

Heritage Research Report 214 Steele St. – Steele Street Public School

Lot 30, Concession 1, Humberstone Township

Formerly called Port Colborne Public School and West Side Public School

Architectural Features:

The school building at 214 Steele St., which opened in September, 1916, is a rectangular, two-and-a-half-storey red brick structure, with a raised, rusticated stone foundation. It had eight classrooms, four teachers' rooms and offices, and the basement was designed to be used as a gymnasium space. The building's symmetrical front façade (the building's east side facing Steele St.) features unique decorative brickwork in a diaper pattern running horizontally between the first and second floor window rows. The brick was manufactured in Ridgeway, Ohio.¹ There is also ornamental, yellow terracotta tiling that decorates the brickwork in geometric patterns, most notably on the corners of the building and the porch pillars. All five of the original brick chimneys remain.

The window surrounds on the front and rear of the building, and the lintels and windowsills on the sides are made of the same terracotta tiles which decorate the brickwork. Six swept dormers, also known as eyebrow windows, adorn the roof of the building, adding an element of the Arts and Crafts style. The original interior trim and windows were made of Georgia pine, and the flooring throughout the school was polished hardwood.² All the windows except for the dormers have been replaced, and all the first- and second-storey windows on the façade have been partially covered by metal siding, while several on the north and south sides of the building have been entirely bricked over. A small window has been added to the corner on the southern end of the façade, on the first floor.

The front façade has several Classical Revival style elements. It features a prominent central gable with a broken pediment, supported by two large, square, brick pillars. The tympanum was originally decorated with fish-scale style wooden shingles, sympathetic with the diamond pattern in the brick, while on its underside, or soffit, were dentils that ran around the entire building (See Appendices 2 and 4); both the shingles and dentils were removed after the 1979 survey photos were taken, and replaced with vinyl siding. The door surround, made of yellow terracotta tiles, echoes the Classical motif of the gable and pillars, with a pediment overhead, and decorative pilasters on either side. The tympanum features a moulded, decorative design. The original entryway, which is no longer in use, had French doors and a large transom window overhead with a starburst pattern (See Appendix 3), but these have been replaced by a modern window. In addition to the central entryway, the school also originally had separate entrances for boys and girls—one on the north side, and one on the south (See Appendix 2). The north side entrance is still in use, but only the upper floor of the southern entrance remains visible from the exterior, as the first floor is covered by an extension.

The first addition to the school was built in 1968, extending from the southwest corner of the main building, containing a gymnasium and some offices.³ Another extension was built on the south end of the building following the 1979 heritage inventory assessment — a one-storey, rectangular structure, which, as noted above, necessitated the partial removal of the southern entrance. The third addition is a one-storey, semi-hexagonal building. The new additions made to the school over the years were designed for

¹ *Port Colborne Citizen and Humberstone News*, June 24, 1915.

² *Port Colborne Citizen and Humberstone News*, June 24, 1915.

³ *Early Education and Port Colborne*, p. 146.

practical reasons and in keeping with contemporary design trends, without reference to the style or character of the original building.

History:

Early Education and Port Colborne tells us that, in 1914, the school board purchased the land on the west side of Steele Street from a Mrs. Zavitz (most likely Hannah A., who resided at 228 Steele St., the house immediately north of the school) for \$4500, in order to build a much larger replacement for Central School which served the west side of the village.⁴ In the early years of the twentieth century, the population of the Village of Port Colborne and the surrounding area was growing quite rapidly with industrial developments bringing more employment opportunities.⁵ Elm St. School in Stonebridge (Humberstone) had to be rebuilt ca. 1907 in order to accommodate a growing school population, and already required the building of two additional classrooms in 1913.⁶ DeWitt Carter School, originally called East Side School, was built in 1912. Port Colborne High School, then called Port Colborne Continuation School, opened in 1921. The proliferation of these early twentieth century school buildings in Port Colborne evinces the need to accommodate a growing population, and the greater value that parents were placing on the education of their children.

Charles Martin Borter of Niagara Falls, who would go on to design St. James Church the next year, and Port Colborne Continuation School (Port Colborne High School) a few years later, was engaged by the school board as the architect for Steele Street School on May 28, 1915.⁷ Borter is notable for his work locally: he designed many of Niagara's public buildings, with much of his body of work comprised of school designs.⁸ In August 1915, the building contract for Steele Street School was awarded to Ryan and Gardner of Welland for \$33,982.⁹ Ryan and Gardner were also the contractors hired to build St. James Church, also of Borter's design, between 1916 and 1917.

The school building was designed with large windows to offer the most natural light possible, and equipped with a telephone system connecting all the classrooms and offices, hot water central heating, modern plumbing in the washrooms, and electric lighting. When Steele Street School opened on the 5th September, 1916, it was said to be "equipped in the most modern manner [and] a credit to the town."¹⁰

Architectural and Historical Significance:

Second only to DeWitt Carter Public School, which was built in 1912, Steele Street School is the oldest school building still being used as a school in the former village of Port Colborne. Dewitt Carter School shares architectural features with Steele Street School, such as its Edwardian, symmetrical façade and decorative terracotta tilework; however, the Steele St. decoration is far more ornate, and much of the tilework on DeWitt Carter has been covered up recently with metal siding. Steele Street School exemplifies the work of C.M. Borter, who designed many of Niagara's public buildings, and made a significant contribution to the built landscape of the region. When the opening of the school was announced in the *Tribune*, it was heralded as "one of the best built, arranged, and equipped school buildings to be found in

⁴ *Early Education and Port Colborne*, p. 145.

⁵ *Early Education and Port Colborne*, p. 135.

⁶ *Early Education and Port Colborne*, pps. 131-132.

⁷ *Tribune*, June 1, 1915.

⁸ Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada

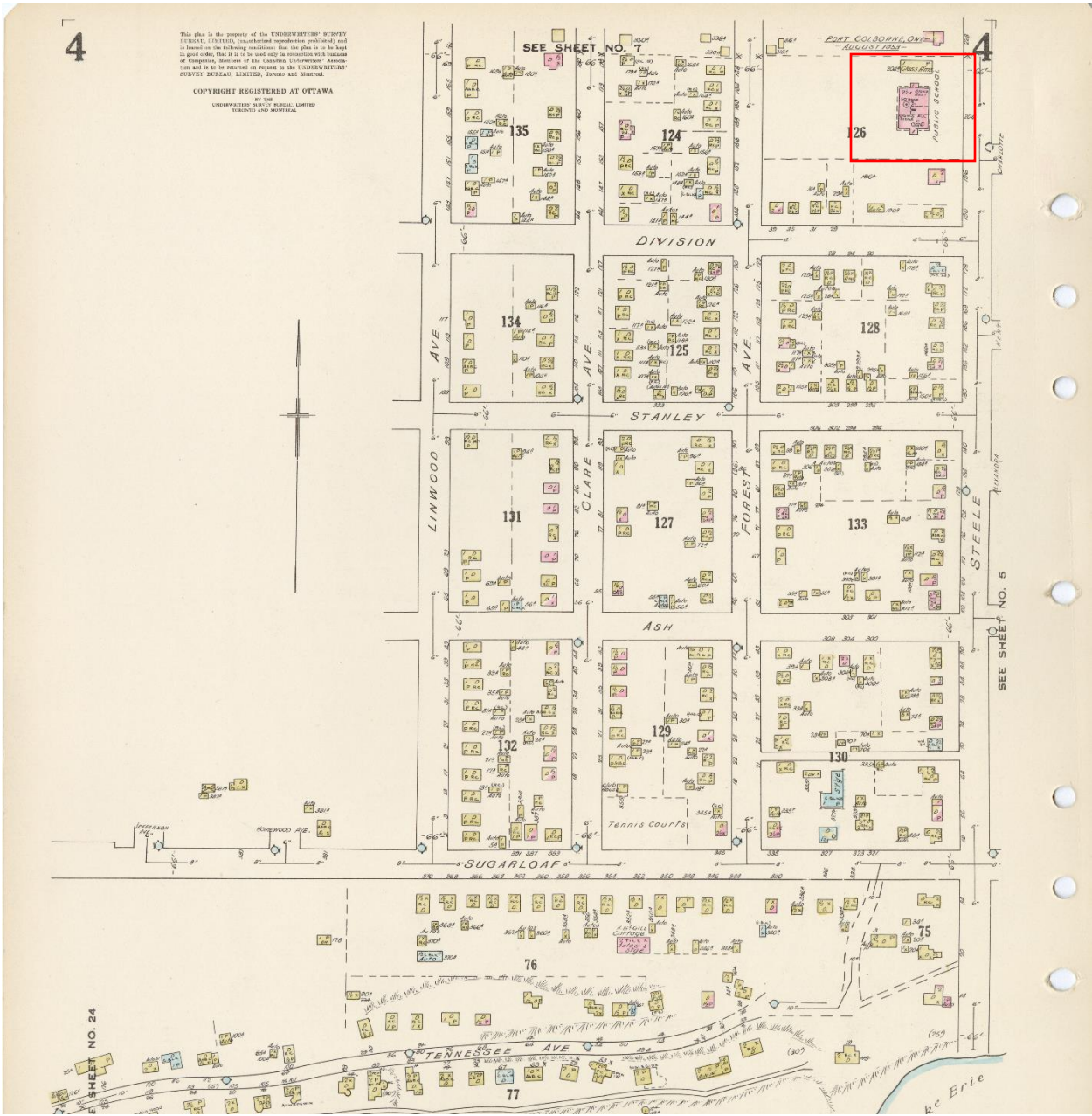
⁹ *Port Colborne Citizen and Humberstone News*, August 9, 1915.

¹⁰ *Port Colborne Citizen and Humberstone News*, August 31, 1916.

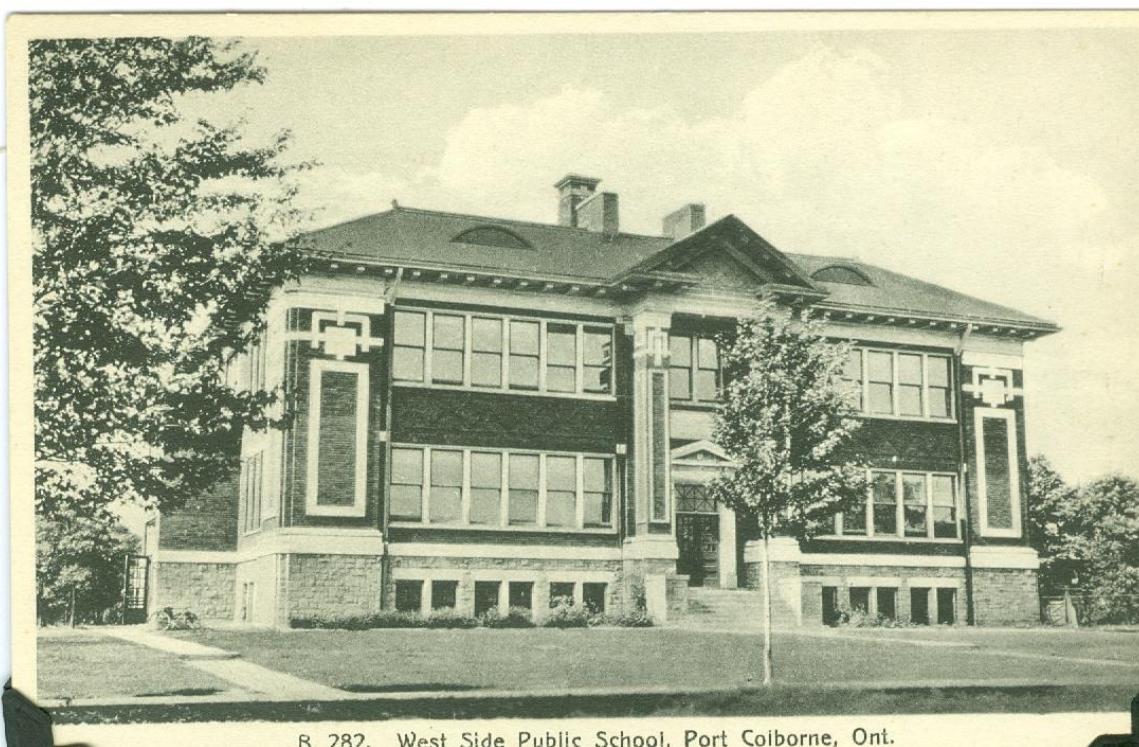
Canada.”¹¹ Although there have been alterations made to Steele St. Public School, most of its notable architectural features—the tilework, diaper patterned brick, eyebrow windows, and monumental entryway—remain intact and visible. Steele Street School is a well-preserved example of the Edwardian Classic style typical in Ontario public buildings, particularly urban schools, of the early twentieth century.

¹¹ *Tribune*, August 31, 1916.

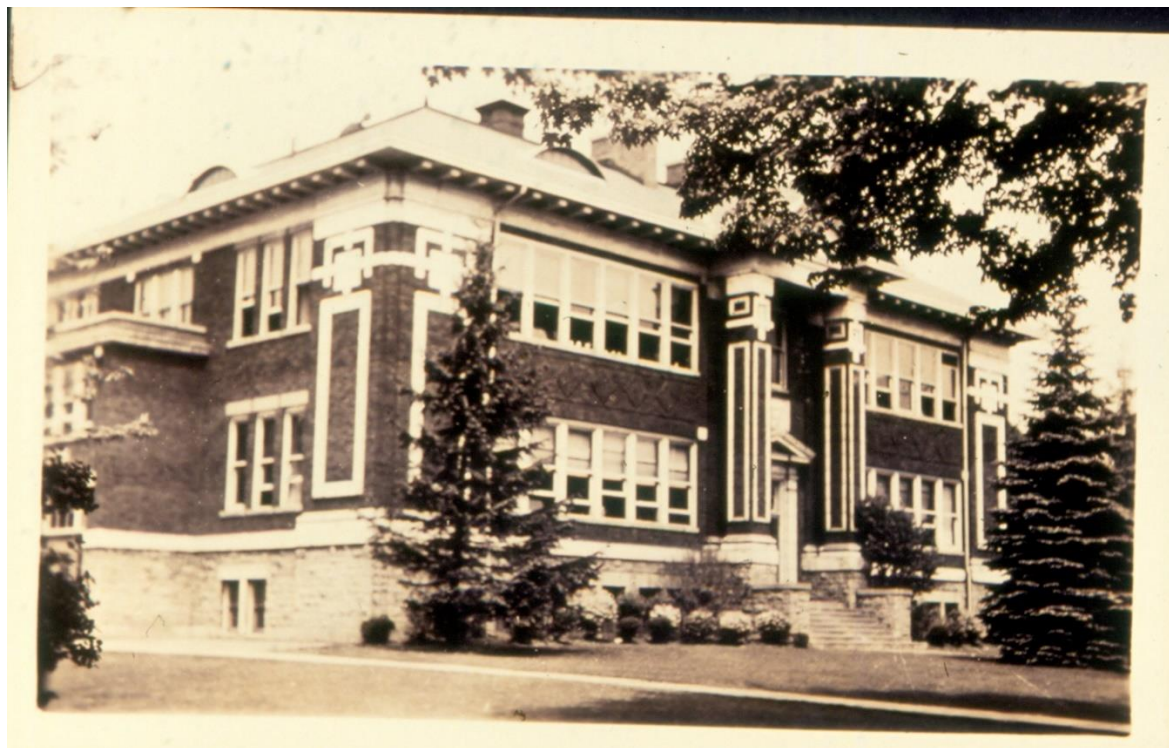
Appendix 1 1953 Fire Insurance Plan



Appendix 2 Photographs of Steele Street School, southeast view



2010.3.157.90 (c.1920)



2015.3.5.37 (c.1920)

Appendix 3



Appendix 4 1979 Heritage Inventory and Assessment Project Contact Prints



Bibliography

Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada: Borter, Charles Martin

<http://dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org/node/1162>

Cerenzia, Ivana, et al. *Early Education and Port Colborne*, Port Colborne Historical and Marine Museum, 1977.