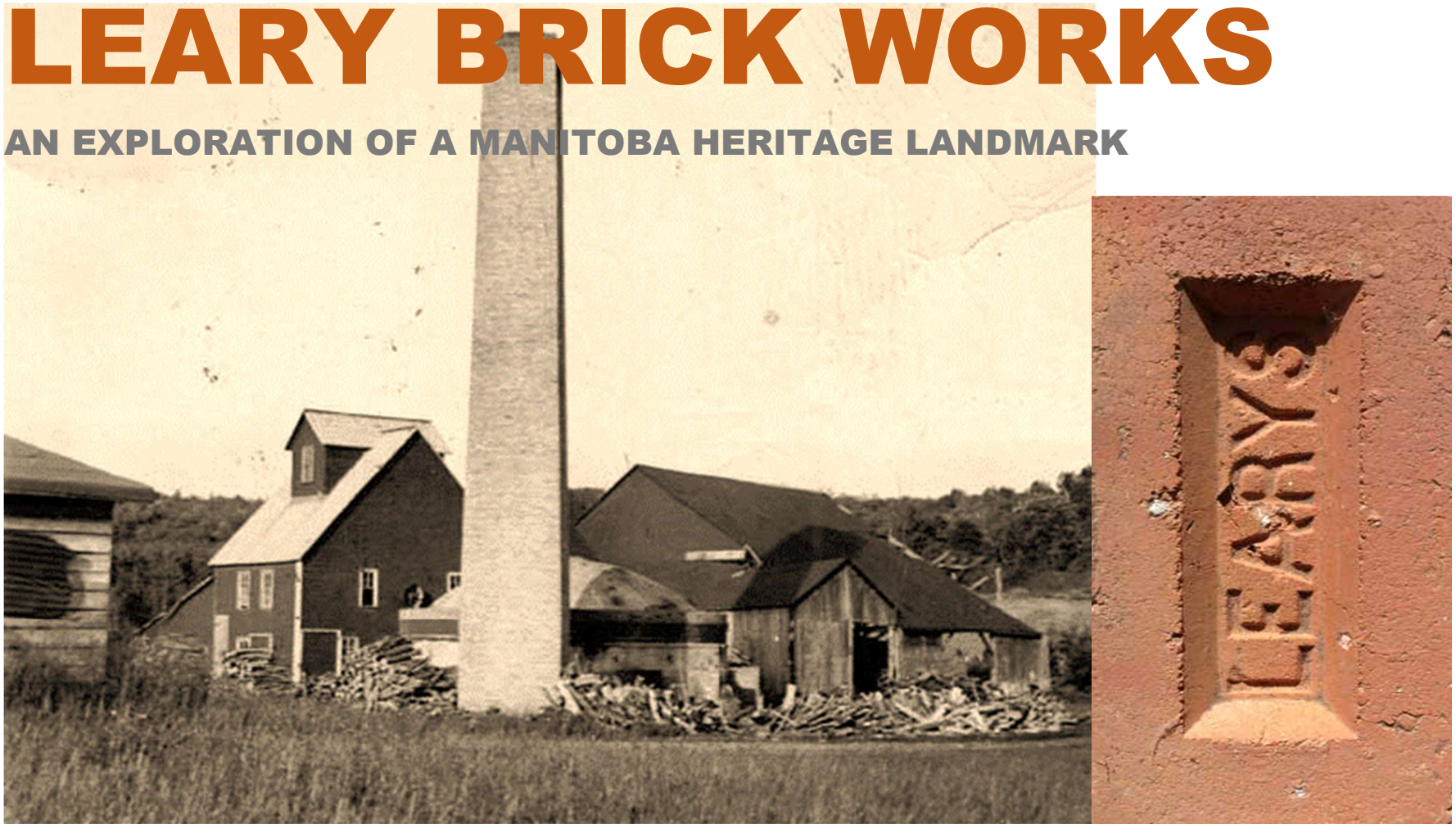
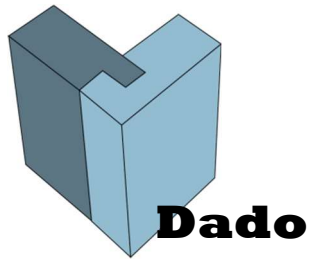


LEARY BRICK WORKS

AN EXPLORATION OF A MANITOBA HERITAGE LANDMARK



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Learys Brick Works, An Exploration of a Manitoba Heritage Landmark has been developed by Dado Projects, a Manitoba heritage research initiative of Maureen Devanik and David Butterfield. These projects are supported by Heritage Manitoba, an informal coalition of municipal heritage associations dedicated to the appreciation and preservation of Manitoba's history. The project is part of a series focusing on Manitoba's early industrial development, especially in small-town or rural situations. Other projects in the series include:

- The Former Manitou Gas Company Plant
- The James White Sash and Door Factory of Carberry
- John Gunn's Water Mill
- St. Peter's Dynevor Windmill

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On the Cover: View of the Leary Brick Works, ca. 1946, and a Learys brick from its 1947-52 incarnation.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1900, George Leary purchased a large piece of property in the Pembina Hills, about four miles west and slightly south of the village of Roseisle, and about 20 miles from the larger community of Carman. It is not clear if Mr. Leary knew what he ultimately was going to do with this land. He was not a farmer; in fact his training (in Ontario) was in education, and from 1890 until the early 1900s, several years after he had arrived in Manitoba, he had been in the employ of the provincial government in Winnipeg, as an accountant in the Treasury department, and for several years as a grain buyer in partnership with Rodmond Roblin (who would become Manitoba Premier in 1903). And between 1893 and 1895, Leary (with his family), resided in Ireland, where he had responsibilities as a Dominion immigration agent.

But the Pembina Hills property (technically 13-6-8W in land titles parlance) was not completely unknown to George Leary. He had relatives nearby – his in-laws John and Catherine Ager, parents of his wife Armintha. And for nearly a decade after his arrival in Manitoba he had been one of the pioneers and stalwarts in an early pre-railway community called Nelsonville (to the south of his new purchase), where, from 1874 until the demise of the town in 1885, he operated a general store and was local postmaster. It was from this situation that George and Armintha had made their way to live in Winnipeg for at least 20 years, and where they raised their family (of four boys and one girl, with three children dying in infancy).

So he was familiar with the country, and of the various opportunities for commercial activity – not just as a farmer, but as a storekeeper, or hotelkeeper, or blacksmith, or livery stable operator. Likely he was aware of another familiar money-making venture that seemed primed for decades of activity and success: brick-making. By the time of his residence in Nelsonville, there was a nascent brick industry in the province – with one short-lived operation near Nelsonville itself (of a Mr. Moran, which produced rough bricks likely only for chimneys, in 1880 and 1881) and well-known operators in Morris, Dominion City, Emerson, Portage la Prairie, and of course in Winnipeg where at least three large firms (Manitoba Brick, Disbrowe & Foxley and McDonald & Holley) were active and productive through the 1870s and early 1880s.

And as it turned out, the newly acquired Leary property in fact was the location of a very fine deposit of friable clay, and even more importantly of high-quality shale, both key components of two distinct types of brick-making at this period of history.



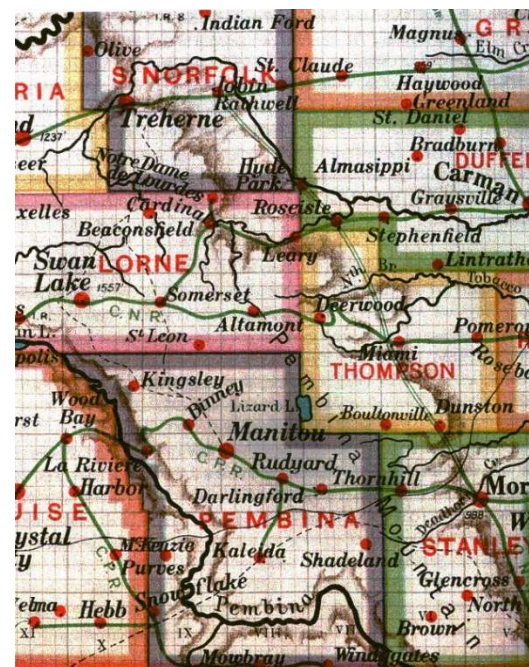
George Leary and Armintha Loretta Ager on their wedding day, March 29, 1880. At this time the Learys lived in Nelsonville. “Mint,” as George called her, was born in Napanee Ontario on September 15, 1864 and had come to Manitoba with her parents in 1876. The Ager family lived northeast of Nelsonville at Ager Corner, the site of Ager School and Ager Church.

In 1900, and through 1901, as George Leary began working on his own brick-making enterprise – planning the operation, gaining the necessary capital, co-ordinating the required skilled labour – he was active at the very moment when Manitoba’s brick-making industry was attaining its greatest level of activity and productive success.* In 1900 there were 38 firms operating in the province, 37 active in 1901, 35 in 1902, and 36 in 1903. And in the years 1904 and 1905 there were 46 Manitoba brick firms, the highest level of activity ever attained, turning out millions and millions of bricks that were required for the burgeoning building needs not only in Manitoba but in the fast-growing territories and provinces further west.

So Mr. Leary’s entry into the field was propitious. And his operation was a success, amongst many other brick factory successes. Throughout this period, from 1900 until the onset of World War I, in 1914, Manitoba’s brick-making industry was characterized by a wealth of factory sizes, brick-making infrastructure and technologies, innovation, marketing, and wealth. Many of the firms were small and short-lived operations, but many were of medium size and highly productive (like the Leary site), and at least 13 were major operations – seven in Winnipeg and St. Boniface, but also at rural and small-town sites at Edrans, Morris, La Riviere, two in Portage la Prairie and at Sidney.

But this enormous success, and stupendous levels of production, was not to last. The 1914 cut-off date noted here marked the beginning of the end for the industry in Manitoba. The outset of WWI disrupted economic activity, in particular building projects. And the manpower shortage caused by four years of war-time military duty had a drastic effect even on those operations that struggled through the war-years (Learys was one of these). And so by the end of the war, in 1918, the whole landscape for brick-making in Manitoba had been transformed. Only a handful of firms made a go of it into the 1920s, and then the Great Depression of the 1930s wiped even more operations into oblivion.

* As will be noted in the next section, these observations have been drawn from a publication developed by David Butterfield entitled *Manitoba Brick: A History of Brick Manufacturing in Manitoba, 1860-1990*.



This old municipal map of the area shows the Town of Carman at the right-hand side, toward the top. Heading west, following the thicker black line that marks the Boyne River, one can read the community names of Roseisle and a bit further west and south, the site of Leary. The railway had just reached Roseisle in 1901, and was continuing west through the valley in 1902.

Only one of the old firms made it through the war-years and into the 1950s and even to the 1970s, with handsome levels of production: Alsips (using raw materials from the old yards at Sidney and the Snyder yard in Portage la Prairie). The yard at Edrans, National Clay Products, made a go of it to the late 1940s. And the Leary yard itself had a second life from 1947 to 1952, when George's son William refurbished the brick plant and kiln and turned out several million bricks over six seasons of operation. A new yard established at Whitemouth in 1923 was highly productive even through the 1930s and made it all the way to 1957 before closing. But the last of Manitoba's brick factories, Alsips, finally closed in 1972, and a latecomer, with roots in Alberta, called Red River Brick and Tile, which set up shop in Lockport from 1971 to 1990, marked the very last brick firing in the province.

Mr. Butterfield's study enumerates more than 200 brick factory sites that once dotted all kinds of locations across southern Manitoba, with large and impressive complexes in Winnipeg, St. Boniface, Portage la Prairie, Sidney, Edrans (near Neepawa), Whitemouth, La Riviere, and Morris. And that study also reveals the almost complete eradication of any remnants of this once-vibrant industry. The utilitarian brick plant at Lockport (the last operational site in Manitoba, which closed in 1990) is still standing, now used for storage, but the once regal set of tunnels kilns are all gone. There are some subterranean and foundation tunnel remnants at Sidney, Edrans and Whitemouth, and in many old brick factory sites one can still find old broken brick bits, maybe even a whole brick. But the great kiln complexes and brick plants that once stood in so many places are all gone.



A 2013 view of one of the firing tunnels that remains at the Sidney brick site. Courtesy Manitoba Historical Society.

It is this sorry state of affairs—the loss of actual sites and even building and mechanical artifacts—that makes the Leary site of enormous significance – for it is the only remaining place in Manitoba that contains the raw materials site, but also all of the necessary infrastructure for brick manufacture – the drying shed, the brick plant, the kiln and the chimney. And all of the brick-making machinery, ca. 1900—like the shale crusher and brick press, both enormous and complex pieces of industrial technology—are also in place. All of these buildings and components, moreover, are very nearly intact, and able to reveal all of the complexity and ingenuity that went into their design, manufacture and operation. It is truly an astonishing legacy, allowing us to see (and even touch) a vital aspect of our heritage that is now mostly completely gone, and if truth be told, mostly forgotten.

It must be acknowledged that the unique opportunity via this project is likely the last chance to safely explore the site. George Leary’s old brick operation last fired a successful kiln-full of bricks in the fall of 1952. An attempt to revive the factory in 1962, by Erven Tallman, ended in



Contemporary view of the Leary Brick Works site, looking to the southwest, and showing the chimney, kiln and on the left the brick plant. The rising terrain in the background, shrouded in autumn foliage, was the site of the shale outcrop used in brick production.

a failed firing. And so the factory, its buildings and machinery, have been silent, and vacant, for nearly 60 years. And while the Leary family, including members who worked at the site in the late 1940s and early 1950s, have attempted to keep the place stable, and slightly viable in the hopes of some kind of heritage salvation, there is little that can be done for a place whose rarefied function has ceased, and whose re-use options are very limited.

But while it still stands—and it must be said that even open to the elements and heaving and cracking, beaten by wind, rain and snow, it might actually stand for another 50 years—this remarkable place still offers enough of its former glory to ensure that this project can describe its operation, and especially through photographs and drawings, convey a complete and accurate record of its every feature and detail.

This project has been organized via three main sections, and chapters: the first section, Manitoba's Brick Industry, contains a brief overview of the evolution of Manitoba's brick-making technologies; a short review of ancillary brickyard activities (like production claims, workforce and financial aspects); followed by a brief history of the province's brick-making industry during the period of Leary's primary activity (1897-1917). These three chapters not only provide interesting context and historical background about Manitoba's fascinating brick-making industry, but also feature information and images that will be useful for a more meaningful understanding of the Leary operation. The second section, Background, contains five chapters: a brief biography of the Leary family, two entries containing documentary information on the Leary operation; and then two final chapters on the development of the site and its overall features. The last section, The Leary Brick Works, presents eight chapters that focus on an overview of the brick-making operation, via its two incarnations (1902-17 and 1947-52); and via a careful and close analysis of the site's buildings and machinery – to get at the granular details of how this kind of essential Victorian-era industry actually worked. These chapters feature a major collection of photographs and measured technical drawings that ensure as accurate a rendering of this special place as is possible. A Conclusion provides some final thoughts on the site, the project, and potential uses for the information developed here.

It is the last section that is the main thrust of this project, and the result of many hours of close on-site inspections, with the patient attendance of William Leary's daughter, Ina (Leary) Bramadat, and with some long-distance observations and clarifications from William's son Carl. The author is also grateful to the current owners of the site – Lynette and Murray Shaw, whose own connection to the Learys is via Lynette's late father, Donald, another of William's sons.



A Leary brick. The operation actually had four distinct names over its life:

- Boyne Valley Brick Works (1901-1905)
- Dominion Pressed Brick Company (1905-1910)
- Learys Brick Company (1910-1917)
- Leary Brick Works (1947-1953)