



596 ST. MARY'S ROAD
ST. VITAL FIRE HALL & POLICE STATION

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

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596 ST. MARY'S ROAD – ST. VITAL FIRE HALL & POLICE STATION¹

The permanent settlement of the area that is now known as St. Vital began with the arrival of the Selkirk settlers at present-day Winnipeg in 1812. It signalled the beginning of a fundamental change in the lives of the people who worked and lived in the area, most of whom were Métis. The lives of this large group, offspring of Indian mothers and European fathers, centred on the fur trade and the buffalo hunt, agriculture was practiced but not as the primary activity. When the Hudson's Bay Company and its rival, the North West Company of Montréal, merged in 1821, it resulted in the loss of work for many Métis families who turned to farming as an alternative. Support for this change came from the Roman Catholic church in St. Boniface, which began a program of bringing francophone families, farmers and professionals, from Quebec, thereby increasing the population and partially transplanting french society in the West.

Along the Seine River, Métis families were known to have settled along its banks in the early 1820s. Other francophone families followed – names like Riel, Genthon, Lavallee, St. Germain, Guay, Mager, Ritchot and Mouard - intent on becoming farmers.² The population also grew as a result of Métis families from Fort Daer, North Dakota moving north to escape the Sioux unrest.³ Slowly the area developed, although drought, flood and grasshopper infestation often stunted the community's growth. The first school was organized in 1860 and named St. Vital.⁴ In 1883, the Rural Municipality of St. Vital was created, but in 1891 became part of the Rural Municipality of St. Boniface (which had incorporated in 1880). In 1903, a Market Gardeners' Society was formed, acknowledging the importance of the activity to the community and the name of the Municipality was changed to St. Vital to avoid confusion with the Town of St. Boniface (it would incorporate as a city in 1908).

¹ This report is based on the earlier report of S.C. Grover (1982).

² V. and M. Wyatt, "A History of St. Vital," unpublished paper prepared for the St. Vital Historical Society, June 1962, pp. 1-13.

³ Information supplied by Bob Holliday, President, St. Vital Historical Society, May 8, 2010.

⁴ History of Settlement and Development of St. Vital, 1822-1970 (Winnipeg, MB: St. Vital Historical Society, no date), p. 3.

The Rural Municipality of St. Vital in the early 1910s was an interesting place. While still a basically rural area with many large landowners and market gardeners, there was more and more pressure being put on these owners to sell their property to developers who wanted to subdivide the land into city lots. The Winnipeg newspapers were full of advertisements touting St. Mary's Road as "the Portage Avenue of St. Vital."⁵ The growth of the Municipality was also shown by the 1911 construction of its new municipal hall on St. Mary's Road (Plate 1). This pressure was also seen politically where the Municipal council, largely controlled by established Francophone farmers and dairymen fought to block the activities of a new group of mainly Anglophone developers trying to subdivide property, extend streetcar lines and introduce sweeping changes to life in St. Vital.

In 1912, the boundaries changed as part of its territory became the Municipality of Fort Garry⁶ and a new Anglophone-led council was elected in St. Vital.⁷ By 1913, the Municipal council was tendering large sewer, paving and other construction contracts as parts of the area "urbanized." There was also pressure being applied by leaders of the nearby City of St. Boniface who were lobbying for an amalgamation between the two entities.

In the midst of all this activity, the Municipality deemed it necessary to build a modern fire hall and police station to address the growth of population in the area. Plans were drawn up, tenders called and the new structure was completed and opened by November 1914 (Plates 2 and 3).⁸

⁵ Manitoba Free Press (MFP), January 11, 1913, p. 40.

⁶ "St. Vital," unpublished history supplied by the St. Vital Historical Society, p. 2. Below as "St. Vital."

⁷ Richard Wilson, "St. Vital - 1912", The Dominion, December 1912. Wilson was, coincidentally, St. Vital Municipality's first English-speaking reeve.

⁸ "Tenders for Building Fire Hall and Police Station," MFP, March 5, 1914, p. 2 and "All St. Vital Public Work By Day Labour," MFP, November 22, 1914, p. 20.

STYLE

Occupying the apex of a public utilities hierarchy were fire halls. These architect-designed edifices frequently were erected at strategic street corners. To enable each building to blend into its residential or commercial surroundings, architects specified gables and occasionally a stone facing.⁹

Nowhere was this quote more apt than in St. Vital where the new combination fire hall/police station occupied the Municipality's premier intersection at St. Mary's Road and St. Anne's Road. And while the building utilized a number of architectural features to "blend into its...surroundings" it was also an important statement made by the Municipality's political leaders to the people of St. Vital and beyond that the community was modernizing and that its civic government was going to spare no cost in providing modern services.

Stylistically, the new building was very similar to the fire halls being built around Winnipeg since 1904 when the City fathers hired local architects Alexander and William Melville to produce a set of plans for new fire halls that became the basis for over a dozen halls built between 1904 and 1913 (see Appendix I). These halls were a blend of several styles, classically inspired detailing and Romanesque features such as arched openings and rusticated cladding.

In terms of extant fire halls in the City of Winnipeg, five have been designated by the City: four, 1055 Dorchester Street (Plate 4), 180 Sinclair Avenue (Plate 5), 325 Talbot Avenue (Plate 6) and 596 St. Mary's Road are Grade III – reflecting the modest ornamentation, the exterior alterations to the original design and/or its importance as part of the expansion of services by the City of Winnipeg; and one, 56 Maple Street (Plate 7), is Grade II, due to its size, ornamentation, location (near the Canadian Pacific Railway Station on Higgins Avenue) and its early date of construction.

CONSTRUCTION

The St. Vital fire hall is a solid brick building, resting on a stone foundation and reinforced by concrete beams and concrete flooring. The broad hip roof originally featured delicate iron

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

cresting (removed after the 1950s). The use of dark face brick was a more expensive choice compared to the cheaper common clay brick used for the construction of Winnipeg's pre-World War I fire halls.

Upon its completion, the fire hall and police station was the largest and most elaborate building in St. Vital and was the object of great civic pride.

DESIGN

The front (east) façade was originally symmetrically designed, with a modestly projecting centre section flanked by two short wings (Plate 8). The ground floor was clad in rusticated limestone giving way to the dark brick of the upper storeys. The wings hold two arched entrances while the projecting section features arched openings large enough for the firefighting equipment. The second storey features square headed window openings with stone sills and heads. The most ornamental feature is the oriel window set in the stepped or Flemish gable with Palladian window on the third floor and stone accenting located in the centre of the original structure (Plate 9).

The addition of a bay on the building's south end removed the original gable dormer that was located on the south slope of the roof. This south addition matched the design of the front façade; the south elevation now features a large window on the ground floor and smaller openings on the second floor (Plate 10). The north elevation includes windows on both the first and second floors and in the northwest corner is the hose drying tower complete with arched windows and brickwork, complete entablature with heavy overhanging eaves and stone accenting (Plate 11). The rear (west) façade features a large brick chimney and one-storey sections (Plate 12).

The fire hall has seen some exterior alteration since its 1914 completion. All the windows have been replaced, as have the big carriage doors, although the arches remain as do the small panes of glass that fill these rounded openings. The cresting has been removed from the roof and two

additions, both brick, have been made to the rear. Despite these changes, the building still displays many of its original design features.

INTERIOR

Because of the multitude of uses for this structure, the interior features a number of interior divisions not normally seen in these 1910-era fire halls. The south end of the ground floor was originally used as the police station, a magistrate's office and jail cells were included in this area (now used by the St. Vital Historical Society as their museum – Plate 13). To the north was the large open space with three bays for the firefighting equipment, accessed from the firefighters' living area on the second floor via a pole. Today, the three bays have been divided by an interior wall into a south bay, used by the museum, and two north bays, used by the ambulance service. All bays still feature the original ornamental tin ceilings (Plate 14), the south bay still has the original white tile walls exposed (Plate 15).

Access to the second floor was gained via the entrance in the northeast corner, the foyer includes ornamental tin ceilings, tile walls and an ornate metal banister (Plate 16). With the move of the Municipal offices to the structure, many changes were made to the second floor space, as firefighters' living quarters were replaced by civic offices. One of the most original spaces is at the rear, where the 1950s-era wood and glass counters used to serve the public are still intact (Plate 17). Most of the second floor is now used by an antique radio club.

The third floor was originally used for storage but became the council chambers for the Municipality (Plate 18) and the tower, with its wooden staircase, was used to dry the lengths of hose (Plate 19).

INTEGRITY

The building stands on its original site and is in good structural condition. Additions to the building have been extensive, although the rear additions are hidden from the front of the

building and the side addition was built to match the materials and design of the original structure.

STREETSCAPE

This structure sat for many years as the only major structure located on St. Mary's Road at St. Anne's Road. Much development has occurred since this time, both streets have developed commercial and residential districts and the Fire Hall/Police Station is now in the midst of a busy retail area. It continues, however, to add to the historic makeup of the area and its streetscape.

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTOR

Alexander R. Melville, Scottish born and trained architect was the designer of this structure, according to a tender published in the Manitoba Free Press on March 5, 1914, p. 2 (see Appendix II for biographical information). Melville has been given 20 points by the Historical Buildings Committee.

PERSON/INSTITUTION

Residences and farms were spread thinly throughout all of St. Vital for decades after 1914. By design, there was no industry in the district, so the firemen's calls were generally to house or barn fires, chimney fires, and grass conflagrations. Only a portion of the municipality was serviced by water lines and fire hydrants so that the pumper engine was essential to fighting fires (Plates 20 and 21). By the late 1920s, the fire department operated two pumpers so that one could refill at the closest hydrant while the other pumped water into the hoses. Not until 1942 did St. Vital enter an agreement with the Greater Winnipeg Water Area to give pressure for water service throughout the developed areas.¹⁰

In the 1930s, there were 5 full-time firemen and a chief. They worked shifts of four full days until the 1950s, when the adoption of regular eight-hour shifts required many more men on staff.

¹⁰ "St. Vital Past — Present and Future", The St. Vital Lance, 10 September 1970, p. 12.

Until early in the 1930s, horses were still used but the stables have since been converted into a lounge for the firemen. In 1948, the fire department purchased a 550 gallon pumper hose and ladder truck and again in 1959 purchased a \$15,000 truck, bringing their equipment up to date.¹¹

The growth which the municipality of St. Vital experienced since 1912 under its new aggressive council was not matched by an adequate tax base. With less than 10,000 people in the area, St. Vital verged on bankruptcy in 1926 and its affairs were taken over by the Municipal and Public Utilities Board of the provincial government for a year.¹² In what may have been an effort to save money, the municipal offices and council chambers moved from their own building along St. Mary's Road into the second floor of the fire hall in 1924. As well, the St. Vital health unit was also located there. The former bedrooms were remodelled into offices and council chambers, while the firemen and policemen were contained entirely on the ground floor. The old civic offices were used as a school until their demolition in 1957.

The arrangement of fire hall, police station, health unit and municipal offices proved crowded but acceptable until a new civic office was built immediately south of the fire hall in 1960.¹³ Since 1952, the fire and police departments had been formally separated although it is obvious that they continued to work co-operatively in the same building well past that date.

The community of St. Vital grew at a healthy rate but was never anxious for any commercial development. The municipal council, housed in the fire hall, resisted incorporation until the City of St. Vital was formed in 1962. At this point, the population was 27,000 people. Likewise, in 1971 St. Vital joined Unicity with great reluctance and the former council marked the event with a mock burial for the crest of the former municipality. Since 1964, the fire hall had shared fire-fighting responsibilities with a new fire hall farther south on St. Mary's Road, but with new amalgamated services, all fire fighting duties were moved from the old fire hall and the building became an ambulance hall.

¹¹ Loc. cit.

¹² Winnipeg Free Press, 4 March 1960.

¹³ "New Civic Offices Opened in 1960", St. Vital Lance, September 10, 1970.

EVENT

The fact that this facility operated as St. Vital's fire hall and police station for many decades, was used as its government offices including activities like licensing, public health nurse and of course, council meetings, means that almost every citizen of St. Vital would have had a personal connection to this building on a weekly basis from the time of its construction well into the 1970s.

There was also a fire in the building (many of the wooden trusses in attic are burnt), however, it is unknown at this time when this fire occurred.

CONTEXT

Contextually, the St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station is a very important illustration of the expansion of civic services in the St. Vital area just prior to the outbreak of World War I. The rapid expansion of the City of Winnipeg had an affect on the surrounding communities including St. Vital. An increase in local population, the construction of new roads and residential subdivisions, the opening of commercial and manufacturing ventures all made it necessary for civic services such as fire and police protection to likewise increase. The construction of this large facility was meant to fill the growing need as well as show citizens that St. Vital was evolving with the times. It continues to be an important reminder of the early stages of growth of the Municipality.

LANDMARK

Few buildings were more conspicuous than the Fire Hall and Police Station. Located on one of the busiest intersections in the area, its size and its tall tower meant that anyone travelling into or out of St. Vital would have noticed this building.

APPENDIX I

MELVILLE BROTHER FIRE HALLS, 1904-1914

ADDRESS	NAME ¹	BUILT	HERITAGE STATUS	PRESENT USE ²
Maple St., 56	Fire Hall No. 3	1904	Grade II	Firefighters' Museum
Burrows Ave., 349	Fire Hall No. 7	1904	None	Demolished
Gertrude Ave., 470	Fire Hall No. 4	1904	None	Closed in the 1930s, demolished
Pearl St., 66	Unknown	1904	None	Demolished
Sherbrook St., 354	Fire Hall No. 5	1904	Inventory	Closed in 1919, converted to commercial use, vacant
Talbot Ave., 325	Fire Hall No. 8	1906	Grade III	Offices
William Ave., 1470	Fire Hall No. 9	1909	Inventory	Converted to Winnipeg Fire Department repair shop (ca.1950)
Sargent Ave., 825	Fire Hall No. 10	1910	Inventory	Active fire hall
Sinclair Ave., 180	Fire Hall No. 11	1910	Grade III	Active fire hall
Cathedral Ave., 410	Fire Hall No. 13	1911	None	Closed 1963
Dorchester St., 1055	Fire Hall No. 12	1911	Grade III	Closed as fire hall in 1974, renovated as multi-tenant residence
Lipton St., 161	Fire Hall No. 14	1913	Inventory	Residence
Osborne St., 524	Fire Hall No. 15	1913	Inventory	Ambulance station
St. Mary's Rd., 596	St. Vital Fire Hall & Police Station	1914	Grade III	Ambulance station and museum

¹ According to Henderson's Directory, 1943.

² Information from The Firefighters Museum of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada website, no date.

APPENDIX II

Alexander R. Melville

The Melville brothers, Alexander R. and William N., began their partnership in Winnipeg shortly after the turn of the century. While they are best known today as the designers of many of the early fire halls, they also were responsible for a number of other buildings of various functions throughout the city.

Alexander Melville was born in 1873 in Fraserburgh, Scotland and received his architectural and civil engineering degrees in Aberdeen. For many years he was a member of the Manitoba Association of Architects and one of its early council members (1919-20).¹ From 1913 to the late 1940s, A. Melville operated a private practice in Winnipeg. He was also a provincial government draftsman for a short period prior to his retirement. He died in 1949.²

Little is known biographically about William Melville, who came to Winnipeg and opened an architectural office ca.1903.³ In 1904, the same directory lists both Melville brothers as residents, and the firm of A. and W. Melville, architects and civil engineers is also listed. In the 1913 list, the two brothers appear to have dissolved the partnership. By 1915, William Melville is no longer listed in the directory.⁴

An incomplete list of Melville Brother designs includes:

Fire Halls: 56 Maple Street, 1904 – Grade II
 349 Burrows Avenue, 1904
 470 Gertrude Avenue, 1904 (demolished)
 66 Pearl Street, 1904 (demolished)
 354 Sherbrook Street, 1904
 325 Talbot Avenue, 1906

¹ "Alexander Melville" file at the office of the Manitoba Association of Architects.

² M. Peterson, "56 Maple Street - Fire Hall No. 3 (Fire Hall No. 2)," report for the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, October 1990, Appendix I.

³ Henderson's Directory (Winnipeg), 1900-1905.

⁴ Ibid., 1900-15.

Melville Brother Fire Hall designs (continued):

1470 William Avenue, 1909
825 Sargent Avenue, 1910
180 Sinclair Avenue, 1910 – Grade III
410 Cathedral Avenue, 1911
1055 Dorchester Street, 1911 – Grade III
161 Lipton Street, 1913
524 Osborne Street, 1913
596 St. Mary's Road (St. Vital), 1914

G.A. Glines House (Tremblay Apartments), 55 Hargrave Street, 1906 – Grade III
A. Stewart House, 67 Harvard Avenue, 1907
Ashford Apartment Block, 381 Balmoral Street (demolished)
Broadway Court Apartments, 251 Broadway, 1906 (demolished)
T. Thompson House, Canora Street, 1912
Touraine Apartments, 410 Ellice Avenue (demolished)
The Coliseum Dance Hall, 225 Fort Street, 1912 (demolished)
The Colonial Theatre, 634 Main Street, 1912 (demolished)

A.R. Melville designs:

The Rex Moving Picture Theatre (Epic Theatre), 646 Main Street, 1912-13 – Grade II
(demolished)
Manitoba Telephone System Building, Portage Avenue East, 1930-1931
Telephone Exchange Building, Elkhorn, Manitoba, 1932

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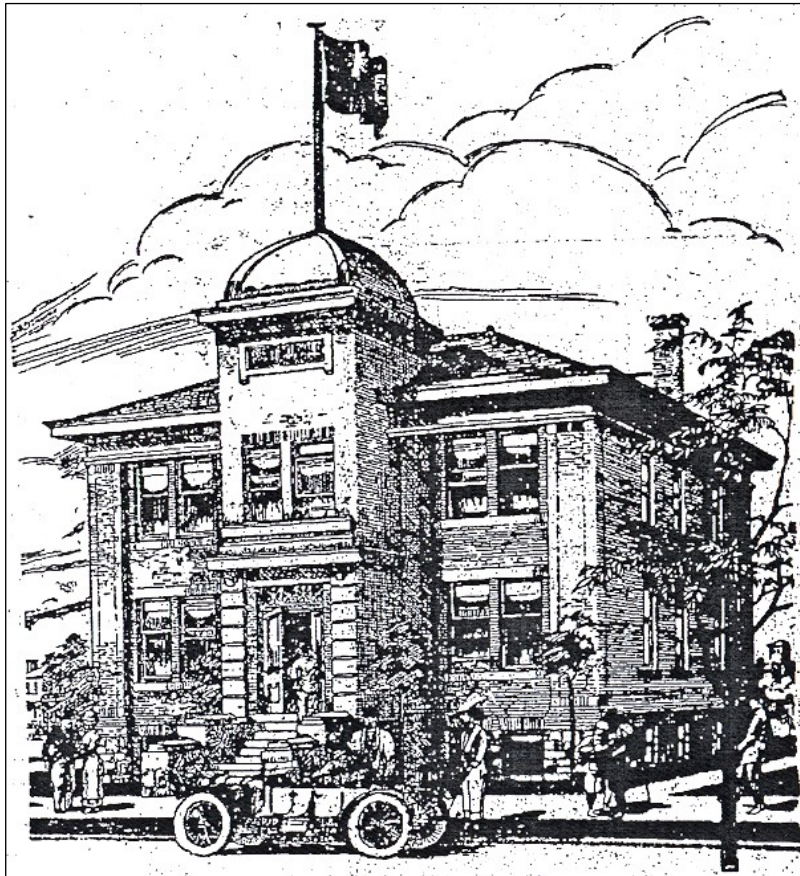


Plate 1 – Rural Municipality of St. Vital Municipal Hall, St. Mary's Road and Lennox Avenue, 1911. The structure was designed by noted Winnipeg architects Hooper and Hooper and built by Boyle and Higgins of Winnipeg (Manitoba Free Press, September 9, 1911, p. 18). It was used as a public school from 1924-1957 ("St. Vital" history supplied by the St. Vital Historical Society, p. 2). (Manitoba Free Press, September 9, 1911, p. 18.)

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Plate 2 – The St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, ca.1914. (St. Vital Historical Society.)

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Plate 3 – St. Mary's Road immediately south of the fire hall, ca.1920. The tower of the fire hall is barely visible through the trees (arrow). (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 4 – Former Winnipeg Fire Hall No. 12, 1055 Dorchester Street, Grade III, now multi-tenant residence. Exterior alterations include the replacement of all windows and the replacement of the overhead doors. (M. Peterson, 2009.)



Plate 5 – Former Winnipeg Fire Hall No. 11, 180 Sinclair Avenue, Grade III, now the Wat Lao Zayaram of Manitoba Inc. Buddhist Temple Community Centre. Exterior alterations include the boarding up of several windows and the overhead doors. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 6 – Former Winnipeg Fire Hall No. 8, 325 Talbot Avenue, Grade III, now offices. Exterior alterations include replacement of second storey windows. (M. Peterson, 2009.)



Plate 7 – Former Winnipeg Fire Hall No. 3, 56 Maple Street, Grade II, now Winnipeg Fire Fighters Museum. Exterior alterations include replacement of windows and overhead doors. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 8 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, front (east) and north façades, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 9 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, front (east) façade detail, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 10 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, front (east) and south façades, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 11 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, tower detail, 2009.
(M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 12 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, rear (west) façade, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 13 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, former police area (south end), now museum space, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)



Plate 14 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, original tin ceiling in the ambulance bay, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 15 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, south bay with its original tin ceiling and tiled walls, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 16 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, northeast entrance foyer, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 17 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, second floor counters, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 18 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, third floor, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)



Plate 19 – Former St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 596 St. Mary's Road, interior of tower, 2009. (M. Peterson, 2009.)

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Plate 20 – St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, no date. Note the equipment includes both horse-drawn and gasoline-driven machinery. (St. Vital Historical Society.)



Plate 21 – St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, with “R.M. of St. Vital” trucks parked in front, ca.1950. Note the metal cresting is still intact on the roof and the south addition has been completed. (St. Vital Historical Society.)