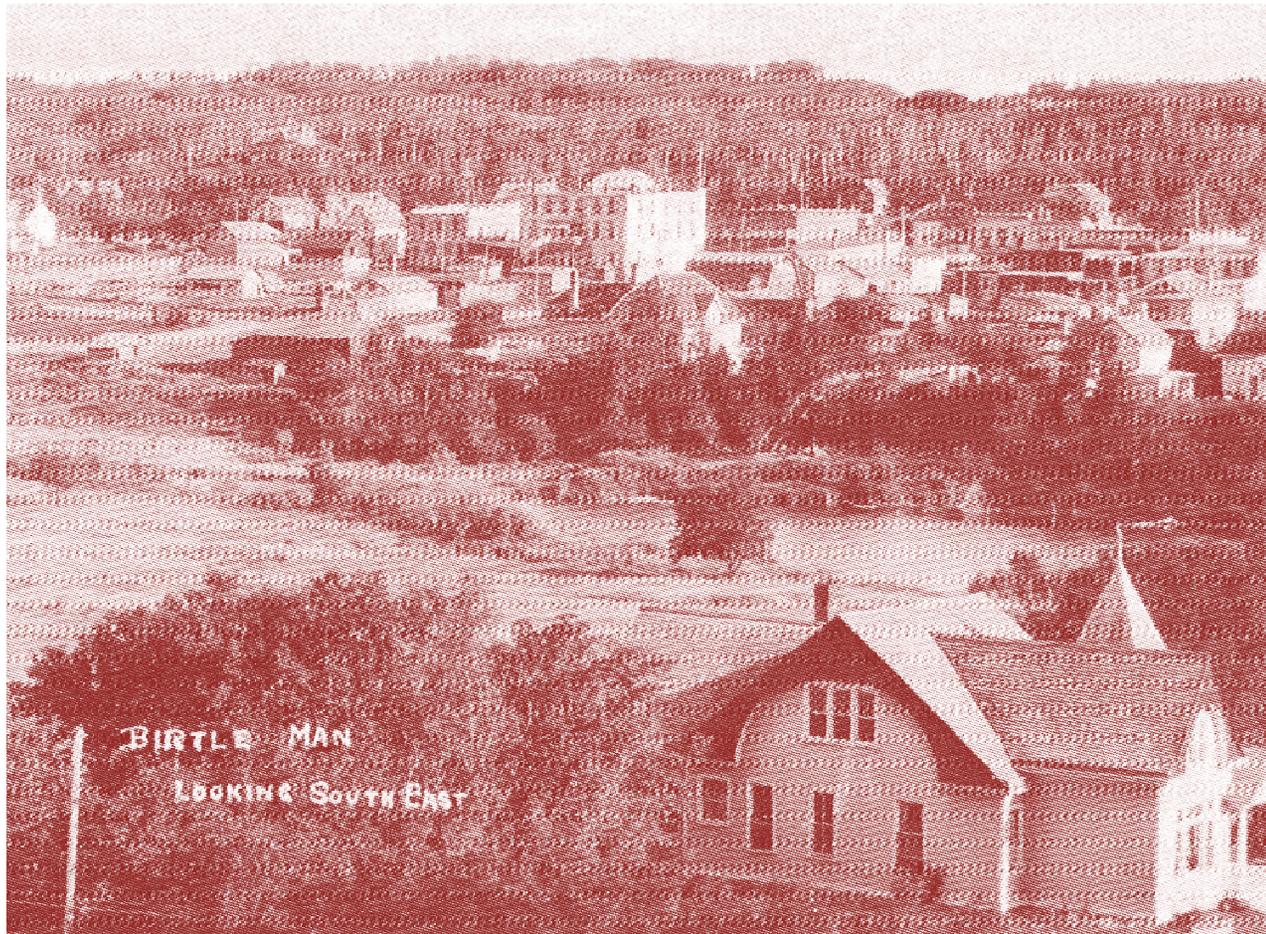
Community Form and Layout

Its situation in a valley of the Birdtail River makes Birtle one of Manitoba's most picturesque places. Birtle's straddling of the Birdtail makes for an interesting physical quality, and this aspect has been effectively exploited through the development of a walking trail. And while the town's main streets do run vaguely east-west and north-south, like most places, there are a number of buildings and sites that stand off this grid and make our community feel more informal and inviting – a quality we see in ourselves as well.

This view of ice cutting on the Birdtail River gives a sense of the topography of the town and of the placement of houses on the north hill.



A view of Birtle, ca. 1910, looking southeast, from above the site of the old Anglican Church, visible in the foreground. The town's picturesque qualities are evident here.



Another formal feature of our town originates in the location of the Manitoba and Northwestern rail line in 1885. Because the line came late (six years after the town was formed), and then went across the North Hill (and not through town), the whole community has a feeling of being somehow untrammelled by prevailing railway dynamics, where the quasi-industrial aspects of a rail line—stations, grain elevators, and even orientation of the whole town to the rail line—often made for a rigid, grid-like atmosphere. Additionally, because it was necessary to accommodate the reality of the station's location, Birtle had to develop a low-incline road (called Ravine Road) for transport of goods to and from the station, and this road is still a major part of the community form and identity.



The Ravine Road to the railway station around 1910.

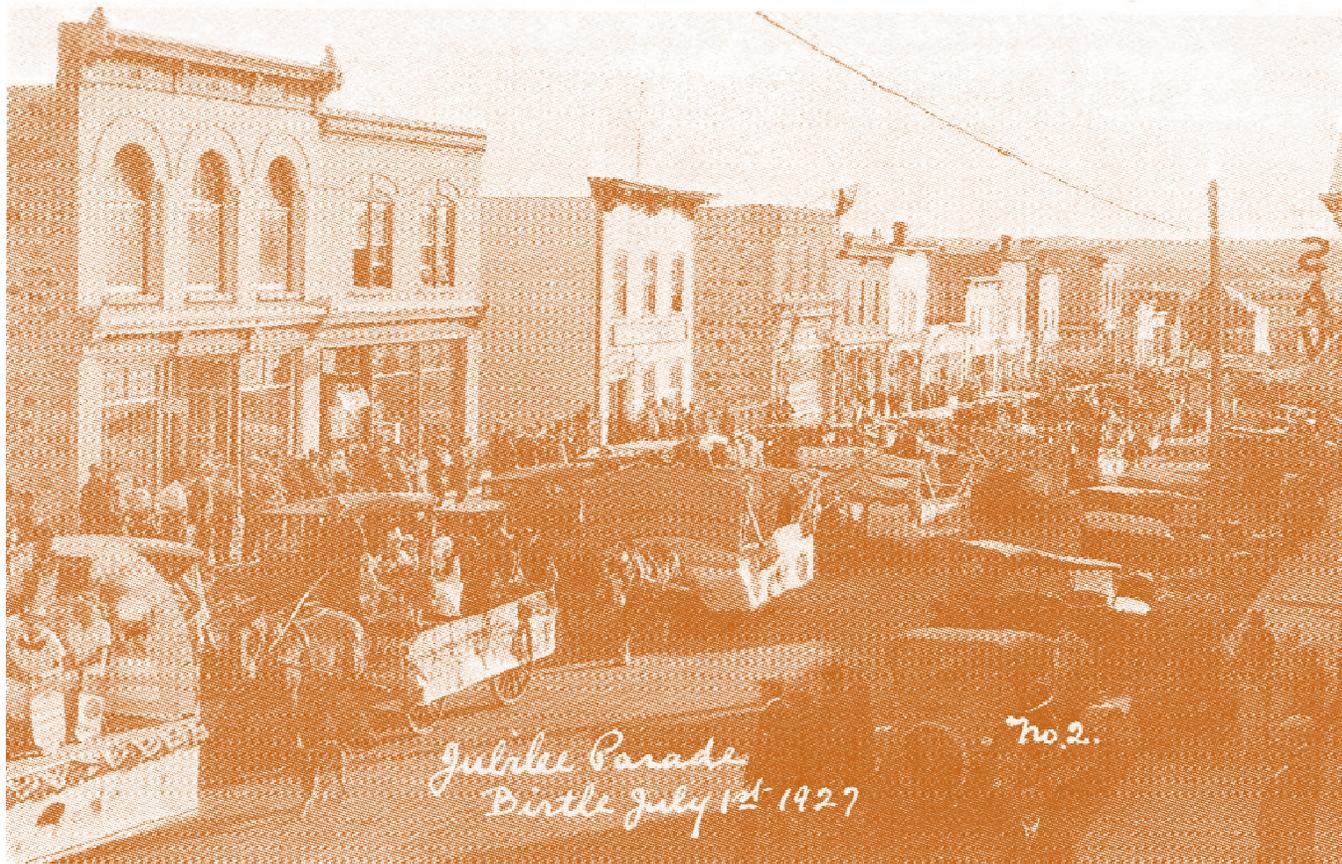
Commercial Buildings

Like any Manitoba town it's our commercial core that defines Birtle – it recalls our purpose, it marks our place. And like so many Manitoba towns our main street is not quite what it used to be. While we have lost some important features of this once elemental thoroughfare, there are still interesting buildings that help express this core aspect of the community's identity. The typical commercial styles and the near-ubiquitous use of masonry are still present in several storefronts, suggesting what these streets looked like when they were lined with such structures. And one of the finest and oldest stone stores in the province, the Pratt Block, dominates a corner lot with two grand storeys of hefty granite blocks.

The striking forms and details possible with brick construction are evident in the storefront facades of these two Birtle landmarks, the Cadwell Block and Holy Cow Building. These two buildings also clearly express the most common architectural style employed in early 20th century commercial design: the Romanesque Revival.



A view, of the south side of Main Street, ca. 1914, suggests the impressiveness of a whole street lined with masonry buildings. In this view, several of Birtle's extant commercial buildings are visible, including on the far left the Cadwell Block and Holy Cow Building, Former Union Bank (centre of image) and at the far centre-right the Pratt Block.



The impressive granite walls of the Pratt Block (1884), whose corner location grants it a certain grandeur.

