

## LeMarchant Road: An Enclave of Mid-Century Modernist Structures in St. John's, NL



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*Research and writing for this report was completed in 2017. It was edited for publication in 2021.*

### Introduction

The 1940s brought significant change to St. John's. An influx of American and Canadian troops, who established bases in and around St. John's during the war, brought with them North American cultural influences and contributed to a booming economy and population growth. With this came new ways of thinking about buildings. The city's traditional Georgian and Victorian wood, brick and stone residential and commercial structures gradually gave way to buildings of a "Modernist" design. Often built of concrete and steel, these structures generally had little in the way of decoration with the exception of a number of Art Deco buildings.

Modernist architecture sought to break with the styles and "excessive" decorative treatments of the past and to employ a "modern" industrial

aesthetic where form was a direct expression of function. Some of the early modern buildings in the city reflected the Art Deco style, characterized by sleek lines but also fine craftsmanship, and a pastiche of decorative styles that represented luxury, glamour, exuberance, and faith in social and technological progress.

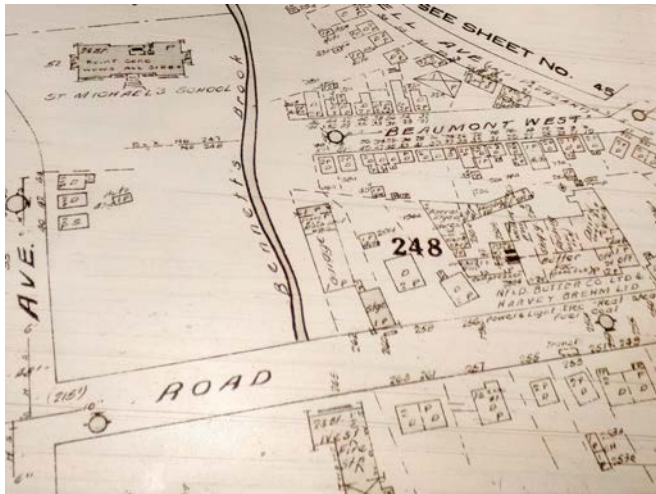
A cluster of buildings near the intersection of Bennett Avenue and LeMarchant Road are a testament to this era in St. John's which saw the city expand rapidly in the west end. While most have been changed over the years and have lost some of their original features, the simple elegance and refinement of these buildings remain. Most were designed by the St. John's architectural firm of McCarter and Colbourne which give these buildings a certain cohesion.

*Below: An aerial photograph of the subject stretch of LeMarchant Rd. L-R: McCarter House, American Aerated Water Company, Cornwall Theatre, Cox House, Automobile Showroom, West Fire Station (opposite).*

*Source: Atlantic Guardian 5(4), July 1948, 14.*



For a more detailed look at this era of architecture in Newfoundland and Labrador see Robert Mellin's 2011 book, *Newfoundland Modern: Architecture in the Smallwood Years 1949-1972* which was a source for much of the information in this report.



**An excerpt from a 1946 insurance map depicting the corner of LeMarchant Rd. and Bennett Ave. West Fire Hall (bottom middle) and St. Michael's (top left) have already been constructed.**  
Source: *The Rooms Archives*.

## Structures

### West Fire Station (265 LeMarchant Rd.)

William D. McCarter and Frederick A. Colbourne



**West Fire Station in the early 1960s.**  
Source: *The Rooms Archives*.

The earliest of the buildings in this cluster, the West Fire Station, was first conceived in January 1940 to service new development in the west end

of St. John's. Newfoundland's Chief of Police recognized that the city was moving westward and suggested three possible locations to replace the deteriorated Western Station on New Gower. High demand for land in the area of LeMarchant and Bennett increased the price of the two most desirable parcels. A portion of land at the rear of the government's Highroads Garage was unenthusiastically selected to be the station's site as it would have to be built immediately adjacent to an active brook. In addition to deliberating on an effective location, the Chief explored ideas to modernize accommodations from those that existed at the old Western Station. The building program for the new structure called for horse stables which the project architect opposed, "as the presence of horses in the same building is objectionable for many reasons" (Mellin 2011, 30).

Initial plans for the station were provided by Montreal architect A. J. C. Paine. The final construction plans were completed in April 1942 by local architect William D. McCarter and his draughtsman, Frederick A. Colbourne. On its upper floor, the two-storey structure was designed to house fifteen firemen and three officers. Below, a 55-foot, three-bay garage would house the station's equipment, with 12 feet. of additional accommodation for three horses. Horses were deemed more effective at hauling fire-fighting equipment through heavy snow than the fire trucks of the period. A full basement and hose tower were also included.

The station's facade was simple with subtle design elements including a slightly recessed row of upper windows and large, rounded columns that separated the three garage bays. Glass block, a common modernist material, was used for the transom and sidelights of the main entrance. The building's sign, located above the garage doors, was fabricated in individual steel letters projecting from the building in a clean, modern font.

The war effort delayed construction. Originally the building had been designed as a steel structure but steel shortages led to a change in design in 1942 to reinforced concrete. Difficulties in accessing steel reinforcing bars further delayed construction until the summer of 1944. During



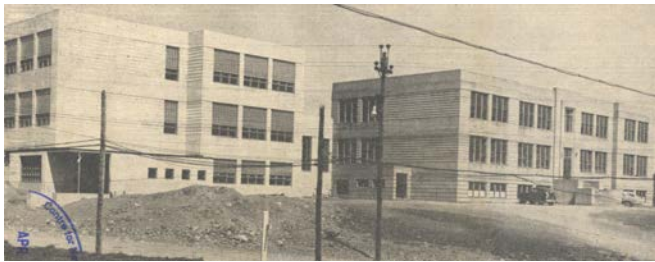
this time, plans for the horse stables were moved from inside of the equipment garage to the basement level, accessible at the lower west side of the station. The building was finally occupied by the Fire Department the following summer.

A number of problems arose in the years after the West Fire Station's construction. As the structure settled, multiple cracks opened in its concrete joints which leaked when engines were washed or rain blew in. Additionally, its placement adjacent to the brook left the basement prone to flooding. When the storm drains of Lemarchant were clogged, water would rush down into this level and destroy all the horse feed and leave behind a layer of silt.

In June of 1973 the front facade's eastern-most column was removed and two new aluminum garage doors were installed onto the station. Since then, the glass blocks around the main entrance have been removed as well but the basic sense of the original design remains.

### **St. Michael's Anglican School, later I.J. Samson Jr. High (Bennett Ave.)**

Frederick A. Colbourne



***St. Michael's/I.J. Samson Junior High in 1954 during construction of the new west wing.***

***Source: St. Michael's Shield, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, MUN***

As the city spread westward, additional schools were required in the area. Curtis Academy and St. Michael's Anglican School were the first to service this area of town. The former was built in a style common in the interwar period with somewhat classical detailing. St. Michael's, which later became I.J. Samson Jr. High, was, at the time of its construction, the largest Church of England school built in the province. It was designed by Colbourne in a much more pared-down fashion

than Curtis Academy. Its decoration was reduced to horizontal bands of recessed lines, a feature used by Colbourne on other buildings in the neighbourhood. The symmetrical two-storey structure was articulated with a slightly protruding central entrance and two side wings. Large window openings made of sets of three wood windows permitted lots of light to flood into the classrooms.

The school responded to the public's desire for more diverse programming than had previously been offered at most schools.

“bearing in mind the purpose in which the school was erected...we have refrained from offering one language and one science only, rather than an offering of two languages and two sciences as at present, . . . if you can prove to the people and the government that you are better citizens and better leaders because you have been educated in a large school, then other large schools will be built.” (George 1953)

By 1953 the already large school was struggling with overcrowding. The building, originally designed to accommodate 480, now held 780 pupils such that classes spilled into the halls and prospective students were being turned away (*Daily News* 1953). In 1954 a large west wing and auditorium were added, increasing overall capacity for classrooms as well as a dedicated space for sports, drama, and music. This addition employed Colbourne's horizontal banding and incorporated a large amount of glass block, common among his work of this period. This new wing supported an enrolment of 1028 in 1956.

“There is a School in Newfoundland,  
In the city it does stand,  
The School of St. Michael's is its name,  
Where Many pupils have won fame.  
Last year was built an extra wing  
In which we learn to play and sing,  
The classrooms are modern in every way,  
Compared with any School today.

The Auditorium when complete  
Will to the pupils be a treat,

Then of Physical Training we'll all partake,  
And stronger children thus will make."  
(Rendell 1954)

Since being acquired by the St. John's School Board in 1969, windows were replaced and a large skywalk connected the original and western structures on their second floor. In 2017 the building was demolished. While not a great architectural monument, the school, together with the other structures described in this article, formed a distinctive modernist precinct in the West End of St. John's, not to mention the memories that it held for many of its former students.

### **American Aerated Water Company (278 LeMarchant Rd.)**

Frederick A. Colbourne and William D. McCarter



*The AAWC is visible in the background of this 1956 photo of a Lions-Kiwanis safety patrol. Source: St. Michael's Shield, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, MUN.*

Another project by Colbourne and McCarter was the American Aerated Water Company (AAWC), a soda-bottling operation situated one block south of St. Michael's on Lemarchant Rd. The company commissioned the construction of the building after its operations outgrew its first location on Barter's Hill. A new drive to meet "international pure food standards" influenced the sleek, modern styling of the factory.

"[AAWC] began laying plans for...an ultra-modern plant that would not only be a credit to the industry but which upon its completion has proven to be an architectural triumph." (Who's Who 1948)

The factory was built by McCarter's own construction firm, the Clayton Construction Company, and incorporated a number of features typically found on Colbourne and McCarter's buildings of the period. According to Mellin:

"[the] building incorporated Art Deco and modernist detailing. At night, the soda-bottling operation was visible through the large front windows and the glow from the illuminated roof lantern turned the building into a local landmark. The central lantern or beacon comprised a cube with circular windows on all sides. Two wide, horizontally ribbed bands, corresponding to the heights of the first and second floor windows, were cast in the concrete, providing a horizontal emphasis. These bands contrast with pronounced verticals in the form of curved concrete fins that frame the front entrance" (Mellin 2011, 31)

These fins echoed the columns separating the garage doors of the fire hall across the road. The building also made ample use of glass block which served to screen the interior workings of the building from public view but which admitted lots of natural light.



*An AAWC ad published shortly before the move to LeMarchant Rd. Source: Newfoundland Board of Trade, Journal of Commerce, January 1946, 11.*



While the company's production quadrupled it closed its doors a short five years later. The building was purchased by the Smallwood government for \$215,000 and it has remained a provincial government office building ever since, housing several different departments over the years. Until 1966 its excavated basement and rear trucking bay were used as storage for the Board of Liquor Corporation. During this time a garage door was added to the front elevation and an elevator at the rear, allowing for easier movement of stock around the premises. By 1954 two sections of glass block windows had been removed from the West end of the building. In the last couple of decades the lantern/beacon was also removed.

**Cornwall Theatre (264 LeMarchant Rd.)**  
Luke, Little, and Mace (Montreal)



*The Cornwall Theatre as it appeared at its opening.*  
Source: The Daily News, October 1948.

The most decorative of the modernist structures in this precinct is the building that, since 1961, houses plumbing supplier Smith Stockley. The Cornwall Theatre was built between 1947 and 1948 in an Art Deco style from plans by architects Luke, Little, and Mace of Montreal, the same architects as 1944's Paramount Theatre on Harvey Rd. It was built by Concrete Products Limited of St. John's as something of a proof-of-concept for local concrete construction at a cost of \$90,000 (Newfoundland Board of Trade 1948, 7). The theatre opened on October 8th, 1948 to a screening of *Sun Valley Serenade*, a

film nominated for Best Cinematography and Best Music at the 1942 Academy Awards.

Oh, by the way, before I go, would you have a dime to lend me?  
You see, I want to go to the Cornwall this afternoon after school.  
JIM BUTLER, Grade X.

**Movie-going was a popular after-school activity among nearby students.**Source: The Curtis Academy Magazine, June 1951, 79.

On the exterior Art Deco features, all of cast-in-place concrete, included a band of curtain-like motifs spanning the facade's third storey, flanked by two crests of the same design, embossed with the letters "CT." Rather ornate, nine-pane windows occupied the second floor, their mullions were arranged as a hash-symbol, with a large square centre on hinges that could be opened. Below this, a large neon sign and semi-circular marquee sheltered the main glass doors and a set of cascading concrete stairs. The 926 theatre auditorium at the rear of the building was constructed of concrete block.

Inside, floors were covered by Kentile or carpet, and wall lights were hidden from view to provide soft illumination throughout the space. In case of power failure, a battery-powered backup system was installed to engage automatically. The outfitting of the Cornwall Theatre was supervised by Alec MacKenzie of United Movies Ltd., who was praised by The Evening Telegram and the Daily News for creating a state-of-the-art experience:

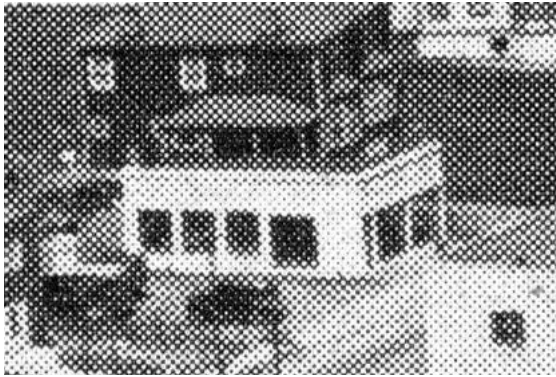
All in all, the New Cornwall Theatre is the last word in modern design and up to the minute layout. The fact that it is so completely equipped, despite present day shortages, reflects great credit on the owners and on Mr. Alec MacKenzie of United Movies Ltd. who has supervised the outfitting of this modern showplace.

**The Cornwall Theatre was an up-to-date and well-appointed facility when it opened in 1948.**  
Source: Evening Telegram, October 1948.

## The Neighbours

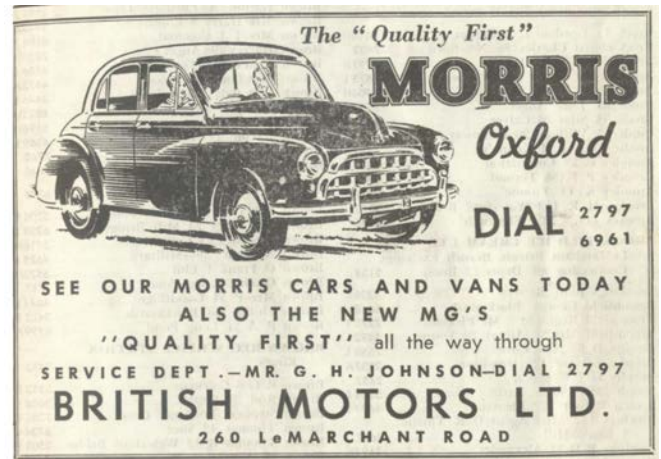
In addition to the four structures described above, several nearby structures were erected by the same architects and builders in the same period.

### Automobile Showroom (260 LeMarchant Rd.)



*View from aerial photo, page 1.*

The storefront at 260 Lemarchant Road dates to the late 1940s and was designed in a style similar to Le Corbusier's early work. Aside from its few window sills and small roof moulding, the cast-in-place structure was simply composed of plate-glass and a smooth, white, facade. A street-side glass wall vertically occupied two thirds of the front facade, and was separated by concrete columns set back an inch from the main form. Looking across the street, this method mimics that of the columns which separate the West Fire Station's garage bay. This building was designed to serve as an automobile showroom. It was first occupied by Hudson Motor Cars followed by British Motors which remained until 1955. With many windows bricked in and a second floor added, it is substantially changed. It remains today as a show-floor for Smith Stockley.



*This period ad employs a modern typeface reminiscent of the West Fire Station's signage.*

*Source: Telephone directory, 1954, Avalon Telephone Company Ltd., 31*

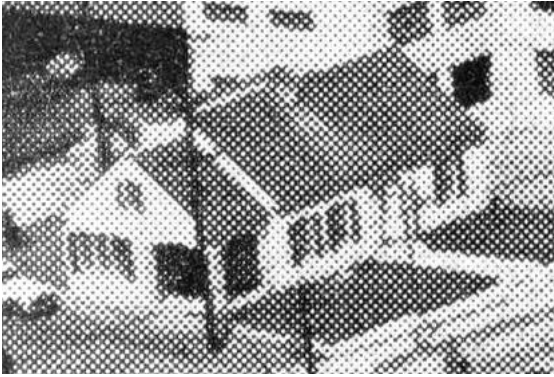
### Cox House (262 LeMarchant Rd.)



*View from aerial photo, page 1.*

Number 262, the residence adjacent to the Cornwall Theatre, was built for Arch E. Cox and his wife. Cox was the chief engineer at McCarter's Clayton Construction. Cox's home is unique compared to even the most contemporary residential architecture in St. John's at the time in its very simple cubist form. While clad in clapboard, there is no ornamentation in the way of window trim or corner boards. Like some of the other buildings described here, the second storey windows are slightly recessed from the front façade, creating a discrete shadow line.



**McCarter House (282 LeMarchant Rd.)***View from aerial photo, page 1.*

A building at the corner of Bennett and Lemarchant, also built by McCarter and, in fact constructed as the architect's residence, is something of an anomaly in the district. Built in 1948, the structure follows a vaguely Cape Cod style typical of what was found in many American suburbs of the time. It is curious that the architect of so many modern structures in St. John's chose as his home a more traditional building form. Today the building serves as a pharmacy and doctor's clinic.

**Brookfield Ice Cream Factory (316 LeMarchant Rd.)**

*The 1947 expansion of the Brookfield Ice Cream Factory, circa 1960s. Source: 11-01-276, City of St. John's Archives.*

Several doors down from the contiguous enclave described above are two further examples of mid-century construction. Brookfield Ice Cream had been established on LeMarchant Rd. since

1928 but was expanded in 1947 with a "playfully designed," Art Deco-inspired frontage (Mellin 2011, 137). The addition sported Pittsburgh Plate Glass's (PPG) "Vitrolite" glass cladding with glass block walls illuminating work areas as at the AAWC building. With this mid-century cladding now removed, the effect is conveyed today through a horizontal corrugated metal cladding in the original black-and-cream colour palette. A current development proposal would see the former factory demolished for the construction of a mid-size residential building.

**Grouchy's (340 LeMarchant Rd.)**

*Grouchy's as it appeared circa 1948. Source: Atlantic Guardian 5(3), June 1948, 47.*

The former Avalon Garage and Service Station, also known as Grouchy's after owner Frank Grouchy, is located a stone's throw from the Brookfield building. Built of cast-in-place concrete in 1929, Grouchy's exhibits Art Deco stylistic elements including the central rounded crest, stepped caps atop the repeated pilasters, and recessed rectangular panels along the frieze. The station, located on what was then on a major road artery leading in and out of the city, was meant to evoke the sleek sophistication of the automobile era. The building was eventually acquired by Brookfield (later Scotsburn) for use as a warehouse.

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