

137 BANNATYNE AVENUE
SWISS BUILDING

(FORMER BRIGHT AND JOHNSTON BUILDING)

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

29 November 1984

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Located on the north side of Bannatyne Avenue between Rorie Street and the Red River, this building and the Mackenzie Block, 141 Bannatyne Avenue, share a common structure and an interwoven history. The eastern portion at 137 Bannatyne Avenue, now called the Swiss Building, is considerably older than the other portion.

Only three bays wide and three storeys high, this original section dates to 1882-83. It was constructed as the first in a set of twin buildings, the second identical building located on what is now a parking lot immediately west of 141 Bannatyne Avenue. While the buildings were identical in design, the building that remains was finished in white brick while the twin on the west had a red brick finish. The remains of the red brick warehouse, which shared a party wall with the centre structure, can still be seen on the far left portion of the facade of 141 Bannatyne. Altogether, the three buildings formed a large unified presence along the street.

The twin buildings were erected for the grocery wholesale firm of Turner, McKeand and Company,¹ who occupied only the red brick building and built the white-bricked twin either for speculation or for possible long-term expansion. A space of 60 feet separated the two buildings. Both were designed by the Winnipeg Architectural firm of Willmot and Stewart. This was essentially a boom-time partnership which was active during the heady years of 1882-83, but dissolved soon thereafter. As a team, Willmot and Stewart designed the Edmonton Terrace and the Stobart Block, as well as several other unrecorded buildings. Little is known about Mancel Willmot, who left Winnipeg when the boom ended. His partner, George W. Stewart, was a civil engineer and Dominion Land Surveyor who continued his multi-disciplinary practice here until 1887.²

This building was tendered in August 1882³ while the twin was not begun until March of the following year.⁴ The building was 34 feet wide, solid brick on a stone foundation and cost between \$17,500 and \$20,000 to construct. Capped pilasters divided the bays. The door is in its original position on the facade, while the head of the door and the windows on the first two floors were

segmented compared to the flat heads of the third floor. A low parapet completed the third floor roofline. A raised basement, lit with front windows, gave four functioning floors to the new warehouse.

Upon its completion in 1883, the warehouse was either leased or sold to the first wholesale commission merchants in Winnipeg, a company by the name of Henderson and Bull. Both W.F. Henderson and Manlius Bull came to Winnipeg from Toronto in 1882.⁵ For seven years, the firm acted as agents for suppliers such as the Canada Sugar Refining Company of Montreal, W.T. Coleman and Company of San Francisco who sold canned fruits and salmon and the Truro Condensed Milk and Canning Company. Their warehouse premises were described as spacious and "admirably suited to their requirements."⁶ In 1889, Bull liquidated his interest in the commission business to purchase a large local soap factory. Henderson and Bull were bought out by their former accountant, renamed Nicholson and Bain, and continued to operate for decades later in a warehouse just down the street from its original location.

The following year, 1890, saw the pork packing firm of J.Y. Griffin and Company occupy the building. The twin building to the west was continuously occupied by the original owners of Turner, McKeand. Griffin eventually moved to St. Boniface and became a major component in the assembly that made up Swift's meat packing plant.

During these years, in c.1894, the Winnipeg Transfer Railway ran a spur track between the north side of Bannatyne Avenue and the south side of Market Avenue. This was a particularly important development for the warehouses backing onto the spurline such as Ashdown's and Marshall-Wells, but for those businesses dealing in perishable goods, it was a godsend. It also greatly increased the value of these properties.

Taking advantage of the immediate rail access, the grocery wholesale firm of Bright and Johnston purchased this warehouse in the spring of 1898.⁷ Some renovation was done to the building at this time, including the installation of a new heating system. The firm constituted a partnership between

Albert Bright and Kenneth John Johnston. Bright, the senior partner, had opened a grocery store at the corner of King and Logan streets in 1883, selling groceries, wines and spirits, as well as provisions for homesteaders.⁸ In 1896, the partnership was formed and the new company became a wholesale supplier to local grocers. By 1898, Bright and Johnston specialized as importers of Canadian, Californian and foreign fruit and nuts, as well as supplying local honey. They also acted as commission merchants for specialty items.⁹

Kenneth Johnston was well known in Winnipeg as a champion high bicycle rider, the "penny farthing" bicycles with the oversized front wheel. For several years in the 1880s, he was Canada's top rider, collecting over 25 medals and trophies in national competitions. Born in Ontario, Johnston came to Winnipeg as a young man in 1882 and gained his knowledge of the grocery business by working for the wholesale firm of Sutherland and Campbell. He stayed in partnership with Bright until 1908, when he became an independent fruit broker. Johnston was active in the business until his death in 1955 at the age of 93.¹⁰

As the grocery wholesale partnership of Bright and Johnston grew more successful more space was required. In 1903, Bright and Johnston commissioned architect John H.G. Russell to design an addition to the building. Four storeys high with dimensions of 66 by 120 feet, the addition was considerably larger than the original building. The addition, joined on the western side of the 1882 structure, became 141 Bannatyne Avenue East while collectively the two were known as the Bright and Johnston Block.

For a price of \$23,158.00, not including the architect's fees, the solid brick addition was built by carpenter S.B. Ritchie and mason Phillip Burnett, both well-known local men.¹¹ The structural work was completed in March 1904 and the interior finished in June. Russell continued Willmot and Stewart's design from 1882, thereby bridging the twin structures on either side. (Although the new building shared a party wall with both of the twin buildings, only the central and eastern portion were owned by Bright and Johnston. To make it easier to understand, the other twin building no longer stands, so the buildings extant are the two in question). Russell's real contribution to the

structure was the fourth storey which features a series of small, arched windows that finishes the design effectively.

Bright and Johnston moved their operation to this new addition and leased out their old space. Suddenly, on a bitterly cold January night in 1907, a fire broke out on the second floor of the new section. Standing on box cars on the spur line, firemen seemed to have the fire in hand when a big explosion hurled them backwards. The damage was very serious to the interior but the walls held up well. Damage to various companies' stock was estimated at \$183,000¹² and all the tenants in the new section had to vacate the premises. The older portion at 137 Bannatyne was not damaged.

After cleaning up the fire damage, Bright and Johnston decided to extend the fourth storey all the way across to the 1882 section, bringing the two buildings to their present appearance. John Russell extended the arched window across, unifying the two facades and visually distinguishing the old section from its red-bricked twin on the other end. The cost of rebuilding the interior and pushing through the fourth storey was \$25,000 which was \$3,000 more than the major addition had cost four years previous.¹³

With K.J. Johnston out of the partnership since 1908, Albert Bright's sons entered their father's business as Bright and Sons Crockery wholesale. In September 1915, a spark happened to light some of the straw that the crockery was packed in on the top floor at 141 Bannatyne Avenue and the building was soon ablaze. The roof collapsed which allowed better access for the streams of water from the firemen's hoses. What could have been a devastating fire was then controlled while the thick plaster sludge that oozed down to the lower floors protected the fire from spreading. One hundred men from five fire stations were called to fight the fire, mainly to contain it in the Bright and Johnston Building and prevent the fire from spreading to other valuable warehouses. Damage to stock was estimated at \$55,000 but there was only about \$5,000 worth of damage to the warehouse itself.¹⁴

A third major fire took place in 141 Bannatyne Avenue in 1926. Once again, the problem seems to

have started with the packing material of Bright's crockery stock. The fire was contained to the top two floors but the lower two floors could not escape smoke and water damage.¹⁵ All three fires occurred in the 1903 section of the building at 141 Bannatyne.

During the first three decades of this century, the Bright and Johnston Building had several tenants, almost all of whom wholesaled in perishable goods in some capacity. The heating and refrigeration system of the building, its loading docks on the spur track and in its own interior tunnel docks, as well as its proximity to the market made the warehouse ideal for its function. Gradually, the retailing of food products narrowed its focus as chain stores grew up and centralized their purchasing. Many of the companies that had acted as commission agents or local suppliers were bought out by the larger firms. Bright and Company were taken over in the 1920s and their warehouse space occupied by such firms as Chase and Sanborn and Kraft Cheese. The older section at 137 Bannatyne housed such firms as Alladin Industries lamp manufacturers, the Seiberling Rubber Company and in the 1940s, the Winnipeg Metal Manufacturing and Stamping Company.

Consistent with the early produce warehouse function of the building was the W.L. MacKenzie Company, who gradually grew to occupy more of the newer section. In 1918, the company acted as manufacturers' agents for assorted products but by the 1940s, they specialized in bakers supplies. In 1949, the 1903 section at 141 Bannatyne became the MacKenzie Building, while the 1882 section became the J.G. Building (now the Swiss Building). The W.L. MacKenzie Company subsequently became the marketing agents for MacDonald Tobacco and remained in the building until the 1970s.

The 1883 twin warehouse on the west side had been used by Marshall Wells many years prior to its demolition in c.1958. These two remaining buildings have experienced vacancies for many years that has limited the amount of maintenance, according to an assessment office report in 1965.¹⁶

Despite its numerous fires and additions, this building presented a unified and attractive facade that expresses its commercial function. It is especially important in the context of the turn-of-the-century development in the warehouse district east of Main Street. Its history is a faithful reflection of the growth and development of the district while the individuals also symbolize Winnipeg's prominence in commercial growth in the Canadian west.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The Building Boom", The Winnipeg Daily Sun, 20 October 1883.
2. Henderson's Directory of the Northwest 1882-88.
3. "Tenders", Manitoba Daily Free Press, 22 August 1882, p. 8.
4. "The Boom of 1883", The Winnipeg Daily Sun, 31 March 1883.
5. "Manlius Bull" in Frank Schofield The Story of Manitoba, Vol. II, The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, Winnipeg, 1913, p. 114.
6. The City of Winnipeg - The Capital of Manitoba, Thompson and Boyer, Winnipeg, 1886, p. 185.
7. "Their New Quarters", The Commercial, 30 May 1898, p. 896. See also "Property Transfers", Manitoba Free Press, 1 October 1898, p. 8.
8. Thompson and Boyer, op.cit., p. 182.
9. Advertisement in The Colonist, 1898 Summer Souvenir, Winnipeg, November 1898, p. 13.
10. "High Bicycle Champion Dies at 93", Winnipeg Free Press, 5 January 1955.
11. J.H.G. Russell Papers MG11 E2 P.A.M., Ledger for 1903, folio 214-15.
12. "Spectacular Fire On River Front Costs Many City Firms Nearly Two Hundred Thousand Dollars", Winnipeg Telegram, 29 January 1907, p. 1.
13. Russell papers, op.cit., Ledger 1907 folio 4-7. W.R. Ritchie was the carpenter and S. Brynj Olfsson and Company were the masons. At this time, a new heating system was installed in the 1882 section.
14. "Spectacular \$35,000 Fire in Winnipeg", The Winnipeg Telegram, 7 September 1915, p. 1.
15. "Heavy Loss Early Today in Bannatyne Fire", Manitoba Free Press, 26 May 1926, p. 1.
16. Selwyn Carrington "137-141 Bannatyne Ave." in Early Building in Winnipeg, Vol. IV, C.I.H.B., Manuscript Report 389, p. 174-5.

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Plate 1 – An engraving of the Bright and Johnston Building as it appeared in their advertisement in 1898. The lot on the right of the building was not in fact vacant. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N7323.)



Plate 2 – A view of Bannatyne Avenue East in c. 1903. The twin buildings (the dark 1883 structure on the left and the light 1882 warehouse on the right) located at the arrows. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N3928.)

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Plate 3 – Bannatyne Avenue East, ca.1905. The twin warehouses (arrows) are separated by 141 Bannatyne Avenue, the Bright and Johnston Building. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Stovel Advocate Collection, #65.)

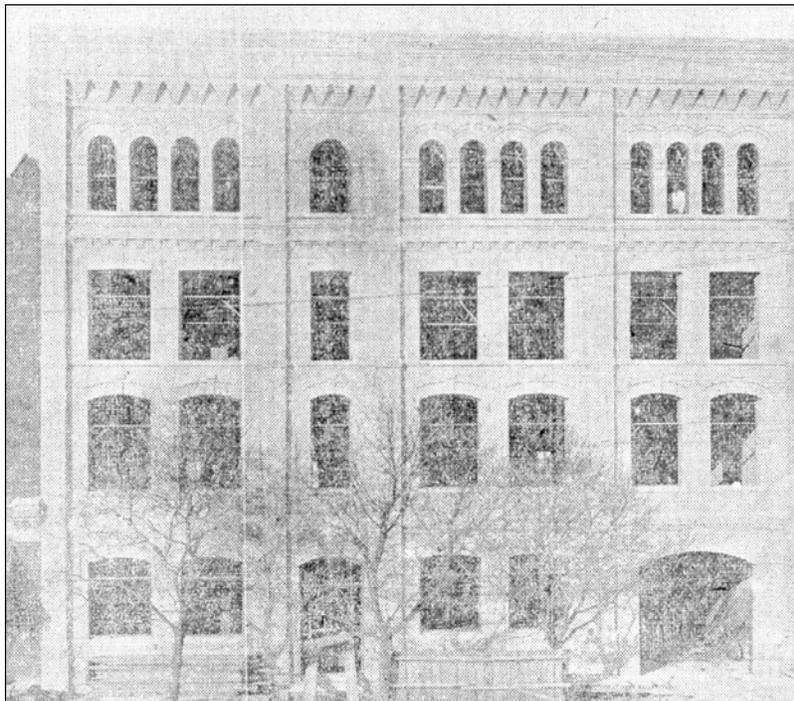


Plate 4 – The Bright and Johnston Building, 141 Bannatyne Avenue, 1907. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Morning Telegram, January 29, 1907, p.1.)

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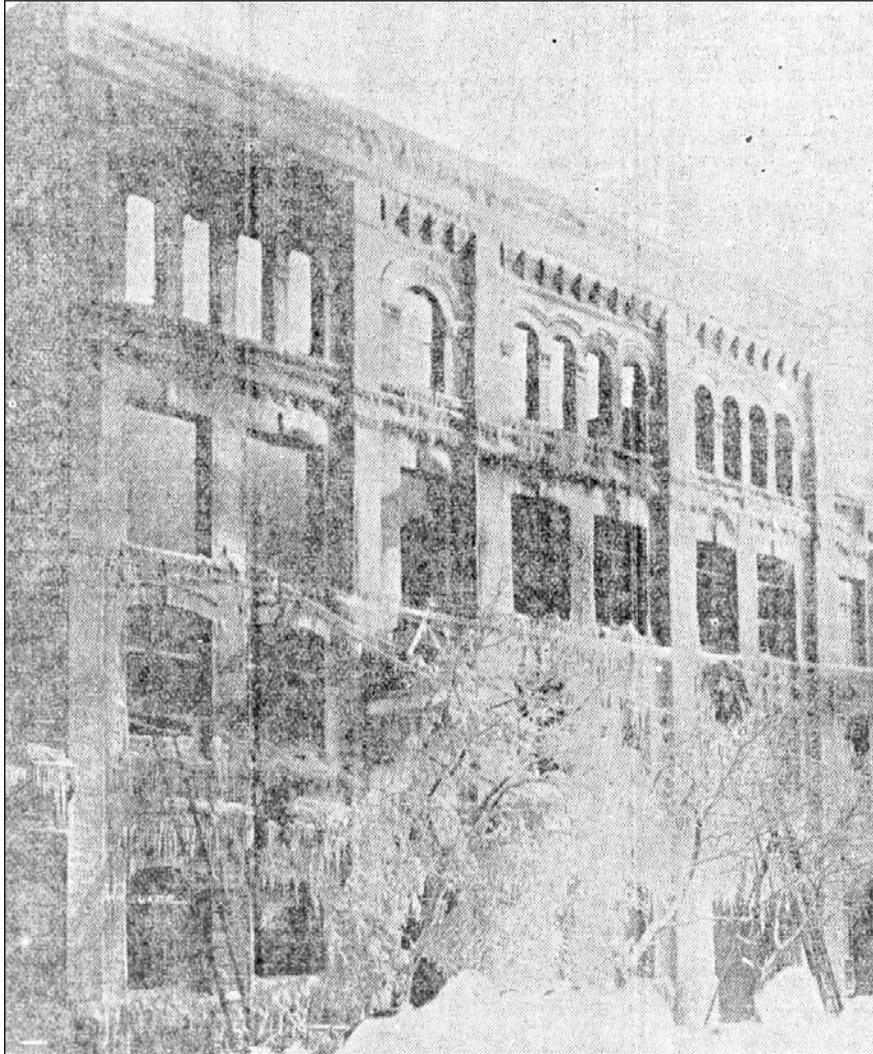


Plate 5 – The Bright and Johnston Building the day after the fire on January 29, 1907. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, *Morning Telegram*, January 30, 1907, p. 1.)