

# CONCLUSION

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**T**he legacy of Manitoba's brick industry is a remarkable one.

The billions of bricks that were produced by the more than 190 firms operational over 130 years of activity went into thousands of buildings, many of which are still standing. These sturdy, and often beautiful, brick walls offer a clear expression of the skill of the brick-makers, and the durability of that ancient product, formed from the very materials within our landscape.

Manitoba's brick-making industry was a major achievement, with fascinating stories of triumph, perseverance, imagination and sometimes of failure, occasionally spectacular failure. The industry went through a typical evolution attendant on any activity that lasted so long. It began in the 1860s with rudimentary attempts to form and burn bricks, mainly for use in chimneys, and proceeded through the 1870s and 1880s with many small yards, most operating with hand-made brick forms and rudimentary clamp kilns, but some with the most up-to-date brick-making machines and scove kilns.

The industry then proceeded through the 1890s and early 1900s to develop ever-more sophisticated operations, with highly mechanized production and finishing systems, including co-ordinated beehive and tunnel kilns. By the onset of World War I, in 1914, Manitoba's brick-making industry was a major player, sending its well-regarded high-quality products across the province and to sites further west. But the war, and an economic downturn that had begun in 1912, proved to be a death-blow to many brick operations, and by 1920 there were just 13 yards still producing, albeit at an industrial scale, with highly sophisticated operations.

Over the course of this history, there were distinct concentrations of brick operations in the province. The most notable was in St. Boniface, where at least 17 firms (six of them long-lasting) undertook clay extraction and brick production over the course of

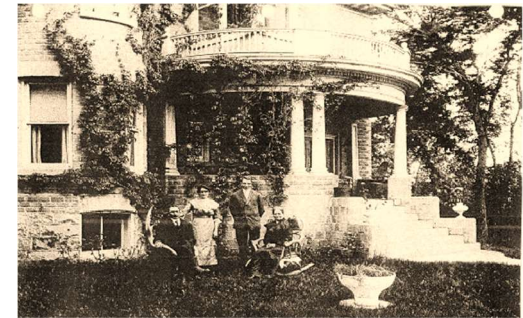


The exquisite architecture of the Beautiful Plains County Court House in Neepawa, from 1884, is a remarkable reminder of the power of a finely crafted brick wall to inspire both pleasure and reverence. (Courtesy ArchiSeek)

about 60 years, from the mid-1880s to the late 1940s; and all within a fairly concentrated area, along the Seine River south of Mission Street, north of Plinquet and adjacent to Youville Street. In 1910, W.A. Marion recalled the days when the St. Boniface yards were burning 38 million bricks annually (which, if extrapolated, would suggest this small beehive of brick-making activity might have produced more than 2 billion bricks over its lifetime). A swath of south-central Manitoba, which included Portage la Prairie, Gladstone, Edrans, Brookdale, Sidney, La Riviere and Somerset, was also rich in brick-clay and shale deposits, and produced at least a billion bricks – most of the yards at these places were active between the mid-1890s through to 1914.

Along with the approximately 3 billion bricks from St. Boniface and south-central Manitoba yards, all of the other Manitoba brick operations, in Winnipeg and scattered across southern Manitoba, contributed greatly to the province's output. A careful examination of brick quantities recorded in the attached inventories is helpful in this regard, but far from satisfactory – some of the data appears quite reliable, but there are more often major gaps in this kind of record, as well as a complete absence of quantity counts for many of the operations. This is certainly no fault of the inventory authors – the fact is that these kinds of values were often unrecorded. At the same time, it is possible to sketch out a total, including the 3 billion already noted – and get an approximation of 12 billion bricks: a truly remarkable achievement.

Some of the names and places that define Manitoba's brick-making history need to be recalled and honoured whenever the subject is raised: William Alsip, Zoel Marion, Alex McCutcheon, Kelly Bros. and Cartier & Lamontagne (who all operated in St. Boniface), Robert and William Hales, (at Rapid City, Brookdale and Edrans), George and William Leary (near Roseisle), Magnus Wilson (at Gladstone), Elwin Davis (at Sidney), Harry Stephens and John Snyder (both in Portage la Prairie), and Walter Wardrop (at Whitemouth). There were of course thousands of people who laboured at Manitoba's many brickyards over the years, many of them with critical knowledge and skills about forming and burning the billions of bricks that were produced. But it



Magnus Wilson, seated left, in front of his fine Gladstone house, 1916. (Courtesy *Gladstone – Then and Now*) This house, which is still standing and in excellent shape, is highly significant in Manitoba's brick-making history – not only a rare surviving house connected to an important brick-maker, but also constructed with specially formed bricks from the Wilson yard.

was these notable men, whose long and productive association with the industry, made it such a resounding success.

Like other historic industrial activities in Manitoba—our once-vibrant lumber industry for example—the physical presence of the province’s brick industry has mostly vanished into the mists of time, and even from the landscape. This cannot be surprising. The heyday of the industry, from about 1890 to 1912, was so long ago that many people would not likely be aware that we once had such a remarkable industrial activity as part of the economy. Moreover, many of the sites themselves were usually unimpressive, with utilitarian buildings and structures, and so with little of the architectural pleasure that attends buildings like churches and major public buildings. And so with little to recommend them to the public, these sites often have reverted to nature or were overtaken for other uses. This can be seen with all of the small rural yards, but also with once-huge operations, like the Canada Tile and Fire Proofing Company plant at Carman, a gigantic (and expensive) project that lasted barely four years (1912-15) and whose huge brick buildings were by 1924 used as rubble in Carman’s streets.

There are a few remnant sites that hint at this history – at Sidney and Edrans there are modest subterranean remnants, and at a few other places, like the Wardrop yard at Whitemouth, there are scattered remains of old bricks and materiel. A stretch of the Seine River just east of Youville Street in St. Boniface hints at the enormous brick-making activity that once defined this area. But these insignificant remnants are minor and frankly un-evocative.



Subterranean remains of the former National Clay Products operation at Edrans, seen in 2016. (Courtesy Devin Seaman and Manitoba Historical Society)



A brick-lined drying tunnel, one of the few remnants of the Sidney Brick and Tile operation, seen in 2013. (Courtesy Manitoba Historical Society)





Views of two major areas of brick production in Manitoba – above, left and centre, of the area near the Seine River in St. Boniface, which once hosted several important brick yards; and above right of the former site of the Wardrop yard near Whitemouth, in southeastern Manitoba (this image courtesy Manitoba Historical Society). These views reveal the contemporary situation of such places. At Whitemouth there are only scattered brick shards scattered across a field to suggest the 17 years—1929-45—of brick-making activity there. At the St. Boniface site, just east of Youville Street, the gentle curves of the river, and the oddly wide expanse of open riverbank, suggest an earlier activity – when at least 17 yards located near here extracted as much clay as they could to burn more than 30 million bricks a year for several decades.

While much of the legacy of Manitoba's brick-making industry has been lost, there is one completely intact brick factory site remaining – Learys, about 10 kilometres west of Roseisle, in the lovely rolling hill country west of Carman. This is a revered place. The old Learys site (begun in 1900) still contains all of its original buildings, structures and features – the shale beds used for brick production (along with the crusher used to refine the shale for brick-making), the evocative beehive kiln, the tall brick smokestack and all of the pieces of machinery, mainly housed in the brick plant. While they are weathered and even rickety in places, the Leary fixtures are all in near-pristine condition, unmarred by upgrades or selected removals. It is questionable, however, how much longer the site can hold out – the re-use options for such a place are difficult to imagine, and the issues attending remediation and upgrade would be prohibitively expensive.



View ca. 2005, of the old Leary Brick Works site, in the rolling hills west of Carman. The factory was inaugurated in 1900 by George Leary, was mothballed from 1917 to 1946, and was revived by George's son William from 1947 to 1952. It is the last remaining site associated with Manitoba's historic brick industry, and is even more remarkable for presenting nearly every form, function and detail of a sophisticated brick-making yard: the brick plant (far left) in which shale from the hill behind was ground and then pressed in brick forms (the two processes via huge and heavy pieces of machinery), the beehive kiln (centre), where bricks were fired, and the 60-foot chimney (right), used in the burning process to draw hot air through the kiln. Just a half mile to the east of the Leary Brick Works site stands a fine brick house, built by the Learys, with Leary bricks, another important connection to Manitoba's brick-making history.

While it is nearly heart-breaking that so much of Manitoba's brick-making infrastructure has been lost, and so much forgotten, it is presumed that this study will go some way to raise the profile of the people and places associated with such an important and fascinating aspect of our past. And the survival of the Learys site has allowed for the production by this author of a meticulous historical and technical study of that special place, available on-line via the Carman-Dufferin Community Heritage Website:

<http://carmandufferinheritage.ca/local%20heritage/special%20places/leary-brick-works.html>

But there are even more opportunities to connect to the history of Manitoba's brick industry – in the very structures built up from those bricks. And there are thousands of such places. It actually makes the most sense to visit smaller communities around the province, where it is easier to connect the buildings to the land and to the yards once nearby that manufactured the bricks – in places like Hartney (from the yards of Harry Payne or William Kirkland), Gladstone (from the yard of Magnus Wilson), Souris (from the yard of "Squire" Sowden) and Portage la Prairie (from the yards of John Snyder and William Stephens).

The buildings in these communities will presumably stand for hundreds of years more, and through them we can continue to appreciate the hard work, skill, talent, grit and determination that animated so much of the work that attended our once-vibrant brick industry.





Two of Virden's fine brick buildings. Handsome and durable, landmarks like this will continue to connect Manitobans to the hundreds of brick factories that provided the billions of bricks required to build up the very walls of the province.