



104 KING STREET

**KING BUILDING
(FORMERLY RYAN BLOCK)**

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

August, 1988

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The Michelin Green Guide for Canada awards the city of Winnipeg a three star rating. It is therefore a distinguished place which is "worth the journey." While I cannot comment on the whole gamut of Winnipeg's attractions, I will agree that it has much to offer the tourist, and after a visit in the summer of 1987, I will reiterate my previously published opinion that in most respects its warehouse district is architecturally the finest on the North American continent. The splendour it displays within a rather concentrated urban area has its roots in Winnipeg's economic and cultural situation in the late nineteenth century.¹

Winnipeg's rapid expansion as a commercial centre was directly linked to the increasing population on the Canadian Prairies after 1890. This new population grew from scattered and isolated homesteaders into organized rural municipalities, villages, towns and cities with a quickly decreasing sense of isolation. Winnipeg became the middleman, 'The Gateway' for many of the goods and services brought into the west and the transcontinental railway lines afforded the western consumer a wider variety of goods.

As the entire transport system developed, goods from across the continent and from overseas became readily available to Winnipeg wholesalers and therefore to prairie consumers. Everything from wood stoves and tractors to salt and china were bought in bulk by Winnipeg merchants, organized into smaller shipments and sold to small merchants scattered throughout the west. Of course it was the non-luxury items that created the most demand but as western society developed, so too did the need for the 'better things in life.'

Among the city's early entrepreneurs was Thomas Ryan, who turned the need for more expensive items into one of Winnipeg's most successful business ventures. Ryan, a journeyman shoemaker,

¹ Leonard K. Eaton, *Gateway Cities and Other Essays* (Ames: 1989), p. 84.

arrived in 1874 from Perth, Ontario with \$70 worth of stock and a desire to make a better living.² He became one of the city's largest shoe and boot wholesalers-retailers, expanding from a store on Main Street to a four-storey warehouse on King Street and finally occupying a large warehouse on Princess Street. His second business address, 104 King Street, added elegance to the intersection of Bannatyne Avenue and King Street. Located in the heart of the warehouse district and southwest of the City Hall/Market Square complex, the Ryan Block (presently the King Building), was designed by Winnipeg architect H.S. Griffith and built in 1895.

STYLE

The King Building is an example of a reduced Richardsonian Romanesque structure, a style popular throughout the warehouse district (Plate 1). It became prominent on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border following the construction of H. H. Richardson's Marshall Field Wholesale Store in Chicago (1885-87). Winnipeg's desire to become the "Chicago of the North" contributed to the quick adoption of the style for the warehouse district. Its main elements include rounded arches, rusticated bases, strong textures, symmetrical designs and a lack of intense decoration.³ These elements combined to create massive, firmly based buildings that gave an impression of security, wealth and stability, often reflecting the character of the owners and business occupants.

CONSTRUCTION

The original three-storey structure measuring 11.6 x 27.3 m. (38' x 89.5') was of solid red clay brick (Plate 2).⁴ The design utilized a popular method of providing a high degree of support and fire resiliency: mill construction. This method, devised in the pre-Civil War United States, utilized large

² Winnipeg Sun, December 24, 1883.

³ For extensive studies on Richardson and his work, see L.M. Eaton, American Architecture Comes of Age. (Cambridge, Mass.: 1972) and H.R. Hitchcock, Jr., The Architecture of H.M. Richardson and His Times, (New York: 1936).

⁴ City of Winnipeg Assessment Record, #609400, Ward 2, PC 50 (below as AR); and Daily Nor'-Wester, November 2, 1895, p. 1.

square timber beams and rafters and thick wooden plank floors.⁵ As wood was relatively cheap at the time, the method became Winnipeg's most popular construction system until steel technology overcame early problems with fire damage. Tyndall stone was used for accents throughout the structure; the foundation is rubblestone.

Ryan's business success led in 1903 to the addition of a fourth storey, creating 1,022 square metres (almost 11,000 square feet) of space (Plate 3).⁶ Ryan re-hired Griffith to plan the 11.6 x 27.0 m. (38' x 88.5') addition. Costing \$2,000, made of the same brick and built by B.V. Hewphill,⁷ the new top fit perfectly into the architect's original design. The present structure rises 18.0 m. (59') from grade.⁸

DESIGN

A strong, sturdy base is provided by rusticated Tyndall stone at grade, an element used extensively in Winnipeg's warehouse district. Three large round-headed arches with rough-cut Tyndall keystones define the first floor of the front or east facade. Above these openings are radiating brick arches with brick drip mouldings. Modest brick pilasters run up the front facade from the first floor arched openings. The three second-storey windows are complete with rough stone sills, radiating brick arches and raised Tyndall keystones. The third storey continues the window rhythm design, replacing only the rough keystones with raised brick elements.

Griffith chose a variety of brickwork techniques for ornamentation at the upper stages. Corbelling above the third storey windows and at the same level on corner pilasters eases the movement into what once was a cornice and parapet. Now found at this level is a series of ornamental brick panels leading to a rough stone belt course that forms the fourth floor window sills on the east and north

⁵ Leonard K. Eaton, "Warehouses and Warehouse Districts in Mid-American Cities" in Urban History Review Vol. XI, No. 1 (June 1982), pp. 21-2.

⁶ Winnipeg Telegram, September 18, 1906, p. 59.

⁷ City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #169/1903.

⁸ AR.

elevations. Griffith also designed the one storey addition (1903) that continues the patterns formed throughout the original design.⁹

Window treatments on this top level mirror the third floor, as do the brick accents above. Griffith chose to complete his work with a brick cornice and parapet.

The west (rear) and south elevations are unornamented other than the shallow pilasters found on the south wall. This southern facade originally formed a party wall with an adjacent warehouse that has since been removed. The north elevation includes a continuation of all the elements found on the east facade. Large windows throughout the structure allow for a great degree of natural light to enter the building. In response to the structure's function as a warehouse, the upper levels were unheated and sparsely furnished. Only the ground floor was finished, being the site of the offices and sample rooms.

INTERIOR

The main floor at the King Building remains fairly true to its original plan. Office space is still present at the front of the structure and the square wooden beams and posts are still visible. Access could not be gained to the rest of the building, although it has likely remained unchanged by time.

INTEGRITY

The King Building occupies its original site and has suffered little alteration. A Building Permit numbered 353 in 1976 shows \$10,000 worth of renovations were completed on the structure. These do not appear to have detracted from the authenticity of the present landmark. The building is in good structural condition.

STREETSCAPE

⁹

BP #169/1903.

Situated on the corner of King and Bannatyne for over 90 years, this structure occupies a nearly central position in Winnipeg's warehouse district. It is both like and unlike many of the surrounding structures and is an integral part of this section of the city.

ARCHITECT

The architect of the Ryan Block was H.S. Griffith. Born in 1865 in England, he came to Winnipeg in the spring of 1887 and in 1893 set up his own architectural practice. He designed many of Winnipeg's residences during his career, a total of 18 during the year he designed this block. He has been given 10 points by the Historical Buildings Committee (see Appendix 1 for biography).

PERSON

Thomas Ryan was born in 1851 in Perth, Ontario, attended common school before entering the shoemaking profession as an apprentice for a local merchant, Robert Coskery, at age 15.¹⁰ It was also in Perth that Ryan fought against the Fenians (1866).¹¹ At age 21, he moved to Belleville to become a journeyman shoemaker under John McKison. After three months he returned to Perth and began working for D. Glossap. Ryan's next move was on a grander scale. With about \$70 worth of stock, he made the long trek to Winnipeg in the summer of 1874, going West like so many other young unattached Ontario males seeking their fortunes.

Almost immediately upon his arrival, Ryan joined with another man to form one of Winnipeg's first shoe retailers, the McFarlane and Ryan Company. Only two short years later, Ryan purchased the business from McFarlane for \$450 and the familiar firm of Thomas Ryan Boots and Shoes was created.¹²

¹⁰ [Winnipeg Sun](#), December 24, 1883.

¹¹ [The Canadians, 1867-1967: Part 1](#), (Toronto-1968), p. 45.

¹² [Winnipeg Sun](#), December 24, 1883.

By 1883, Ryan's business was so successful that he built a new store on Main Street (Plate 4). Ironically, another shoe store, McDonald's Shoes, today occupies the site at 492 Main Street. This first Ryan Shoe Store was Winnipeg's first all stone structure and the first in the city with an electric passenger elevator.¹³ Carved in stone and set at the top of the facade was the inscription, "The Earth is the Lord's and the Fullness Thereof", reflecting Ryan's strong religious faith. This original building was sold in 1893 to A. F. Banfield who remodelled it and used it as a department store until his death. Several owners then occupied the building until it was gutted by fire in 1933 and subsequently demolished.¹⁴

In 1889, Ryan correctly saw a brighter future in the wholesale trade and sold the retail end of the company to his brother George. By 1895, business had progressed to the point where a warehouse was deemed necessary and Ryan built the present structure at 104 King Street (also numbered 286 Bannatyne Avenue). Business continued to flourish (in 1902 brother George sold the retail business and became the vice-president of the wholesale firm) and in 1906-07, 33 years after his arrival, Ryan moved his business to its third Winnipeg location, 44-46 Princess Street.

If the new structure can be taken as an indication of Ryan's success, then he was doing very well. The building at the corner of Princess Street and Notre Dame Avenue was a full seven storeys high with approximately 3,300 square meters (36,000 square feet) of space, and was built of stone, brick and steel. Possessing the same attitude as many other Winnipeggers, Ryan purchased the adjacent lot to enable his interests "to double their plant when necessary without moving."¹⁵ Blair and Northwood designed the Princess Street warehouse in 1906.

Also in 1906, the company opened a Calgary branch and began the organization of another in Edmonton. Ryan employed eight travelling salesmen throughout the West at this time, under the

¹³ Winnipeg Tribune, December 24, 1937.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Winnipeg Telegram, September 18, 1906, p. 59.

motto, "The pick of the Boston and Quebec markets is demanded and furnished."¹⁶ When Thomas retired in 1928, it signalled the end of over 50 years of mercantile activity for Ryan in the city.¹⁷

Ryan also led an active political life. He became an alderman in 1884, a post he held until December 1888 when he was elected for a one-year term as Mayor. It was during this term that the popular Ryan Sunday By-laws were passed, limiting Sunday trading activities to a minimum.¹⁸ They were seen as Ryan's major accomplishment and again showed the importance of his religious beliefs.

Ryan died in 1937 at the age of 86 after a lengthy illness. He left two sons and seven daughters and a legacy of success. It seems difficult to believe such a success story as Ryan's. From a journeyman shoemaker with \$70 of stock settling in a new city to alderman, Mayor and industry giant in less than 25 years. But Winnipeg could boast many such stories, this fact only heightened the city's growth and stature in Canada and North America.

In Ryan's 63 years in Winnipeg he helped promote the city, provide jobs here and throughout the west, and continue its Christian past against the lobbying of commercial interests. In so doing, he became one of the city's leading men.

With Ryan's departure from 104 King Street in 1907, the structure took on several new minor wholesaling interests and continued to regularly change tenants. The first tenant to become associated with the building for a long period of time was Warkov and Safeer, a wholesale leather supplier. The two men involved, Jacob Warkov and B.D. Safeer, took up occupancy in 1945 and remained there until 1973. For the next 4 years the warehouse stood vacant. Gray's Auction Mart became the next tenant in 1977, remaining in the building until a recent move.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Winnipeg Tribune, December 24, 1937.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Henderson's Directory, various years.

EVENT

There is no known significant event connected with the building.

CONTEXT

The year 1895 would be the approximate beginning of major warehouse construction in the city. Building techniques were finally being developed to support taller, larger buildings and greater amount of stored materials. Much of the 1895 construction in Winnipeg can be compared favourably to the Ryan Block. While floor plans changed and degrees of ornamentation differed, the basic design, utilizing Richardsonian Romanesque ideas, remains similar. This block was an early example of this new building technology.

The post-1890 period in Canada was one of much debate in Canada's larger cities over what was termed the city beautiful. Many architects, engineers and urban planners felt construction should be totally planned to allow for aesthetic consideration of each new structure.²⁰ In Winnipeg this movement was moderately supported but was combined with the city's desire to adopt popular trends from Chicago, like the Richardsonian Romanesque style. In combination these two ideas increased the virtual monopoly over design which this style enjoyed in Winnipeg's warehouse district from 1895-1905.

There are other good examples of this design: the Massey Building (1885) at 294-96 William Avenue, designed by George Browne (designated Grade II);²¹ the J.M. Ashdown Warehouse (1895) at 157-59 Bannatyne Avenue designed by S.F. Peters;²² and the Gault Building (1900) at 92-104 Arthur Street, also designed by George Browne and designated Grade II.²³

²⁰ W. Van Nus, "The Plan Makers and the City. Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and Urban Planning in Canada 1890-1939,"(Toronto: 1975), pp. 134-156.

²¹ The Year Past, 1983, pp. 71-2.

²² The Year Past, 1985, pp. 23-6.

²³ The Year Past, 1982, pp. 19-20.

Not only can the Ryan Block be seen in the context of Winnipeg's most popular commercial architectural form, but also in the growth of the city as a wholesale centre and, even more specifically, in City Hall district as Winnipeg's wholesale centre. In all three areas of concern the Ryan Block can be viewed as one of the earlier models for later construction and development and once again Ryan was at the forefront.

LANDMARK:

On one of Winnipeg's busier intersections, in a revitalized district of shops and restaurants, the King Building is a familiar sight to many citizens and is a familiar sight to many citizens and is a relatively prominent structure. With the relatively recent advent of summer festivals in the area, the Old Market Square region has taken on an even larger significance and increased the areas popularity.

We are in too great a hurry to make Winnipeg look like every other city. We have a rich heritage. In our rush to develop we must be careful not to lose site of what is unique and special to Winnipeg – our Exchange District.²⁴

²⁴ Winnipeg Sun, July 25, 1990.

APPENDIX I

Henry S. Griffith

H.S. Griffith was one of several British architects who immigrated to Canada in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Griffith was born in Oxfordshire, England in 1865, the son of Reverend G. S. Griffith. Architectural training took the form of three years of service (1882-85) to Reading, England firm of Webb and Tubbs. In 1886 Griffith trained as a draftsman with the London District Surveyor's office.¹

He came to Winnipeg in the spring of 1887 where he found employment with the Northern Pacific Railway and later with the Land Titles Office. Both positopms dealt mainly with surveying activities but, in 1893, Griffith opened an architectural practice in the city.² Although this practice was relatively small, he designed several buildings across the province. He moved to Saskatoon in 1906 and Victoria in 1907. He stayed in British Columbia for the remainder of his life, designing many residential and commercial buildings. The 1918 collapse of his firm followed its rapid expansion during the 1900-12 land boom. Griffith's Victoria office was closed and he operated solely out of his Vancouver office. He died in that city in 1944.³

An incomplete list includes:

Winnipeg:

- G.H. Snow house - 1894
- Ryan Block - 104 King Street - 1895
- Norwood Cricket Club Pavilion - 1895
- Mitchell Building - 1896
- Rev. Andrew Stewart house - 239 Colony St. - 1896
- Brookside Cemetary Chapel and Vault - 1897
- Central Fire Hall - 1899

¹ "A Group of Winnipeg Architects" in Canadian Architect and Builder, January 1897, pp. 5-6.

² Ibid., pp. 5-6.

³ Compiled from: Ibid., H.S. Griffith (file of the Historic Resources Branch - thanks to R.R. Rostecki), and M. Peterson, "Ryan Block - 104 King Street.", report for the Historical Buildings Committee. Note: Norwood Cricket Club information from The Daily Nor'-Wester, November 2, 1895, p. 1.

H.S. Griffiths Winnipeg designs, continued:

School on the Machray School site - 1899
Office Building - McDermot Avenue - 1900 (Permit #162/1900)
Olafson Warehouse - James at King - 1901 (permit #272 and 489/1901)
Northwest Laundry Building - Main Street at York - 1901 (Permit #490/1901)
Baker Building - 270 McDermot Ave. - 1901
St. Boniface Normal School - 210 Masson St. - 1902
C. Vokes house - Central Ave. - 1902 (Permit #283/1902)
Criterion Hotel - 214 McDermot Ave. - 1903 (Grade II)
M. Lechtzier's Turkish and Russian Bathhouse - corner Pacific and King - 1903
Oxford Hotel - 1905

Portage la Prairie:

Trinity United Church (Knox Presbyterian) - 1897
James Cowan Block - 1897
Pratt Opera House alteration - 1898
St. Mary la Prairie Church - 1898-99
T.&W. Millar Hardware Store - 1899
A. McKillop Furniture Store - 1899
John Ferriss house - 1899
J. Fulton house - 1899
T.B. Mills Block - 1899
J.R. McDonald house - 1899
Bailey Block - 1900

Manitoba:

Stonewall - two businesses/warehouse blocks - 1895
Minnedosa - bank building - 1899
Morden - P.C. Heckels house - 1900
Westbourne - Episcopal church - 1900
Neepawa - Neepawa Hospital - 1904

Vancouver:

West Pender Building - 1912
Mining Building

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Plate 1 – 104 King Street, Ryan Block, ca.1988. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

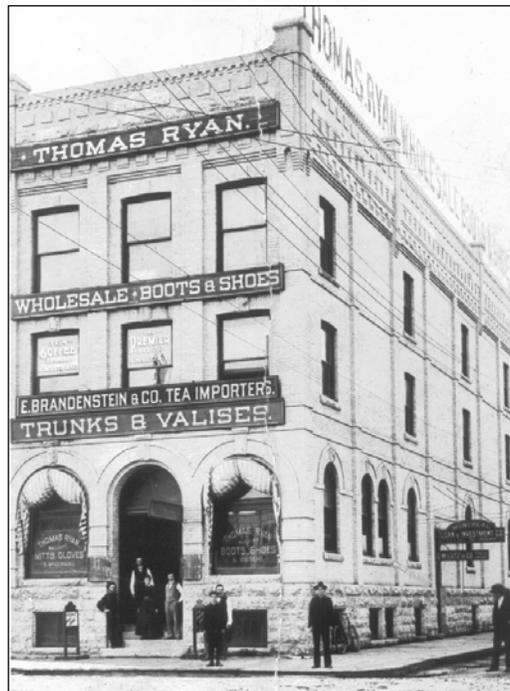


Plate 2 – Ryan Block, ca.1900. Note it is only three storeys high. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

104 KING STREET – KING BUILDING (FORMERLY THE RYAN BLOCK)



Plate 3 – Ryan Block with a fourth floor, ca.1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N1578.)



Plate 4 – Warkov-Safeer Limited Building, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

104 KING STREET – KING BUILDING (FORMERLY THE RYAN BLOCK)

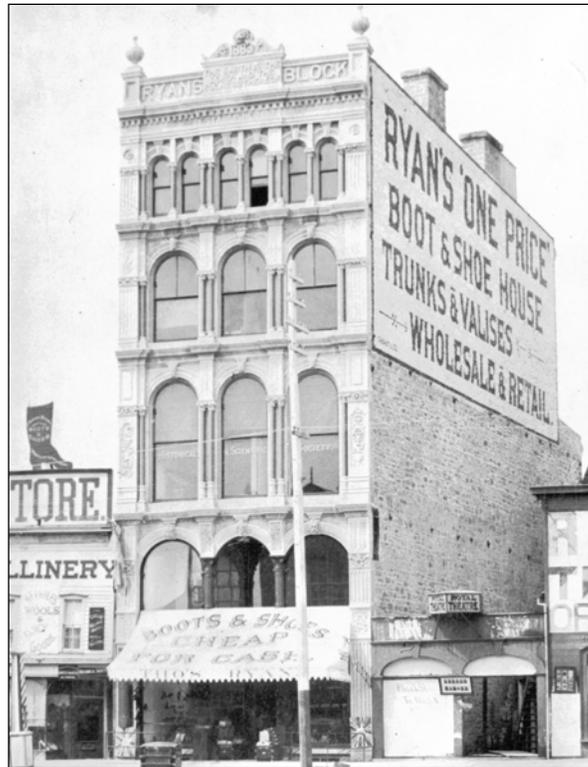


Plate 5 – Ryan Boot and Shoe Building, Main Street, no date. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N8648.)

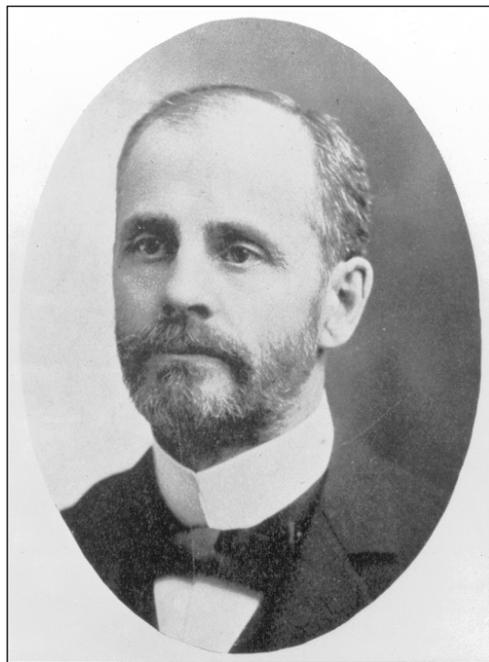


Plate 6 – Thomas Ryan, 1902. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N4403.)