



91 ALBERT STREET
IMPERIAL DRY GOODS BLOCK

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

March 14, 1980

91 ALBERT STREET IMPERIAL DRY GOODS BLOCK

The study of this building, called the Imperial Dry Goods Block, initially posed more questions than it answered. As the research progressed, an odd story unfolded and its resolution was found in a series of photographs. Briefly, the present structure is only the shell of an older warehouse which originally extended from Main Street through to Albert. The Royal Bank on Main, and this structure on Albert share that shell.

The first building was indeed the Imperial Dry Goods Block, erected in 1899. This was the retail outlet of the large dry goods wholesale business of R.J. Whitla and Company. The wholesale was owned by R.J. Whitla, an Irish-born merchant who started the business in Winnipeg in 1882.¹ Whitla supplied clothing, fabrics and furs to the entire Canadian west, which was developing at an astounding rate at the turn of the century. The wholesale district of Winnipeg profited from a hinterland that was bounded by the Rocky Mountains and was serviced by an army of travelling salesmen who peddled their wares to the burgeoning communities. Whitla had a good name, built up through sound business practices and competitive prices.²

R.J. Whitla and Company flourished. Rapid growth forced the business to add a second warehouse building in 1884 (now the Telegram Building on McDermot at Albert), and finally a third large warehouse in 1899. This latest structure, the Whitla Block, is located at 70 Arthur Street. It is a huge building, seven storeys of solid brick mill construction. It was designed by J.H. Cadham in a style described as "Richardsonian Romanesque".³ Without question, the Whitla Company was significant in the development of Winnipeg as the most prominent wholesale distribution centre of the west. The business boom convinced this wholesale operation to enter the retail trade and on April 6, 1898, the Imperial Dry Goods Company, a subsidiary of R.J. Whitla, was incorporated. It had a capital stock of \$25,000, of which R.J. Whitla personally held the majority of shares.⁴

The following year, the Imperial Dry Goods store was erected on Main Street, between McDermot and Bannatyne. The building extended right through to Albert Street, long and narrow across the block. The front entrance was in the centre of a bustling retail trade;⁵ the rear loading docks opened

onto the heart of the warehouse district. The street address was 460 Main. Pictures of the retail store (see appendix) show a handsome brick façade with various eclectic details so typical of the turn of the century. Massive ground floor windows, and prominent third and fourth storey windows were dressed to show the most appealing merchandise of the season.

The interior photographs present the dry goods offered: ready-made clothing for men, women and children; bolts of material for drapes, clothing and household linens; toys, housewares and small tools; baskets, knitting wool and notions. The store itself was narrow and deep, with steel posts and a pressed tin ceiling. Neither plans nor permits for it exist, but Cadham, the architect who built the Whitla Block the same year, may also have designed this store.

Imperial Dry Goods Co. advertised extensively after 1899 and there is every reason to believe that it was as successful as the parent company. However, in 1907, the retail store was closed and the following year, the property was acquired by the Royal Bank of Canada. R.J. Whitla had died in 1905, but his wholesale business survived until 1931⁶ when it either ceased operation or was bought out.

In 1909, most of the Imperial Dry Goods Block was gutted and only the exterior side walls were retained on the Main Street section of the building. A heavy brick dividing wall was erected across the shell which formed the back wall for the new bank building.⁷

The bank was of steel and concrete construction, with the exterior faced in Milford granite. The architects were Carriere and Hastings, a famed New York firm, with Eustis G. Bird of Toronto as the associate architect. The structure, 40 by 120 feet and four storeys high was completed in September, 1911.⁸ The granite facing was arranged in a rusticated form around the arched windows of the main floor, and together with classic window details on the upper floors and a red tile roof, the style imitated the Italian Renaissance look that enjoyed a considerable revival at the time. No expense was spared in finishing the handsome bank: Hauteville marble lining the walls and formed the tables; heavily panelled ceilings and solid bronze grillwork graced the banking room doors and elevator fronts.⁹

Pictures taken in 1909 show the steel bracing against the old brick walls as the bank went up. The party wall can be seen in the rear. The Royal Bank owned the property which the Whitla estate must have sold as the block became part of the growing financial district. The Bank of Toronto had built immediately south of the old Imperial Dry Goods Block, and the Union Bank (now Royal) and annex to the north had raised the value of the real estate and altered the nature of the block somewhat.

The rear of the old store was developed by the Royal Bank as a warehouse. In 1909, as the bank was erected in the Main Street part, the Albert Street section was also altered. Although the front and side walls were kept, windows and a regular door had to be added as well as many interior alterations. The architect who designed these changes was J.H.G. Russell and the contractor was Wallace and Aikins of Winnipeg. The cost of the alterations was \$7,500.¹⁰

A fire atlas map of 1918 shows the proportions of the new arrangement. The bank was 40 feet wide by 120 feet long and took up two-thirds of the length of the original structure. The Albert Street end was left at 40 feet wide and about 80 feet long. This section of the earlier building for the first time was given the street address of 91 Albert; it is the rear third and only actual remaining portion of the Imperial Dry Goods Block.

After completion, Tooke Brothers Men's Furnishings moved into the building and used it as a warehouse for their agency. Tooke Brothers was a Montreal-based firm of men's shirt-makers, later merged to become Tooke-Van Heusen. The upper parts of the building were also rented by dry goods businesses: Stanfields Ltd., Wabasso Cotton and Evans and Evans Co. Manufacturers agents also held offices in the building, but it was called the Tooke Building.

In 1929, the Canadian Legion took over the building and established several affiliated offices such as the Official Soldiers' Adviser and the Pension Advocate of the Department of Pensions and National Health. In 1930, the Legion added a fire escape to their building.¹¹

In 1935, the Steinkopf family purchased the building in memory of Max Steinkopf, and converted it into the Young Men's Hebrew Association, the YMHA.¹² The YMHA had been formed in 1919 by a group of veterans who wanted an outlet for recreation and personal development. The group had space rented on Main Street and it grew quickly to be a family organization providing athletic and cultural pursuits for the Jewish community. Besides philosophy groups and craft sessions, the YMHA fielded formidable football, soccer and rugby teams.

Max Steinkopf was a prominent Winnipeg lawyer whose public spirit touched such organizations as the Children's Hospital, the Winnipeg Free Hebrew School and the Archaeological Institute of America.¹³ He was also keenly interested in sports. After his death, the family used part of his large endowment to purchase facilities for the YMHA at 91 Albert Street.¹⁴

The entire building was used, although the permit tracing alterations to this new use does not survive. The clear span of the third floor became the gymnasium and a small theatre.¹⁵ There was also a lunch bar in the building. Besides the usual "Y" members, the facilities were also used as a recreation centre for off-duty troops during World War II and as a physical education training centre for two regiments.¹⁶

The YMHA outgrew the Albert Street building and in 1952, it opened new facilities at 370 Hargrave Street. In its 50th anniversary in 1969, the organization had grown to 3,200 members.

The Albert Street structure was then rented to Gray's Auction Mart who shared the building with a variety of small offices. By 1975, it was substantially vacant. Trend Interior Consultants Limited purchased the old dry goods store and renovated it for commercial and office space.

91 Albert has seen many changes over the years, as it changed from the rear of a dry goods retail store on Main Street, to a warehouse, to an athletic facility and back to commercial space. The Whitla business was partner to the developing of Winnipeg as a major wholesale centre, and the Imperial Dry Goods Company was a natural development from this. The front section of the building was completely altered into the Royal Bank, and the rear was significantly altered in 1909

to its present appearance. It now enjoys a rigorous trade in a revitalized area.

Footnotes--

1. Frank Howard Schofield The Story of Manitoba Volume II, The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, Winnipeg, 1913, p. 25.
2. "Pioneers of Winnipeg" Free Press, May 20, 1911. Article on R.J. Whitla.
3. George Fuller et al Winnipeg's Historic Warehouse Area, a Report prepared for Heritage Canada and the Manitoba Historical Society, Winnipeg, 1976, p. 10.
4. The Commercial, December 9, 1905.
5. In 1902, the Main Street block consisted of the following: 454 — men's furnishings; 456 — architect; 458 — clothing store; 460 — Imperial Dry Goods; 466 — Woodbine Hotel and Billiards; 468 — shoe store.
6. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg, 1931.
7. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 402, April 19, 1909. The wall was designed by J.H.G. Russell and the cost was \$1,600.
8. "The Royal Bank Building at Winnipeg" Construction magazine, April, 1912, p. 54.
9. Ibid., p. 58-59.
10. Permits, op. cit., no. 2273, October 22, 1909.
11. Ibid., no. 411, November 13, 1930.
12. "From Philosophy to Weight Lifting", Tribune, May 2, 1959.
13. Schofield, op. cit., p. 508-511.
14. R.J. Whitla had also been president of the YMCA in the 1880s and Steinkopf had done his articles under a Whitla brother's law firm.
15. "The Historic Winnipeg Restoration Area", Heritage Winnipeg, c.1979, no. 17.
16. Tribune, op. cit.

91 ALBERT STREET – IMPERIAL DRY GOODS BLOCK

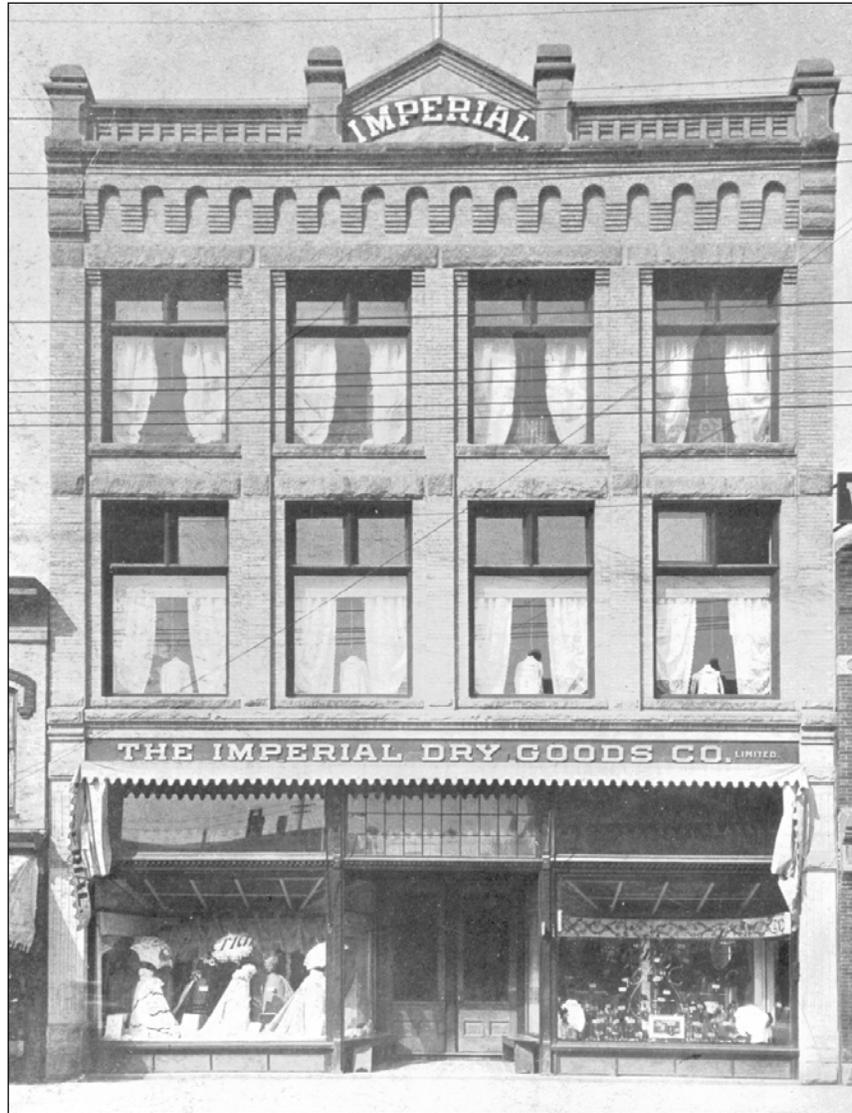


Plate 1 – Imperial Dry Goods Block, 91 Albert Street, front façade, ca.1906. (M. Peterson Collection.)

91 ALBERT STREET – IMPERIAL DRY GOODS BLOCK



Plate 2 – Interior of Imperial Dry Goods Block, ca.1906. (M. Peterson Collection.)

91 ALBERT STREET – IMPERIAL DRY GOODS BLOCK

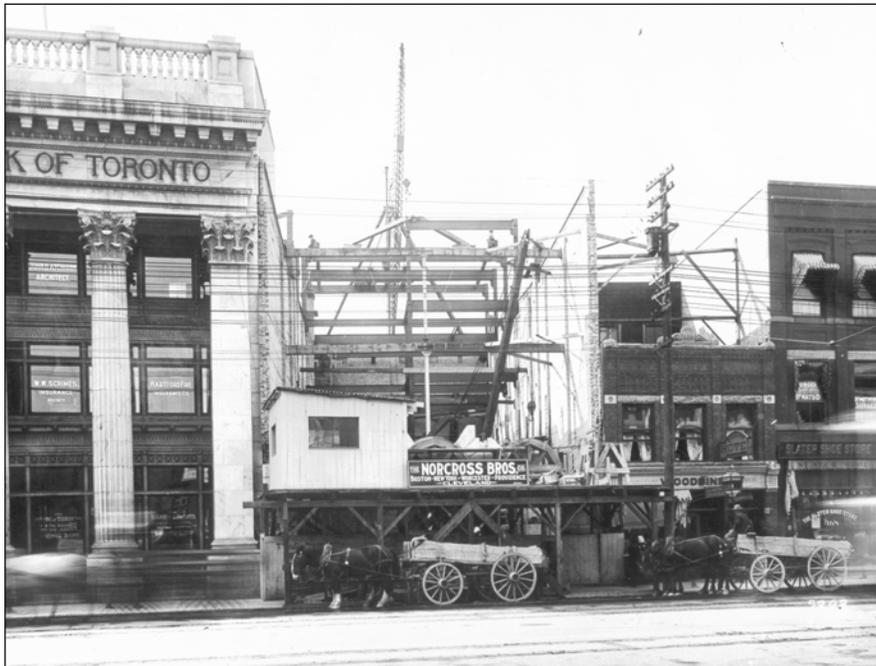


Plate 3 – The Royal Bank builds within the side walls of the Imperial Dry Goods Block at Main Street, 1909. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, J.H.G. Russell Collection.)

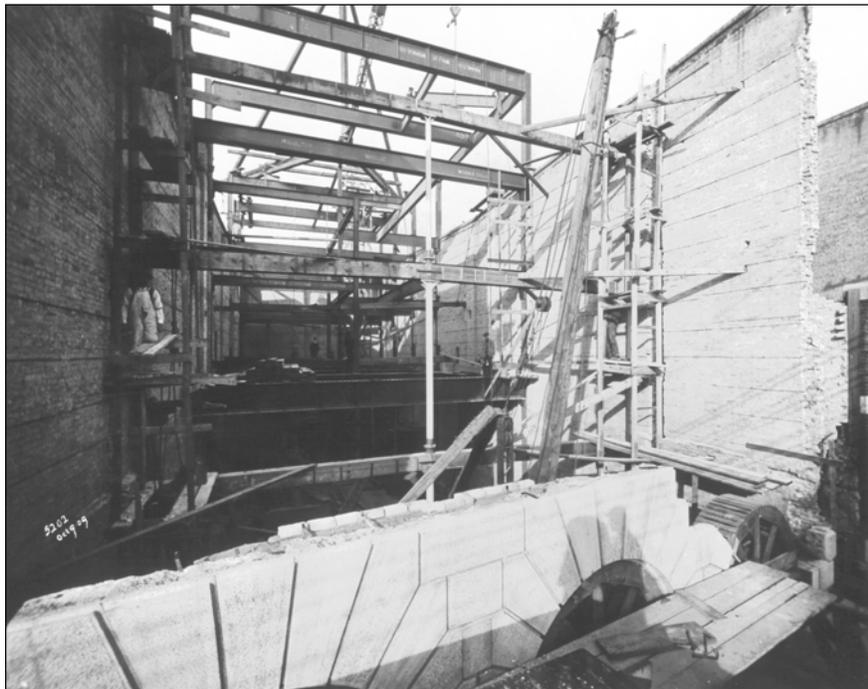


Plate 4 – The Royal Bank builds within the side walls of the Imperial Dry Goods Block at Main Street, 1909. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, J.H.G. Russell Collection.)

91 ALBERT STREET – IMPERIAL DRY GOODS BLOCK



Plate 5 – The Royal Bank Branch, 460 Main Street, 1909. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, J.H.G. Russell Collection.)

91 ALBERT STREET – IMPERIAL DRY GOODS BLOCK



Plate 6 – Two views of the Imperial Dry Goods Block, 91 Albert Street, 1979. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)