



**288 McDERMOT AVENUE  
ALLEN BUILDING  
(FORMERLY: WILSON BUILDING)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

September 20, 1986

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The portion of McDermot Avenue between Princess and King Streets presents a well-integrated streetscape of turn-of-the century buildings in a visual union of scale, materials, design and function. This large brick warehouse is one of those structures.

It was constructed in 1905 as the warehouse and office of the J.C. Wilson Company, a paper products wholesale. Designed by local architect John Woodman (see Appendix I), this was one of Woodman's earlier commercial designs. He is better known for his more elaborate works such as the Lindsay Building in 1912 and the Paris Building in 1915 to 1917. On this building, he worked with one of the city's most prominent firm of contractors, Peter Lyall and Company. Later known as Lyall and Mitchell, the contractors specialized in larger commercial projects, including the construction of Union Station and the Bank of Commerce, both on Main Street. They also specialized in the use of cut stone, evident on all three of these buildings, and operated their own stone yards in the city rather than depending on suppliers. Employing between sixty and one hundred craftsmen in their stone works, the company divided its operation into machine cut stone utilizing steam driven equipment, and hand-cut stone.<sup>1</sup> Both of these techniques can be seen on the Wilson Building.

Constructed at a cost of \$75,000.00 the new Wilson Building was described as "one of the very handsomest wholesales" on which no expense was spared in making it attractive and modern.<sup>2</sup> Measuring fifty feet along McDermot Avenue and 126 feet deep, the building rises six storeys in heavy mill construction. Its stone foundation includes a raised basement that gave the structure seven working floors. The brick walls of the lower three floors are twenty-one inches thick, tapering only to a less massive width of seventeen inches for the upper floors.<sup>3</sup> It was designed for the heavy floor loads of various wholesale requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Enormous Growth of Industrial and Wholesale in Winnipeg in 1905," Manitoba Free Press 30 October 1905, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> "Wholesale Houses Make Big Showing," Manitoba Free Press, 6 December 1906, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 576, 27 April 1905.

The façade of the building is divided into three sections, in a popular fashion of the time. Particular care was taken in the design of the first floor, where three massive stone arches define the windows and door with an impression of dignity and commercial stability. The architecture was visible proof of the company's commitment to the city. The arches, carved in a smooth grey-beige Bedford stone by the Lyall craftsmen, contain a stylized floral form deeply carved in the keystone of each arch. The arches are carried to the ground in heavy engaged columns with a foliated capital and resting on a broad plinth at grade. Framing the arches is ashlar stone that has weathered to a gun-metal grey. Beneath the arch on the east side is a large fan transom with elegant tracery over the large double doors. The entire first floor has recently been cleaned, setting it in further contrast to the upper storeys.

Prominent brick quoins emphasize the side walls of the façade, separating the building distinctly from its two neighbours. The walls in this centre section are plain brick, with most of the space given over to the windows. The windows are in pairs, each set continuing upward the three bays established by the ground floor arches. Flat headed and angular, the windows are topped by stone voussoirs that fan out in blocks that have weathered to an alternating light and dark pattern from the pronounced key stone. A string course distinguishes the top storey, which repeats the same window pattern but is topped with a deep copper cornice. The side walls were left black in the correct assumption that neighbouring warehouses would soon be built. Windows on the back wall continue the pattern established in the front but are finished plainly with brick voussoir heads.

The name "Wilson Building" is carved into the stone arch over the front door, which is broached by broad granite steps. The J.C. Wilson Company had opened its doors in Winnipeg in 1902 from an Albert Street address, two and a half years before the construction of this building. The company had been formed in Quebec in 1870, with its head office in Montreal and large paper mills and factories in LaChute and St. Jerome. Five hundred employees produced a wide range

of paper products for domestic and commercial use from paper bags to toilet paper to newsprint.<sup>4</sup> The new Winnipeg Building was to look after the Manitoba and western Canadian business, for which commercial travellers were employed.

Initially, the offices and product showrooms, as well as the shipping rooms of the paper company were on the first floor and in the basement. Mark Fisher and Sons, a wholesale woollens merchant and long-time tenant of the building, occupied the second floor. The third floor held a show wholesale, the fourth floor a stationery supplier. Eaton's rented the upper floors for warehouse space.

Everything seemed to be running smoothly in the handsome new building until one summer evening in 1909 when the roof top water tank of the automatic sprinkler system came crashing through the building. Located on the roof in the southwest corner at the rear of the building,<sup>5</sup> the water tank contained 20,000 gallons and weighed about eighty-eight tons. It had been installed only six months earlier by its manufacturer, the Ontario Wind Engine and Pump Company. Neither the water tank nor its steel moorings had fractured; the building had simply collapsed under the weight. When it fell, the tank burst and flooded the basement. About one quarter of the building collapsed, but because it was after hours, no one was in it at the time. The crash of wrenching timbers and flying brick caused great alarm to the congregation of Grace Church, midway in a service two blocks to the south. The remaining portion of the west wall of the structure had to be stabilized immediately before investigators could sift through the sudden ruins to determine the cause of the accident.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Montreal Firm to Build Here," Manitoba Free Press, 29 March 1904, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> The 1917 fire atlas drawings of the two neighbouring buildings both show their water tanks in the same corner of the building, while the rebuilt Wilson Building tank was in the centre of the roof.

<sup>6</sup> "Rear Section of Big J.C. Wilson Company Building Collapses," Winnipeg Telegram, 26 July 1909, p. 1 & "Wilson Building on McDermot Avenue Collapses Suddenly," Manitoba Free Press, 26 July 1909, p. 1.

Nine days later, a start was made to some \$6,000.00 worth of repair to the warehouse,<sup>7</sup> and the following spring of 1910, a new water tank was installed. This time, architect Woodman worked with contractors Carter, Halls, Aldinger to install an “independent steel tower with an independent foundation” to prevent a recurrence of the original structural error.<sup>8</sup> The new water tank was in the centre of the roof, presumably with a separate support system within the building carried down into the foundation.

Over the following years, the Wilson Company generally only used two or sometimes three floors of their building. The others were occupied by such long-standing firms as the Mark Fisher Company, the Toronto Pharmacal Company and two rubber companies that were eventually consolidated through the B.F. Goodrich Company. In the late 1940s, various garment trade firms moved their factories into the building, establishing a long-term trend that continues to the present. In 1946, the J.C. Wilson Paper Company relocated to the west end, where it operated at least into the early 1970s. The Wilson Building was renamed the Allen Building, although the original name remains carved into the arched stone entrance. Since 1978, it has been the home of Altman, Sheps and Company, a dry goods wholesaler.

The exterior of the building has seen only cosmetic changes since its construction in 1905. The rebuilt rear section is not discernible, the seam camouflaged by stains on the brick from the fire escape. Naturally, over eighty years of occupation has seen many changes in the interior remains of the pressed metal ceilings, window openings, stairwells etc. are still in evidence. Some of the early office partitions may have endured as well.

With an architecture that helped to establish the genre of the district, the building exhibits the love of the architect for something different as well as the flair of the craftsmen involved in the construction. In telling the story of an eastern manufacturer using Winnipeg as a distribution base for its new western trade, the Wilson/Allen Building reinforces the urban fabric of this

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<sup>7</sup> City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 1592, 4 August 1909.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., No. 169, 1 March 1910.

commercial district. Its visual impact on the street is mostly important within the context of its surrounding buildings, yet this building could easily stand alone and be substantial in its own right.

## APPENDIX I

### John Woodman

Architect John Woodman, throughout his 26 year career in Winnipeg designed several of this City's most prominent commercial buildings.

He was born in Oshawa, Ontario in 1860, coming to Winnipeg with the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1880. Until 1901, Woodman stayed on with the CPR, working his way to the position of Chief Engineer of the entire western division. In 1901, he retired from the CPR to establish his own architectural practice in Winnipeg. John Woodman worked on his own in earlier years but later in partnership with Raymond Carey and in the 1920s with A.E. Cubbidge. He retired in 1927 and died in Winnipeg in 1944.<sup>1</sup>

Among the buildings to his credit are the Paris Building (1915-1917), the Lindsay Building (1911), the Allen Building at 288 McDermot (1905), the Somerset Building (c.1910), the Free Press Building, the Public Press Building at 290 Vaughan (1917), the Hudson's Bay Wholesale, and the Eaton's track warehouse on Alexander Avenue (1927). During the 1920s, in partnership with A.E. Cubbidge, John Woodman designed several striking houses and apartment blocks.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "John Woodman Dies, Aged 84," Winnipeg Tribune, 18 May 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Compiled from a number of sources including ibid., files from City of Winnipeg Historic Projects and Western Canada Contractor and Builder, July 1920, October 1922, September 1923 and May 1927.

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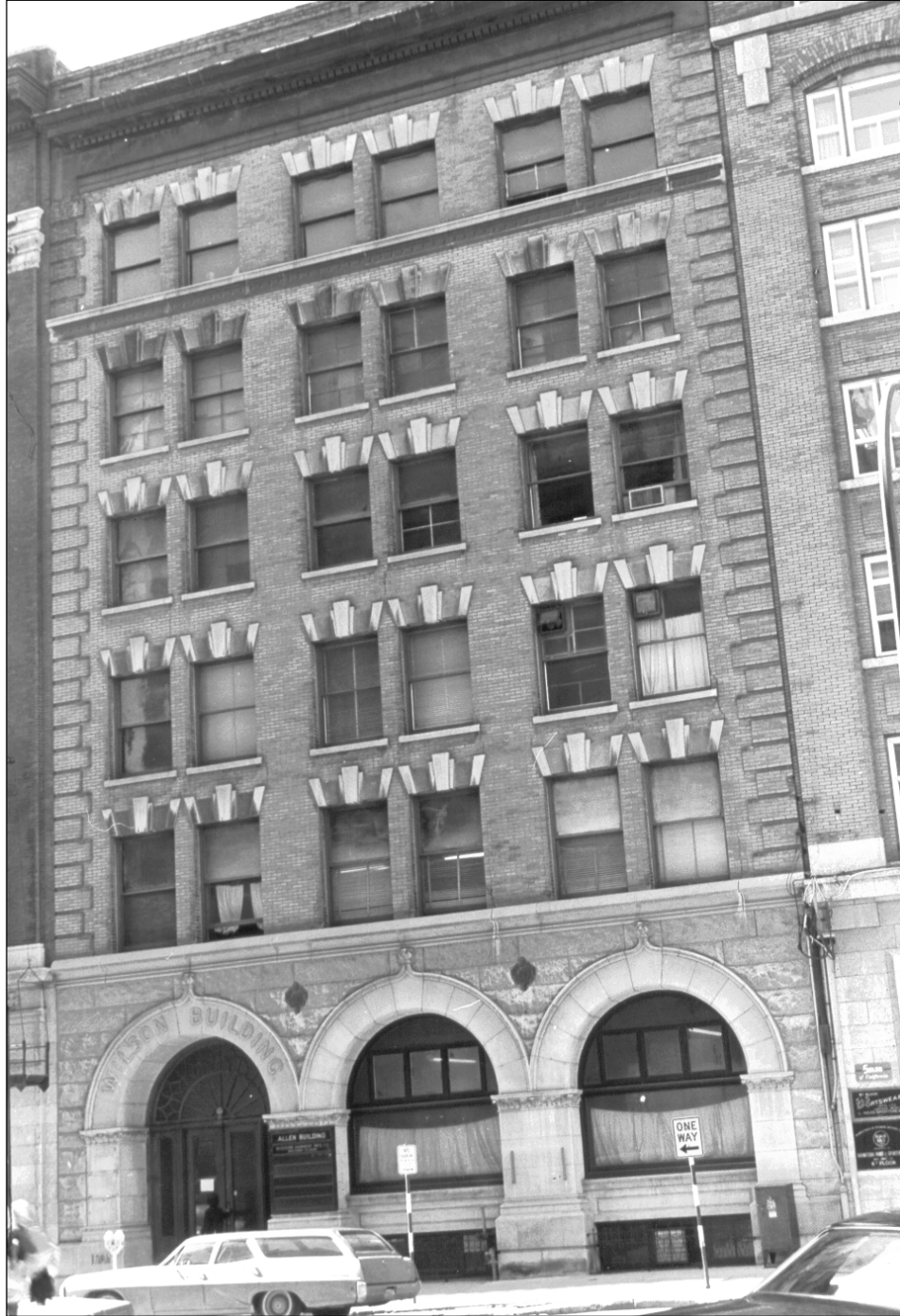


Plate 1 – The Allen Building, 288 McDermot Avenue, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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Plate 2 – Rear of the Wilson Building following the collapse of the water tower on the roof, 1908. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N9128.)



Plate 3 – Detail of the ground floor windows, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)