



**70 ALBERT STREET**  
**TELEGRAM BUILDING**

City of Winnipeg  
Historical Buildings & Resources Committee  
Researchers: S. Grover (1980)  
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## 70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING

With the competition that now exists among wholesale dealers in Winnipeg the majority of the customers throughout the country are finding that they can buy their goods with as great advantage in Winnipeg as if they went to Montreal or any other place for them. The importers now in Winnipeg have arranged for direct rates from Liverpool and London to Winnipeg. By securing this through freight rate, saving which will warrant the selling of the goods at prices almost equal to those of Montreal is effected. The consequent cost of opening and repacking goods at Montreal is thus avoided.<sup>1</sup>

This quote from wholesaler Robert Jones Whitla (Plate 1) in a Winnipeg daily newspaper in 1882 perfectly describes the rise of the wholesale trade in Manitoba's capital city. The preferential freight rates on the newly completed Canadian Pacific Railway, the increased contact between the manufacturers in Europe and Winnipeg's businessmen and the growing local and regional markets combined to guarantee success for local wholesalers. Assured of financial success, wholesalers flocked to the City from Eastern Canada or organized locally – quickly replacing Winnipeg's early downtown small-scale residential property into large brick and stone warehouses (Plate 2).

Whitla was born and educated near Belfast, Ireland in 1846.<sup>2</sup> He immigrated to New York City and then to Ontario (ca.1869), establishing a store in Arnprior, 60 kms. west of Ottawa in the Ottawa River valley. This first business, according to his personal records, was not financially successful.<sup>3</sup>

Arriving in Winnipeg in 1878, Whitla established a retail store on Main Street known as "One Price House" (Plate 3). In 1882, the business was reorganized as R.J. Whitla and Company and he took on Dawson Kerr Elliott as a partner. Elliott, who had worked with Whitla in Arnprior, had come

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<sup>1</sup> Winnipeg Daily Sun, November 30, 1882, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> F.H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba (Winnipeg, MB: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913), Vol. II, pp. 22-28. It is interesting to note that although dead for nearly a decade, Whitla still ranked as one of Winnipeg's important businessmen and is a prominent inclusion in this 1913 collection of biographies. Also in G. Bryce, A History of Manitoba (Toronto, ON: Canada History, 1906), pp. 310-11; and Winnipeg Tribune, May 20, 1911. Information from <http://www.ghosttowns.com/canada/alberta/whitla.htm>: Whitla, Alberta (32 kms. southwest of Medicine Hat) is named after him (he had visited the area in 1885) and is now a ghost town.

<sup>3</sup> "MG11- C43," Archives of Manitoba, General Ledger, R.J. Whitla & Co. Ltd., Folio 20, 1874-1877.

west in 1879 and joined Whitla in his new enterprise. Elliott would assume control of the business after Whitla's untimely death in 1905 and became one of the city's leading businessmen.<sup>4</sup>

Whitla's wholesaling venture began in a small warehouse on McDermot Avenue in 1882 but only two years later, in 1884, he opened his grand new headquarters, the four-storey brick block on the southwest corner of McDermot Avenue and Albert Street (Plates 4 and 5).

## STYLE

This 1884 warehouse was unique in Winnipeg's warehouse district. Whereas most of the large structures were designed utilizing the Romanesque Style, Whitla's architects chose the Italianate Style. This style, along with the Gothic Revival and Second Empire styles, flourished internationally from the 1840s to the 1880s. The styles were a part of the purposeful movement away from the classically-based Georgian and Greek Revival designs earlier in the century. Italianate was predominantly of British origin and was influenced by Renaissance-era Italian palaces and Tuscan farmhouses.<sup>5</sup> Often used in residential architecture, it also found its way into commercial blocks in urban centres. Prominent features included: the tripartite composition of base storey, main storey, and attic storey; flat roofs; and decorative features such as segmental arches over windows, heavy door and window moldings, vermiculated masonry, prominent keystones, deep cornices with prominent brackets, and roundheaded windows grouped into threes.<sup>6</sup>

## CONSTRUCTION

This is a four-storey solid yellow ochre brick building resting on a 1.2-metre high exposed rough-

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<sup>4</sup> F.H. Schofield, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 241-242; Winnipeg Free Press, September 28, 1966; and "Elliott, Dawson Kerr," Memorable Manitobans, Manitoba Historical Society, [http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/elliott\\_dk.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/elliott_dk.shtml), 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Chiara Gottheil, "The Stories of Our Walls: A Timeline of Canadian Architecture," online, December 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Barbara A. Humphreys and Meredith Sykes, The Buildings of Canada (Ottawa, ON: Environment Canada, Parks Service, 1980), p. 8; and Leslie Maitland, Neoclassical Architecture in Canada (Ottawa, ON: Parks Canada, National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1984), p. 122.

hewn limestone stone foundation (Plate 6). The internal structural system is a combination of cast-iron columns and wood beams (first and second floors) and wood posts and beams on the upper floors (Plates 7 and 8). A fire in the building necessitated alterations to the main and second floors structure and the addition of concrete slabs between steel columns. The upper floors have wooden joists with cast iron columns encased in wood. In 1947 the building was underpinned and the basement has been restructured with concrete and steel.<sup>7</sup>

The irregularly shaped structure stands approximately 22.3 metres tall. The north façade facing McDermot Avenue measures 4.9 metres, the west elevation is 30.5 metres long, the northeast corner angle that originally held the main entrance is 2.4 metres and the east façade facing Albert Street is 35.1 metres long (see Appendix I for additional information).

The ground floor has been significantly altered, the original window configuration has been replaced with rectilinear openings and newer window units.

## DESIGN

As originally built, this structure featured a wealth of brick and stone ornamentation. Both main façades are divided into bays by attached columns with ornamental capitals (Plate 9). Ornate metal-clad belt courses with divide the upper floor horizontally (Plate 10). All original window openings were arched, window openings within the bays are double on the second and third floors and triplets on the top floor (except for the angled northeast corner which has single and double openings). The top storey is the most ornate, intricate brickwork above the fourth-floor window openings, bands of corbelled brick and geometric shapes lead to the metal cornice embellishing the flat roof (Plate 11). An equipment penthouse is located in the southwest corner of the roof and an open metal fire escape is attached to the east façade.

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<sup>7</sup> Jonas Lehrman, "Feasibility Study of Three Building Types in the Historic Core of Winnipeg," in William P. Thompson et al, Winnipeg's Historic Warehouse Area, prepared for Heritage Canada and the Manitoba Historical Society, Winnipeg, 1976, p. 62; and I. Saunders, "70 Albert Street, Telegraph [sic] Building," Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings, Historical Building Report, 1974, Vol. IV, pp. 39-49.

Only the upper two floors of the west façade are visible above the neighbouring building, the rear (south) façade features a large loading door and windows on all upper floors (Plate 12).

As mentioned previously, the ground floor has seen considerable alteration over the years and while some elements of the upper floors are showing signs of aging, many of the design features have remained in their original state.

## **INTERIOR**

The interior, due to the evolving use of the building over time, has undergone several extensive renovations – from warehouse to newspaper offices to retail (Plate 13).

The original water tank used for fire protection, is still located on the fourth floor (Plate 14).

## **INTEGRITY**

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition for its age. Alterations to this building have occurred on the ground floor, with little alteration occurring on the upper floors.

## **STREETSCAPE**

The Whitla/Telegram Building has, since construction, been an integral part of two main thoroughfares in downtown Winnipeg and the Exchange District National Historic Site.

The building was also an important part of “Newspaper Row”, from 1882 to 1920, McDermot Avenue, west of Main Street, was the location of Winnipeg’s three major newspapers: Manitoba Free Press, Winnipeg Evening Tribune, and Winnipeg Telegram. A plaque celebrating this is mounted on the east side of the Telegram Building.

## **ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS**

William Hodgson of Ottawa,<sup>8</sup> is credited with the design of the building. Hodgson was born in Wigton, England in 1827, learning the carpenter's trade from his father. Coming to Upper Canada in 1841, the family ultimately settled in Whitby. He took a job as a foreman and site supervisor for a prominent Ottawa-area builder in 1859 and in 1867 opened his own architectural practice. His practice was successful and he was well-known in the city. Concentrating mainly in Ottawa, his list of contracts also includes a store in Arnprior, ON for R.J. Whitla, (Whitla and Galvin) in 1875.<sup>9</sup>

## **PERSON/INSTITUTION**

As Whitla and Company occupied its new headquarters in 1884, the local real estate boom busted, marking a period of economic downturn. Despite this, Whitla's wholesale operation saw modest growth. An 1886 publication describing Winnipeg's businesses observed that Whitla's company was "at the head of all similar establishments in Manitoba" and continued by saying:

Here may be found at all times a very complete assortment of staple and fancy dry goods, foreign and domestic, embracing a wide range in the varied departments of textile fabrics and affording an opportunity for selection rarely attainable outside of the great markets of the country, the goods having been selected with a perfectly comprehensive knowledge of the business and a nice discrimination as to the exact requirements of the trade.<sup>10</sup>

It was reported to be the "largest dry goods firm in the city" in 1887.<sup>11</sup>

For the remainder of the 1880s and the first half of the 1890s, Whitla utilized a network of travelling salesmen and an annual catalogue to provide "British and Foreign" dry goods to retailers

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<sup>8</sup> The Commercial, January 2, 1883, p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Robert G. Hill, "Hodgson, William," in Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, online, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson and Boyer, The Industries of Winnipeg, (Winnipeg, MB: The Commercial, 1886), p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> Manitoba Free Press, December 24, 1887, p. 11.

in cities and towns as far west as the Rocky Mountains and see slow and steady growth.<sup>12</sup> By the late 1890s, Whitla's business was again booming. Whitla had outgrown his 1884 warehouse and in 1899 built his third warehouse district headquarters on the south side of McDermot Avenue between King and Arthur streets (Plate 15).

Whitla was also a leading citizen at the time. He was a member of the Board of Trade, and later served a term as president. He was a trustee of Broadway Methodist Church and became president of the Y.M.C.A. in 1892. He was also a founder of Wesley College, which later became the University of Winnipeg. In addition, Whitla was a sporting man, and his family home was a centre of culture and recreation for the leading families of Winnipeg.<sup>13</sup> Unlike many of his peers, politics did not hold much interest for Whitla and he refrained from the common practice of the commercial elite dominating civic offices. He died suddenly in 1905.

From 1900-1914, Winnipeg's economy boomed and R.J. Whitla and Company mirrored this unprecedented growth. Despite the death of its founder in 1905, the company continued to prosper under former partner D.K. Elliott, who reorganized the company around a board of directors that included his son-in-law J.B. Coyne and prominent local businessmen.<sup>14</sup> In 1906, the company opened a subsidiary garment factory on McDermot Avenue at Kate Street,<sup>15</sup> and prior to World War I had opened a warehouse in Edmonton, Alberta.<sup>16</sup> The company ceased operations in 1931.

After the R.J. Whitla and Company vacated the Albert Street warehouse, it was taken over by the Telegram Publishing Company. The Telegram was a weekly paper, established in 1894, and geared for the farmer's interests. It enjoyed a circulation of about 5,500 throughout Manitoba and the

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<sup>12</sup> Henderson's Directory, 1886-1888. In 1886, Whitla's company was listed with one travelling salesman, three local salesmen and a total of 12 employees. Two years later, of the 14 employees, two were travelling salesmen and five salesmen covered Winnipeg.

<sup>13</sup> F.H. Schofield, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> "MG11-C43," op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Manitoba Free Press, December 6, 1906, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Winnipeg Free Press, August 28, 1966.

North-west. In June 1898, the Winnipeg Telegram began publication of a daily morning paper, more urban in character, and committed to challenge the “franchise monopoly of the Free Press.”<sup>17</sup> Publicly Conservative in its politics, the Telegram railed against everything “Liberal” in a manner that was acceptable at the time. Despite its old-time partisan leanings, the Telegram was Winnipeg’s most modern paper in every way. It boasted a new automatic printing press and was certainly the most modern in its layout and style. Newspapers were undergoing fundamental changes at this period too, brought on by faster methods of communication and the impact of such international news agencies as Reuter’s Associated Press. The Telegram reflected these changes in technology and content better and sooner than the other local papers.

In 1901, the circulation of the daily and the still-printed weekly was over 5,000 each.<sup>18</sup> That year, Sandford Evans, a prominent Conservative journalist from Toronto, purchased the Telegram Publishing Company and became editor until 1905.<sup>19</sup> Although Evans continued to own the paper until 1920, he resigned to establish the W. Sandford Evans Company, a financial concern which continues business in printing, statistical and financial services. Evans became mayor of Winnipeg from 1909 to 1911 and used the paper openly to cultivate his support. In 1922, he became a Conservative member of the Manitoba Legislature and served as Leader of the Opposition from 1933 to his retirement in 1936.<sup>20</sup>

After 1908, the Telegram published both a morning and an evening paper but in 1920, it discontinued the morning paper. On October 18, 1920, while it had a circulation of 39,000, the Telegram was bought out by the Tribune and both the Telegram and the publishing company folded.

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<sup>17</sup> Winnipeg Telegram, October 22, 1898.

<sup>18</sup> McKim’s Directory of Canadian Publications (Montreal, PQ: McKim and Company), 1901.

<sup>19</sup> Alan F.J. Artibise, Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914 (Montreal, PQ: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1975), p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Who’s Who of Canada, 1936-1937.

From 1919-1924, R.P. Roblin and Robert Rogers owned the building.<sup>21</sup> Hon. Redmond Palen Roblin, was born February 15, 1853, in Prince Edward county, Ontario, and came to Manitoba in 1880. He started a mercantile business at Carman, MB before entering into public office as a school trustee. He later became leader of the Conservative party and was called upon to lead the province upon the retirement of Hon. Hugh John Macdonald in 1900.<sup>22</sup>

In 1921, Jack Cohen, a manufacturer's agent, occupied the Albert Street building, which continued to keep the popular name 'Telegram Building'. In 1926, Sures Brothers Limited bought the building as a warehouse for its dry goods business and a factory for garment manufacturing. In 1966, a household appliance company moved into the building, and in 1976 the building was purchased and partly renovated by Modernage Furniture Company.

## **EVENT**

There is no known significant historical event connected with this building.

## **CONTEXT**

This structure is an early addition to Winnipeg's warehouse district, built shortly after the completion of Canada's first transcontinental railway that guaranteed year-round, cheap delivery of manufactured goods to Winnipeg's wholesalers, who in turn took advantage of the growing consumer markets to the west. R.J. Whitla and Company was one of the most successful late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century firms and this building is reflective of its early success and growth.

## **LANDMARK**

The building is prominently located on the busy corner of Albert Street and McDermot Avenue. Its location and the wealth and uniqueness of its exterior ornamentation heighten its conspicuousness.

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<sup>21</sup> City of Winnipeg, Assessment Roll, Roll No. 609050-12-2, PC 50.

<sup>22</sup> George Bryce, A History of Manitoba, (Toronto, ON: Canada History Co., 1906), pp. 311-312.



## APPENDIX I

### *CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report*

Building Address: 70 Albert Street  
(68-70 Albert St. & 242 McDermot Ave.)

Building Name: Telegram Building

Original Use: wholesale warehouse

Current Use: warehouse/offices

Roll No. (Old): 609050 (10088)

Municipality: 12

Ward: 2

Property or Occupancy Code: 50

Legal Description: 6<sup>W</sup> St. John, Plan 139, Lot 6 except west 6.4' (Original: 6<sup>W</sup> St. John, Plan 139, part Lot 6, Lot 7)

Location: west side between Notre Dame & McDermot avenues

Date of Construction: 1882-1884

Storeys: 4

Construction Type: Ordinary – masonry wood frame

#### **HERITAGE STATUS: GRADE II (July 14, 1980)**

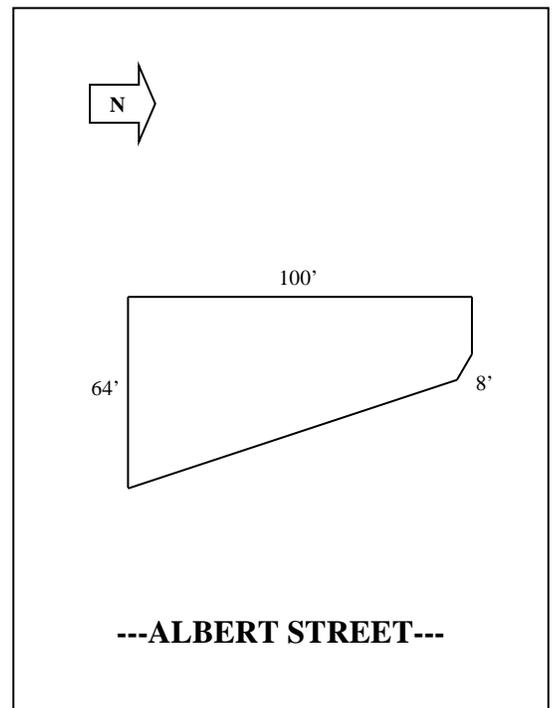
Building Permits (Plans available: [CS] City Storage):

- 172/1904 \$5,000 (alteration); 2286/1910 \$7,000 (alteration); 110/1946 \$20,000; 299/1947 \$2,000 (alteration); 817/1947 \$5,000; 31/1961 [CS] (alteration); 3498/1976 \$20,000 (interior alteration); Fire 1985; 1740/1985 [CS] \$30,000 (interior alteration); 1208/1985 \$20,000 (alter front entrance and interior alteration); 2217/1991 \$40,000 (interior alteration); 7477/1992 \$300 (alteration)

#### Information:

- 43 x 100 x 73 = 313,900 cu. ft.
- Exterior – Brick face, rough cut stone foundation. Pilaster & spandrel wall construction, heavy cornice.
- 1941 – Exterior walls weathered but good – no cracks visible
- 1948 – Underpinning with new foundation 2' either side of wall and 6' below basement level.
- 1947 – 2<sup>nd</sup> floor fire door; fluorescent fixtures on 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- 1951 – Entrance on Albert lined, and fluted glass
- 1961 – no structural changes – fair condition for age
- Permit 31/1961 – new slate windows ground floor
- 1977 – some partitioning removed & decorating
- 1986 – smoke damage
- 1987 – partitions & ceiling tile on 2<sup>nd</sup> floor
- 1991 – Maintained and in good condition

**ARCHITECT: WILLIAM HODGSON**  
**CONTRACTOR: UNKNOWN**



**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 1 – R.J. Whitla, no date. (Reproduced from F.H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba [Winnipeg, MB: S.J. Clarke Publishing, 1913], Vol. II, p. 24.)

## 70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING



Plate 1 – McDermot Avenue looking west from Main Street, ca.1881. (Photo courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba, "Winnipeg- Streets- McDermot #1".)



Plate 2 – The same view approximately two decades later (ca.1903). Large brick and stone warehouses and retail/office buildings have replaced all the residential property in this shot. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba.)

70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING

THE ONE PRICE HOUSE.

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**R. J. WHITLA,**  
IMPORTER,  
WHOLESALE AND RETAIL DEALER IN  
**STAPLE & FANCY DRY GOODS, CARPETS,**  
*Ready-made Clothing, Hats, Caps and Gents' Furnishings*

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DRESS-MAKING A SPECIALTY.

311 MAIN STREET, - - - OPPOSITE POST OFFICE.

Plate 3 – Advertisement for R.J. Whitla’s “One Price House,” 1881. (Reproduced from Henderson’s Directory, 1881, p. 7.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 3 – Looking south down Arthur Street, ca.1885. The R.J. Whitla and Company's new warehouse, Albert Street at McDermot Avenue, is seen at the arrow. (City of Winnipeg, Historical Buildings and Resources Committee.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**

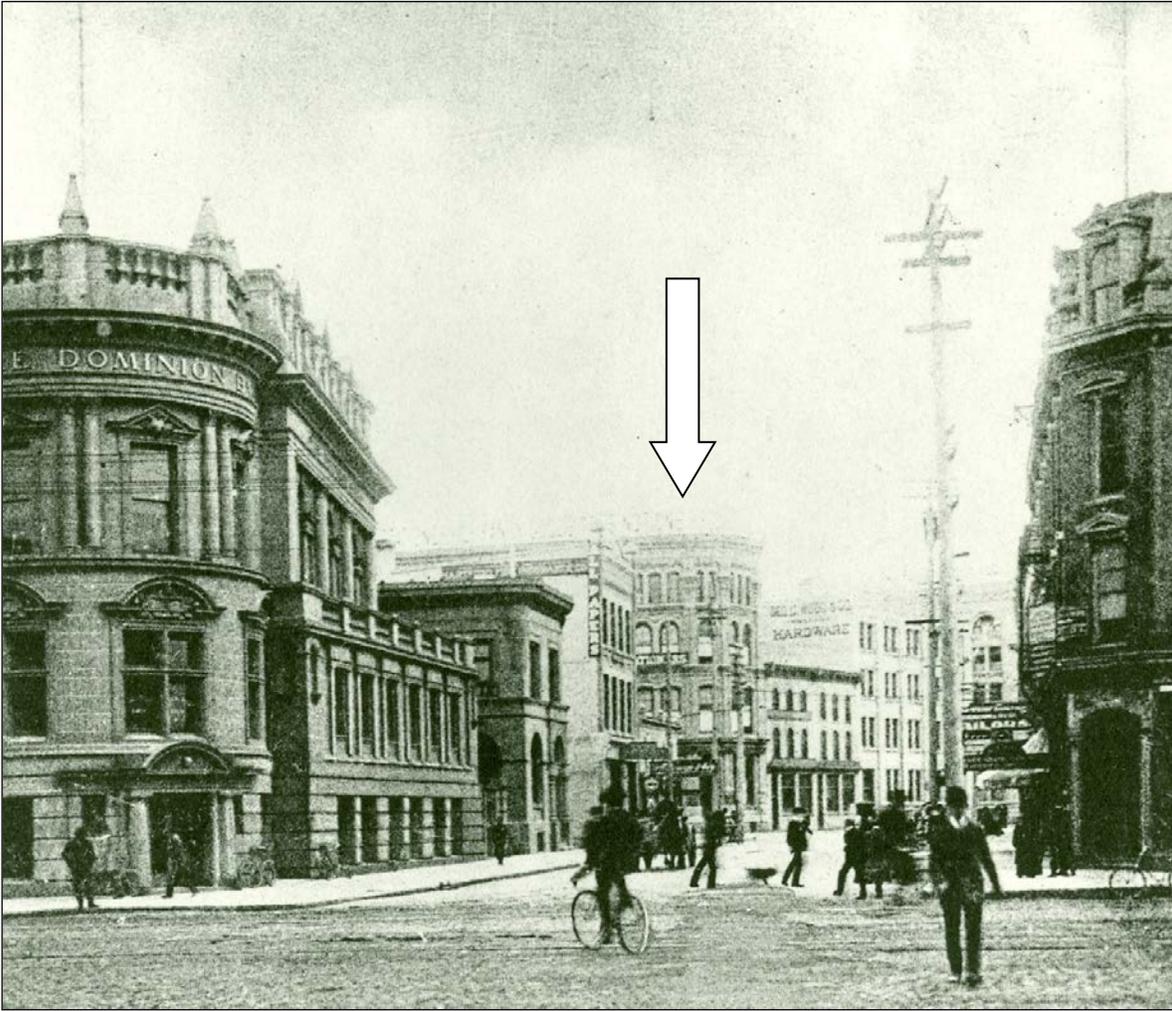


Plate 4 – Looking west along McDermot Avenue from Main Street, ca.1900. The Whittla Building at arrow. (Archives of Manitoba, “Winnipeg- Streets- McDermot- 5”.)

70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING

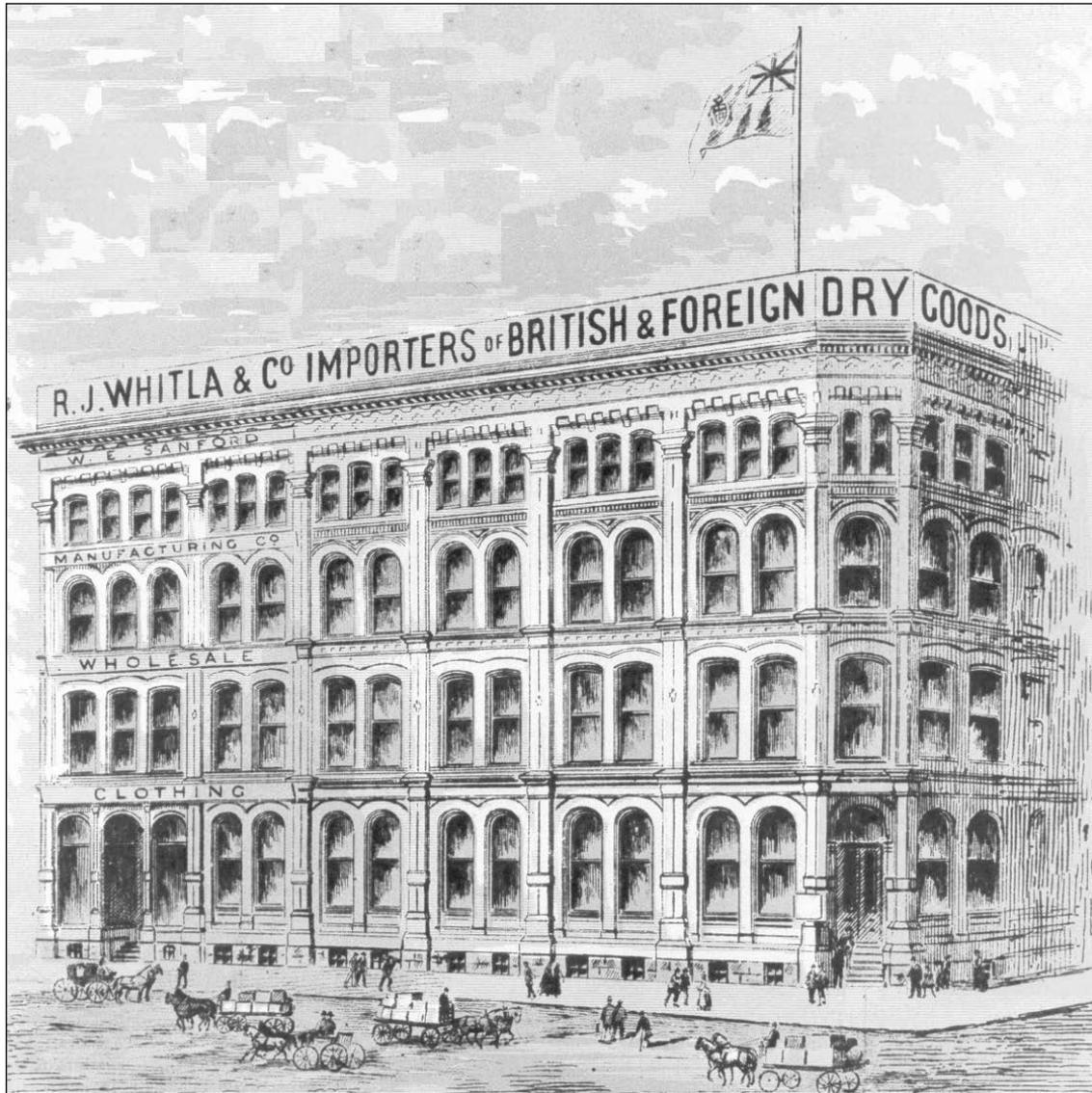


Plate 5 – Drawing of the Whitla Building as it appeared in the Winnipeg Sun, 1888. (Archives of Manitoba, N902.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 6 – Telegram Printing Company Building, 70 Albert Street, ca.1910. Note the original windows on the ground floor and the replacement of the original angled entrance with a window. Also note the posted newspaper editions on the ground floor. ([Archives of Manitoba, N2353.](#))

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 7 – Telegram Building, 70 Albert Street, wood beam and post structural system, 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 8 – Telegram Building, 70 Albert Street, cast-iron posts, 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 9 – Telegram Building, 70 Albert Street, north and east façades, 2003. (G. Cline, 2003.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 10 – Telegram Building, 70 Albert Street, portion of east façade, 2021. (M. Peterson, 2021.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 11 – Telegram Building, 70 Albert Street, north and east façades, 2021. (M. Peterson, 2021.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 12 – Telegram Building, 70 Albert Street, rear (south) façade, 2021. (G. Menzies, 2021.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 13 – Telegram Building, 70 Albert Street, main floor retail space, 1985. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department, 1985.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 14 – Telegram Building, 70 Albert Street, fourth floor water tank, 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)

**70 ALBERT STREET – TELEGRAM BUILDING**



Plate 15 – R.J. Whitla Building, 70 Arthur Street, ca.1900. ([Archives of Manitoba, Outsize 133/409, N3255.](#))