

**630 WESTMINSTER AVENUE – J.A.M. AIKINS HOUSE
(RIVERBEND SCHOOL/BALMORAL HALL SCHOOL)
*J.H.G. Russell, 1901***



The riverbank property at 630 Westminster Avenue in Winnipeg's Wolseley district has been known for seven decades as the home of one of Manitoba's finest private schools. But the site had an earlier prominence as the urban estate of James Albert Manning Aikins who was active in legal and public affairs from the late 1870s into the 1920s.

It was through an Aikins endowment that the United Church of Canada in 1929 established a girls' school, Riverbend, at 630 Westminister. The facility accommodated both residential and day students from kindergarten through to the senior grades. In 1950, it joined with a similar Anglican institution, Rupert's Land College, to form the non-denominational Balmoral Hall

School for Girls. Enrolment in recent years has exceeded 500, including boys in kindergarten classes and about 40 international students who live on site.

Aikins (1851-1929) began making a mark almost as soon as he arrived in Winnipeg from his native Ontario. Born into a political family from Peel County, he studied at Upper Canada College and the University of Toronto before being called to the Ontario bar in 1878. He subsequently was admitted to the bars of Manitoba and the North-West Territories in 1879 and 1882, respectively. He went on to become a partner in a law firm that continues to this day under the name Aikins MacAulay and Thorvaldson. Numbered among his long-standing clients were the federal justice department, Manitoba government, western division of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Imperial Bank of Canada, Bank of Ottawa, and Great-West Life Assurance Co. He also sat on corporate boards, engaged in personal business dealings throughout the West, and was a bencher of the Law Society of Manitoba.

In 1901, Aikins hired architect John H.G. Russell to plan a 2.5-storey, solid brick house for a 7.3-hectare (18-acre) estate known as Riverbend on the north bank of the Assiniboine River next to the exclusive Armstrong's Point neighbourhood. The Davidson Brothers Co. built the home for \$14,000.

Russell employed the Georgian Revival style noted for its subdued classical detailing and focus on central entrances. He gave the Aikins House large porticos and decks on both its front (north) and riverbank (south) façades. Other features included limestone accents, roof-lines highlighted by classical architraves, friezes, dentils, and modillions, stained glass, and interior oak and mahogany finishes.

The house extends from a high, rusticated stone foundation to plain brick walls and a roof that once was hipped, but now has side gable ends. The front façade has a one-storey portico and large gable dormer. The portico has free-standing unfluted columns, an upper deck and limestone stairs. Wooden balustrades originally ran between the columns and around the deck. Next to the off-centre main door is an oval stained-glass window outlined by radiating brick and

four limestone keystones. The dormer contains a Palladian opening with an arched centre fanlight.

The south façade has a two-storey pedimented portico supported by massive free-standing unfluted columns. There are two railed decks, one on the second floor and one on top that is accessed via an arched door with a large limestone keystone. The east and west elevations have classically detailed gable ends. All facings originally were well lit by windows with rough-cut stone lug sills and heads. Most west-side openings are now closed.

A decade after his house was built, Aikins entered federal politics as the Conservative member of Parliament for Brandon. He resigned in 1915 to lead the Manitoba Conservative Party in the wake of its disgrace during the Legislative Building scandal. Defeated in a provincial election, he went on to serve two terms as Manitoba's lieutenant-governor (1916-26), a post which his father, James Cox Aikins, held in 1882-88.

Aikins also was a founder and first president of the Canadian Bar Association (1914-27). Among his community activities, he was the first president of the Winnipeg branch of the Young Men's Christian Association, a chairman of Wesley College, a member of the advisory board of education for the Methodist Church of Canada, a member of the Social Services Council of Manitoba, and a Chief Scout of Manitoba. He was appointed a Queen's Counsel in 1884 and knighted in 1914.

Like Aikins, architect Russell (1862-1946) was an Ontarian who was drawn to Winnipeg in its early years as an urban centre. From 1895 into the 1930s, he planned some of the city's finest Presbyterian churches (Augustine, Knox and Westminster), as well as numerous office, warehouse, apartment, and institutional buildings. His clients included merchants James Ashdown, funeral director John Thomson, investor Augustus Nanton, the Royal Bank of Canada, Great West Permanent Loan Co., YMCA, Manitoba Government Telephones, and Manitoba and Wesley colleges. Among his surviving projects are the Hammond, McKerchar, Campbell Brothers and Wilson (Adelman), Allman, Franklin Press, Porter, Glengarry, and Dingwall

buildings, the Casa Loma Block, the Odd Fellows Home, Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Fort Rouge Methodist Church, Ashdown Store, and Ashdown House.

Since the Riverbend property was converted to school use, the Aikins House at various points has held classrooms, student dormitories, offices, and the headmaster's residence. Several additional facilities have been added over the years, beginning with a Junior School in 1930, followed by Dalton House and Richardson Hall in the 1960s, and four other structures in the 1980s and 1990s.