

140 MEADE STREET NORTH – ROSS HOUSE
William Ross, 1854



Ross House is steeped in the history of the fur trade, the Indians, the early settlers, and the cultural and commercial life of Red River, as the community was known before it became Winnipeg. The Ross family in Winnipeg dates to 1825 when Alexander Ross originally brought his Indian wife and children to Red River to obtain a “Christian education”. Ross was a former fur-trader, who commenced farming on his new river lot, granted by Sir George Simpson of the Hudson’s Bay Company. In addition Ross kept a store to service the settlement, and was appointed both councilor and sheriff to the Council of Assiniboia.

The Ross children were raised in an atmosphere of enlightened faith with a sense of public responsibility. Son James attended university in the east where he won a gold medal, returning to Red River to edit the first newspaper, the *Nor-Wester* and to be the Sheriff of Assiniboia. In 1870, he was prominent in the dealings of the “Scots” community with Riel’s provisional government.

Daughter Henrietta married John Black, the first Presbyterian minister in the west who came to the colony in 1851. Alexander Ross had been the leader of a persistent group of Selkirk settlers who had pleaded for almost 30 years, finally to have Kildonan Church erected by Black, near the historic area of Seven Oaks.

His son William was the builder of Ross House, completed in 1855, somewhere behind the present site of the Centennial Centre on Main Street. He and his wife Jemima raised their family in a log house, typical of the riverside colony. The base of the house was of horizontally laid beams. Uprights, mortised deeply, were set at the corners and at windows and door positions. The remaining logs, which formed the walls, were notched at each end and dropped down the mortised grooves. Gumbo, as the local clay is called, was used with lime for plaster. The attic was reached by solid stairs, held aloft by a rope.

Floods and a shortage of material delayed completion of the house, but when the family took occupancy in early 1855, Alexander called it “the prettiest in Red River”. The cost was more than £252. William, like his father, was a central figure in the community: sheriff, councilor, a magistrate, and keeper of the jail.

He was also the first postmaster, earning the grand salary of £5 a year. The post office was operated from his home and was a regular meeting place. In the first year, it handled 2,912 letters, 2,437 newspapers and 580 parcels. Letters were addressed simply to “Red River, British North America”. The mail left Red River for Pembina, then through Minnesota, and east to its destination.

William Ross died after living in the house less than two years. His widow married William Coldwell, a journalist, and they lived in Ross House until well past the turn of the century. The house was then used as an office for a lumberyard. It was saved in 1947 by the Manitoba Historical Society and was restored and moved to Higgins Avenue across from the Canadian Pacific Railway station. Today, the house is a museum of Red River family life, and early postal services, as well as a tribute to the historic Ross family.