

## 73, 75, and 77 Water Street: Commercial History on East Water Street, St. John's.



Heritage NL

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By Juliet Lanphear

### Introduction

Located on East Water Street, this warehouse and commercial building was built following the Great Fire of 1892 and constructed of durable and fire-resistant materials of brick and stone. With three separate civic addresses, 73, 75, and 77 Water Street has served as a warehouse, office, and commercial space for various companies in its 130-year history.



**Fig #1. Photo of 73, 75, and 77 Water Street, undated (unknown).**

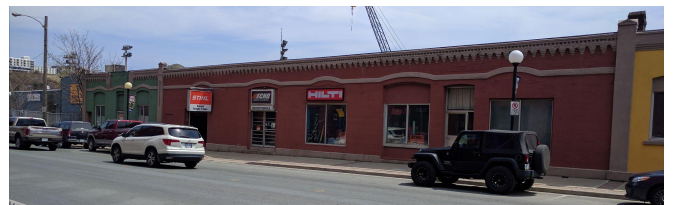
The building is located directly next to Gill's Cove and the St. John's harbour, and several historic buildings and sites, including the Newfoundland National War Memorial, the King George V Building, the Crows Nest and the S.O. Steele Building. 73, 75, and 77 Water Street was designated a Registered Heritage Structure by the Heritage NL in 2008.



**Fig #2. Photograph of the War Memorial Unveiling in 1924, with 73, 75, and 77 Water in the background (Memorial University Geography Collection, 2008).**

### Building Design

Despite being constructed as a commercial building/warehouse, 73, 75, and 77 Water Street displays several unique design elements.



**Fig #3. 73, 75, and 77 Water Street (Heritage NL, 2017).**

A brick stringcourse runs the length of the building along the front, and embossed brick dentils top the main façade, with each civic address having a different brick treatment. Each separate address is also painted a different colour, running green, red, and yellow from East to West, and are separated by pilasters that extend above the roof. The building is

single-story in the front and two-storeys in the back due to the ground's slope.

## Building History

### 1880s: Wharves and Boarding Houses

According to the St. John's fire map from 1880, in the location of the current 73, 75, and 77 Water Street were several attached buildings, including a veneered wooden grocer and a brick boarding house with the civic numbers 77 and 81 Water Street (Goad 1880). They were located in front of Gill's Wharf, owned by McDougall and Templeton, numbered 91. The wharf further east, 92, was owned by W&G Rendell.



**Fig #4. 1880 St. John's Fire Map (Goad 1880).**

### 1892: The Great Fire and Rebuilding



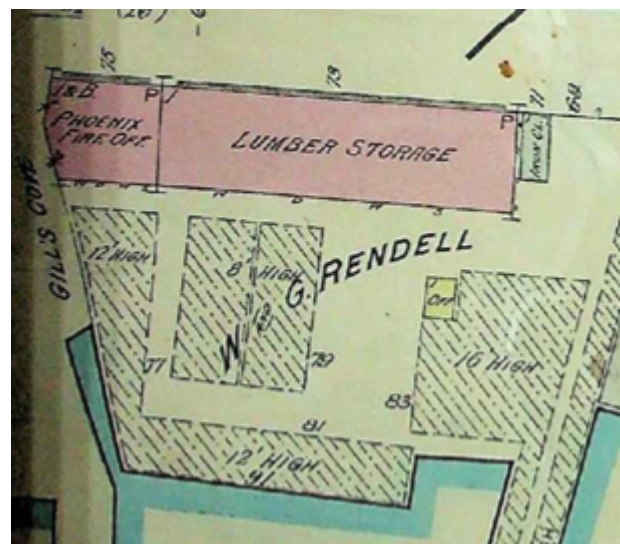
**Fig #5. Picture of Downtown St. John's after the Fire of 1892 (MUN DAI).**

On the afternoon of July 8th, 1892, a small fire broke out in a stable near the top of Carters Hill (Higgins 2007). Firefighters were unable to combat the fire as the closest water tank had been emptied during a recent practice drill and had not been refilled. Hydrants also could not be used to combat the fire due to low water pressure,

as the city water supply had been shut off earlier in the day to add new pipes (Baker 1984). Hot, dry weather and high winds helped to spread the fire and by 8 pm, it had spread to downtown, destroying large sections, including the wharves and their contents (Higgins 2007). By morning, over 2/3rds of St. John's was destroyed by the fire, and 11,000 people were made homeless.

Following the 1892 fire, large sections of St. John's had to be rebuilt. New buildings were constructed using flame-resistant materials due to legislation passed following the Fire of 1846, which required new buildings on Water Street to be built of stone or brick, with slate roofs and to include fire breaks (Collier 2022). Immediately after the Fire of 1892, the Reconstruction Act was passed, which stated that all buildings on the south sides of Duckworth and George Streets must also be constructed of stone or brick (Collier 2022).

According to the City of St. John's fire map of 1893, different buildings were now located east of Gill's Cove from the ones in 1880 (Goad 1893). The previous structures, which were slanted inwards in the rear and were three separate but attached buildings, were likely destroyed in the 1892 fire along with other large sections of downtown St. John's. The attached buildings to the east in 1880, owned by merchant firm W&G Rendell, were completely destroyed in the fire (Riggs 2000).



**Fig #6. 1893 St. John's Fire Map (Goad 1893).**

In the 1893 fire map, the structures directly east of Gill's Cove are numbered 73 and 75 Water Street. 73 Water Street was a large rectangular building that spans what is now 73 and 75 Water Street and was marked as lumber storage. The buildings and rear lot were owned in 1893 by W&G Rendell. Both buildings were made of brick with a brick parapet wall on the front and composition roofs.

The building directly next to Gill's Cove, 75 Water Street, was the Phoenix Fire Insurance Office. The Phoenix Fire Insurance Office was a British fire insurance company originally founded in England in the 17th Century which had agents in North America starting in the early 1800s (Weaver and De Lottinville 1980). The local Phoenix Fire agents for St. John's were W&G Rendell, dating back to 1877 (Rochfort 1877).

PHOENIX ASSURANCE CO., LTD. OF LONDON  
Covering you with Accident Insurance at Lowest Rates.  
**W. & G. RENDELL, Agents**

**Fig #7. W. & G. Rendell and Phoenix Fire Insurance advertisement from St. John's City Directory (Thomson and Button 1932).**

The Phoenix Fire Insurance Company Office was located in the western address of 73, 75, and 77 Water Street until 1946 but was no longer at that location by 1967 according to fire records (Underwriters' Survey Bureau Limited 1946; Canadian Underwriters' Association 1967).

### The Rendell Family

The first owners of 73, 75, and 77 Water Street was the merchant firm of W&G Rendell, started by brothers George and William (Riggs 2000). George Rendell was born in 1826 in Ringmore, Devon and at age 16 he migrated to Newfoundland where he entered into service with the St. John's based mercantile operation, Job Brothers and Company (Riggs 2000). In 1861, George and his brother, William, established their own business as general and commission merchants and acted as property and insurance agents. Little is known about the life of William Rendell. George Rendell was also a politician who supported Robert Thorburn's Reform Party and was a member of the Legislative Council (Riggs

2000). George Rendell's private home was located on the corner of Cochrane Street and Military Road and is now known as the Rendell Shea Manor.

George Rendell was married to Mary Wix Wood, and their daughter, Margaret Alexandra Rendell, was the first Newfoundland-born professionally trained nurse and the General Hospital matron of St. John's (Riggs 2000).

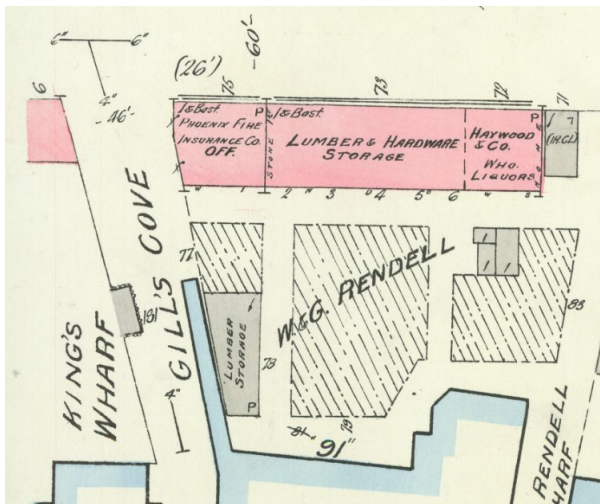


**Fig #8. Photograph of Margaret Rendell Shea (Women's History Group 1999).**

Margaret would later marry politician George Shea, who served as the first mayor of St. John's and an MHA and cabinet minister. Besides being Newfoundland's first professionally trained nurse, Margaret was one of the first women in Newfoundland to obtain a driver's license (Riggs 2000).

### Changes in the Early 20th Century

According to city fire maps in 1914 the wharf and buildings were still owned by W&G Rendell, but 73 Water had been divided in two with a wood or lath and plaster partition (Goat 1914). Split into 72 and 73 Water Street, 72 was Haywood and Company wholesale liquor. The larger middle building, 73, was lumber and hardware storage while 75 Water Street was still the Phoenix Fire Insurance Company Office.



**Fig #9. 1914 City of St. John's Fire Map (Goad 1914).**

The building numbers for the structures changed in 1925, when what was 72 became 73, 73 became 75A, and 75 remained the same.

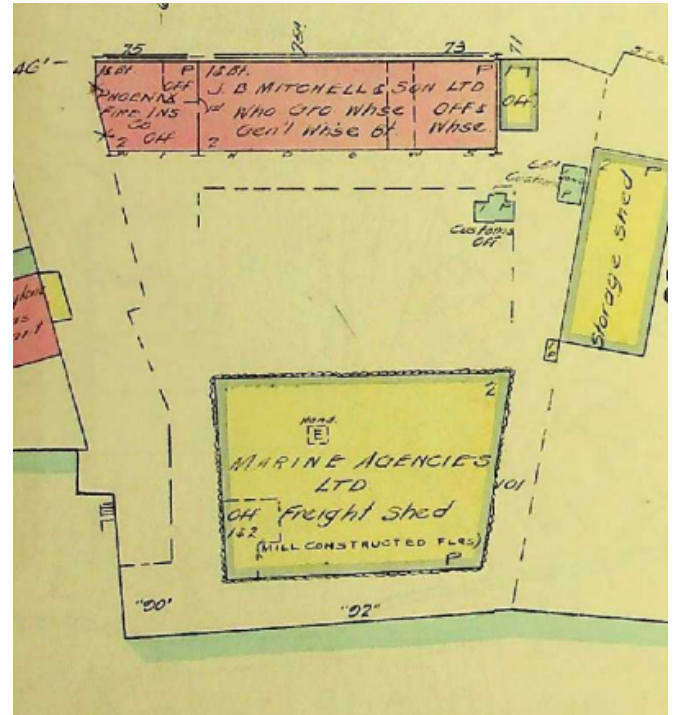


**Fig #10. 1925 City of St. John's Fire Map (Underwriters' Survey Bureau Limited 1925).**

73 Water Street was an unspecified office separated by plaster from 75A, which was a paint and hardware warehouse. The basement of 75A was listed as a general warehouse. A 1928 St. John's city directory identifies 73 Water Street as the office of commercial agent Fred Harris (Newfoundland Directories 1928). 75 remains the office of Phoenix Fire Insurance Company. According to the city directory until 1928, the building was still owned by W&G Rendell (Newfoundland Directories 1928).

By 1932, W&G Rendell was no longer listed at 73, 75, and 77 Water Street but at a different location at 274 Water Street, where they were advertised as Phoenix Fire Insurance Agents (Thomson and Button 1932). The listed occupants for the building, which were all under 73 Water Street, included Avalon Cold Storage Company, J

Quinton (agent), Colin Campbell (limited agents), and J.B. Mitchell and Son (agents). Several other businesses were listed under 73 Water Street, but some were likely located behind the building by the harbour.



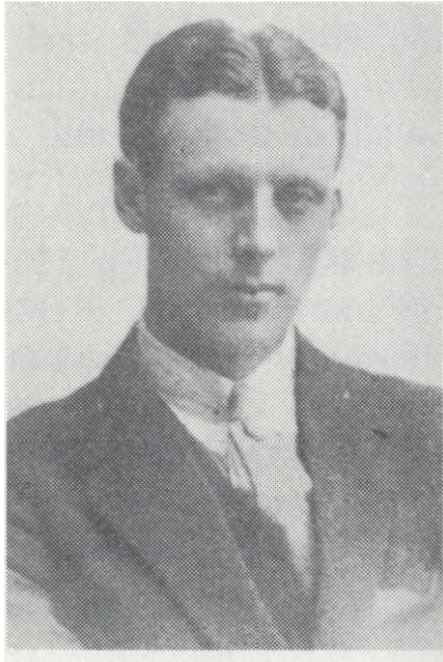
**Fig #11. 1946 City of St. John's Fire Map (Underwriters' Survey Bureau Limited 1946).**

## The Mitchell Family

J.B. Mitchell and Son was a brokerage agency started by John B. Mitchell, which was later taken over by his son Harold Mitchell in 1920. Harold Mitchell was a WWI veteran wounded at Gallipoli and was one of the founders and first president of the Great War Veterans Association (Smallwood 1991). In 1932, Mitchell was elected MHA for Trinity South as a Conservative, where he served one term.

John B. Mitchell's wife, Anna Mary (Barnes) Mitchell, was a key suffragist in NL in the 1920s. The "Votes for Women" campaign was founded in the Mitchell's living room, which culminated in a petition with 1700 signatures fighting for women's right to vote. Although the petition was thrown out of the Newfoundland parliament, Anna Mitchell was told to go home and "learn how to bake bread" (Smallwood 1991). Beginning in 1925,

Newfoundland women over 25 were allowed to vote.



**Fig #12. Photograph of Harold Mitchell (Smallwood et al. 1991).**

## Later History

According to the 1946 fire map for St. John's, the building was still 73, 75A, and 75 Water Street. 73 is the office for J.B. Mitchell and Son, while 75A is their wholesale grocery warehouse. 75 is the Phoenix Fire Company Office. The fire map for 1967 is the same, except 75 is now an unidentified office (Canadian Underwriters' Association 1967).

73, 75, and 77 Water Street is still a commercial business and is now the location for Hiscock Rentals and Sales, a repair and service center for tools and equipment, and Party Time, a party equipment store.

## Notes

Copies of the City of St. John's Insurance Plans/Fire Maps are available at the city of St. John's archives or on their website.

<https://www.stjohns.ca/en/recreation-culture/insurance-plans.aspx?mid=9234>

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