

288 McDERMOT AVENUE – WILSON BUILDING (ALLEN BUILDING)
John Woodman, 1905



This is a six-storey brick building constructed in 1905 for the J.C. Wilson Company, a Quebec-based paper products manufacturer and wholesaler, is one component in a well-integrated series of turn-of-the-century buildings on the south side of McDermot Avenue between Princess and King streets in Winnipeg's warehouse district.

The Wilson interests, formed in 1870, made a wide range of domestic and commercial paper products at mills in Montreal, Lachute and St. Jerome. The firm established its western wholesale operations in Winnipeg in 1902, subsequently expanding to its new office, shipping and show-room space at 288 McDermot.

This structure is one of John Woodman's earlier designs as a commercial architect. Woodman, an Ontarian, arrived in Winnipeg in 1880 with the Canadian Pacific Railway, eventually becoming chief engineer of the western division. He left the railway in 1901 to establish his practice. Alone, or in partnership with Raymond Carey or A.E. Cubbidge, he was responsible for several major office, warehouse and residential projects including the Paris, Lindsay, Somerset, Free Press and Public Press buildings, and the Breadalbane (Ambassador) Apartments.

Woodman worked on the Wilson Building with Peter Lyall and Company, one of the city's prominent contractors specializing in large commercial projects. Later known as Lyall and Mitchell, this firm also specialized in the use of machine- and hand-cut stone crafted at its own yards in Winnipeg. Both cutting techniques are evident in the Wilson project.

Built for \$75,000, the structure is in the Richardsonian Romanesque style. It has raised stone foundation and buff-coloured brick masonry walls which taper off in thickness at the upper storeys. Consistent with its contemporaries, the building's façade features a tripartite order starting with three massive stone arches around the main-floor windows and entrance, followed by symmetrically placed pairs of windows in three bays, and a deep copper cornice topped by a brick parapet.

The arches, carved in a smooth, grey-beige Bedford stone, contain a stylized floral form in each keystone. Heavy columns with foliated capitals carry the arches to broad plinths at grade. Metal fencing lines the base of the arches over the main-floor windows, separating the sidewalk traffic from the recessed basement windows. Two carved bronze plaques are set in the ashlar stone between arches. The entrance features broad granite steps leading to double wooden doors with long, clear side windows and a fan transom with elegant tracery. The building's name and date are carved in the entrance-way arch.

Brick quoins highlight the sides of the façade on the upper storeys, distinguishing the building from its neighbours. Windows are topped by stone voussoirs that fan out in alternating flat and slightly projecting blocks from pronounced keystones. A string course separates the fifth and

sixth floors. Windows on the rear (south) elevation repeat the pattern but are finished plainly with brick voussoirs.

The Wilson Company originally occupied the basement and first floor while various tenants were on the upper levels, including Mark Fisher and Sons, a wholesale woollen merchant.

The building was damaged during a spectacular mishap in 1909. A recently-installed roof-top water tank servicing the automatic sprinkler system crashed through the southwest corner of the building to the basement one evening in July. Some \$6,000 in repairs were required to restore the partially collapsed structure. In 1910, Woodman worked with the Carter-Halls-Aldinger Company to install an independent steel tower and support system.

The Wilson interests relocated to west Winnipeg in 1946 after which the structure was renamed the Allen Building. The firm had never occupied more than three floors of 288 McDermot, leasing the remainder of the space to long-standing tenants such as the Mark Fisher and Toronto Pharmacal companies. Various firms in the garment trade established factories in the building in the 1940s. Altman, Sheps and Company, a dry goods wholesaler, has been located here since 1978.