136 MARKET AVENUE

MARSHALL-WELLS HARDWARE WAREHOUSE

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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> The pre-eminence of Winnipeg as a regional metropolis had been established during the 1880s and 1890s but was confirmed, in most emphatic terms, by the boom years between 1900 and 1913.[1]

An understanding of the "boom years" in the Winnipeg wholesale trade can be found symbolically in the early history of the Marshall-Wells Hardware Company. The expansion of the Duluth, Minnesota, based concern into the western Canadian market moved in perfect step with the rise of population, the growth of financial institutions, and, most importantly, to the extension of railway lines which ran from Winnipeg to all points in the Northwest. From the 1890s the firm advanced in the Canadian jobbing trade by having a one man representative in Winnipeg and, then, by the construction of a warehouse on Bannatyne Avenue, in 1900. From there the company built another warehouse at 136 Market Avenue, in 1905, and a year later, extended that property. Finally in 1912 the building was upgraded by the addition of another four storeys. The advance of Marshall-Wells' Canadian interests was clearly in tune with the economic and social circumstances of the early twentieth century. For instance, as the western Canadian population increased by a flood of immigration from Europe, the United States, and eastern Canada, due to the availability of land and good crop conditions, it created a labour pool and a consumer market which extended throughout the prairies, as far as British Columbia. Responding to this demographic phenomenon were the financial institutions, the warehouse trade, and the railroad companies, all of which were intrinsically linked. Significantly, for the wholesalers was the availability of credit and favourable tariff for Winnipeg shippers, in the late nineteenth century. Thus, graphic evidence of warehouse expansion is to be found in the Core Area of Winnipeg, as in other large North American cities, which were subject to the same social and economic factors.[2]

The Marshall-Wells Company, having established a foothold in the Duluth wholesale trade, cautiously began to invade the Winnipeg market by placing a resident representative in the city in 1894. However, by 1900 a clear decision had been made to extend their operation. That year the

company was incorporated with three directors from Winnipeg and three from Duluth to carry the Canadian trade from a Winnipeg warehouse building. Plans were drawn and the new "Hardware House" was constructed at 123 Bannatyne Avenue.[3] Three travellers were immediately put into the field to take orders for the sale of hardware items, exotic foodstuffs, and chemicals.[4]

Five years later, in response to a steadily increasing trade, Marshall-Wells commissioned the Winnipeg architectural firm, Hooper and Walker, to design a four-storey hardware warehouse building on Market Avenue.[5] The firm, a partnership of Samuel Hooper, stone cutter and architect, and Charles H. Walker, draughtsman, was well known and had achieved a certain popularity and confidence among Winnipeg citizens.[6] A local construction firm, William Grace and Company, was employed to do the work. The location of the building was ideal as it would back onto a railway spur line which could be shared by both the Market Avenue and Bannatyne properties. The building was to be four storeys high with a frontage of 50' and a depth of 132'. The estimated cost was $30,000.00. It was raised to a height of 65' from grade level on concrete footings which supported a stone foundation. The exterior of the building was buff brick with cut limestone decoration which encased the first floor and was carried through to the window sills. The flat roof rising above the cornice was covered in tar and gravel. It had a scuttle access and one chimney. The building had one "automatic" freight elevator. Heating was provided by steam, light by electricity, and water came in by the City main.[7]

Less than one year after the beginning of construction on the new warehouse on Market Avenue, in what became a record building year, Marshall-Wells applied for a permit to expand their floor space by the erection of another warehouse which would be adjacent to that built in 1905. On April 20th 1906 Hooper and Walker were granted permission by the City of Winnipeg to raise a four-storey warehouse on the southeast corner of Market Avenue and Rorie Street. The work this time was done by the construction firm of Waterworth and Fee. Frontage was to be 132' with a depth of 130'. The building was to rise to 68' from grade level on concrete footings, again supporting a stone foundation. The external walls were to be "buttressed for additional storeys in the future". They were to be enclosed in brick with a stone covering to the end of the first floor with stone decorations

on the window sills, as with its predecessor. Evidence of Hooper and Walker's concern for fire safety was to be found in the plans for the building. For example, the flat roof with its scuttle access and one chimney was to be covered in asphalt rather than tar and gravel. The frame of the building was of slow burning millwork construction so that it was "as fireproof" as possible. Ceilings throughout were metal, although a concession was made to management with light planking ceilings in the offices. There were to be two freight elevators protected by 12" solid doors - elevators which were constructed with every facility for handling heavy hardware. Fire doors were built into every floor. Finally, there were two fire escapes situated on the south side of the building near the loading docks. Again steam heat and electric light were chosen, as was a water connection to the City main. The total cost of the building was estimated at $110,000.00.[8]

In addition to a particular interest in fire safety the Hooper-Walker building bears the distinctive mark of Samuel Hooper's talent in monumental stone work and eclectic design. The clearest indication of Hooper's personal touch is in the elaborately carved stone entrance which frames the doorway on Market Avenue giving the building a sense of dignity and stability.[9] Moreover, this classical sense of importance and stature within the community is carried throughout the ground floor rooms, which are noteworthy with their supporting posts disguised as corinthian capitals. The newly constructed warehouse building gave Marshall-Wells "enormous" capacity in Winnipeg. It proved to be more than adequate for the jobbing trade until 1912 when the company decided to expand again.[10]

On July 24, 1912 a permit was issued to Carter, Halls, and Aldinger - designated architect and builder. An additional four storeys were added to the 1906 building at a cost of $63,000.00.[12] Continued attention was paid to fire prevention with the construction of a parapet and metal cornice on two sides of the building and with the installation of an automatic sprinkler system on all floors.[13]

The Marshall-Wells Hardware Warehouse, as it stood when completed in 1912, was an impressive structure marking the company's position in the Winnipeg wholesale trade. Its buff brick exterior, with cut stone base to the first floor, offered a classical elegance which was carried through with the

raised brick pilasters which ascended to the seventh floor. The eighth floor was distinguished by extra windows, although of a smaller size, which appeared to be protected by the overhanging metal cornice which rested on a series of brackets. The general aspect of the building was one of form and function which was further enhanced by the loading docks on the west and south facings. However, severity of design was tempered by Hooper's detailed stone entrance and the rather elaborate eclectic wrought iron balconies which decorate the north front facade.

Marshall-Wells continued to hold its place in the Winnipeg warehouse community through its operation from the Market Avenue building until 1956. At that time the company moved to new premises on Ellice Avenue. The building at 136 Market Avenue was sold to Monarch Wear Ltd. and two years later was renamed the Modern Women Building. Since that time the structure has continued to serve a mixed warehouse/factory function with the focus on the clothing trade.[14] The building appears to have been well managed and well maintained.

If the story of a city's history can be read in its buildings, then there is no better example of Winnipeg expansion during the "boom years" than that found at 136 Market Avenue. Marshall-Wells penetrated the north-western Canadian market by the installation of a resident representative of the company, followed by the construction of a warehouse, which, in turn, was succeeded by the construction of another. Finally, that property was expanded to a grand eight-storey building. As the company increased its trade in Canada, it marched in perfect time with the social and economic conditions of the day.

FOOTNOTES

1. G.A. Friesen, The Canadian Prairies: A History (1984), p. 275.

2. Reuban Bellan, Winnipeg: First Century, An Economic History (1978), pp. 94-108.

3. The Commercial 27/01/00, p. 661. See Bellan, p. 75.

4. City of Winnipeg Fire Insurance Plans, 1918, vol. II, p. 206. There is a breakdown of the goods which the Bannatyne Warehouse carried. Unfortunately, the same is not true for Market Avenue, however, one might assume that such was the case. For example, there were machine supplies, automobile and telegraph parts, paints, oils, paper and wood, calcium carbide and pipes, a banana ripening room and a current cleaning room...

5. Bellan, p. 76.

6. See biography of Hooper and Walker. See photograph - photographic collection, P.A.M.

7. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 2467, 30/08/05. See also Manitoba Free Press 06/12/06, p. 25, and the Fire Insurance Plans, p. 206.

8. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 654, 20/04/06.

9. See L.K. Eaton, "Warehouses and Warehouse Districts in Mid-American Cities", A.H.R., xi (June 1982), p. 17, for his comments on the importance of design in conveying a message of commercial importance and financial solvency to the community.

10. Bellan, p. 94. Between 1909 and 1912 there was a boost to economic activity with an inflow of British investment and easier credit terms. See the City of Winnipeg Assessment Roll, 1912, p. 96. The building was assessed at $203,500 (land - $100,000; buildings - $103,500).

11. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 2793, 24/07/12.

12. Ibid.

13. Fire Insurance Plans, p. 206.

14. R. Rostecki, Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings, pp. 311-316.

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Plate 1 – 136 Market Avenue, Marshall-Wells Hardware Warehouse, 1987. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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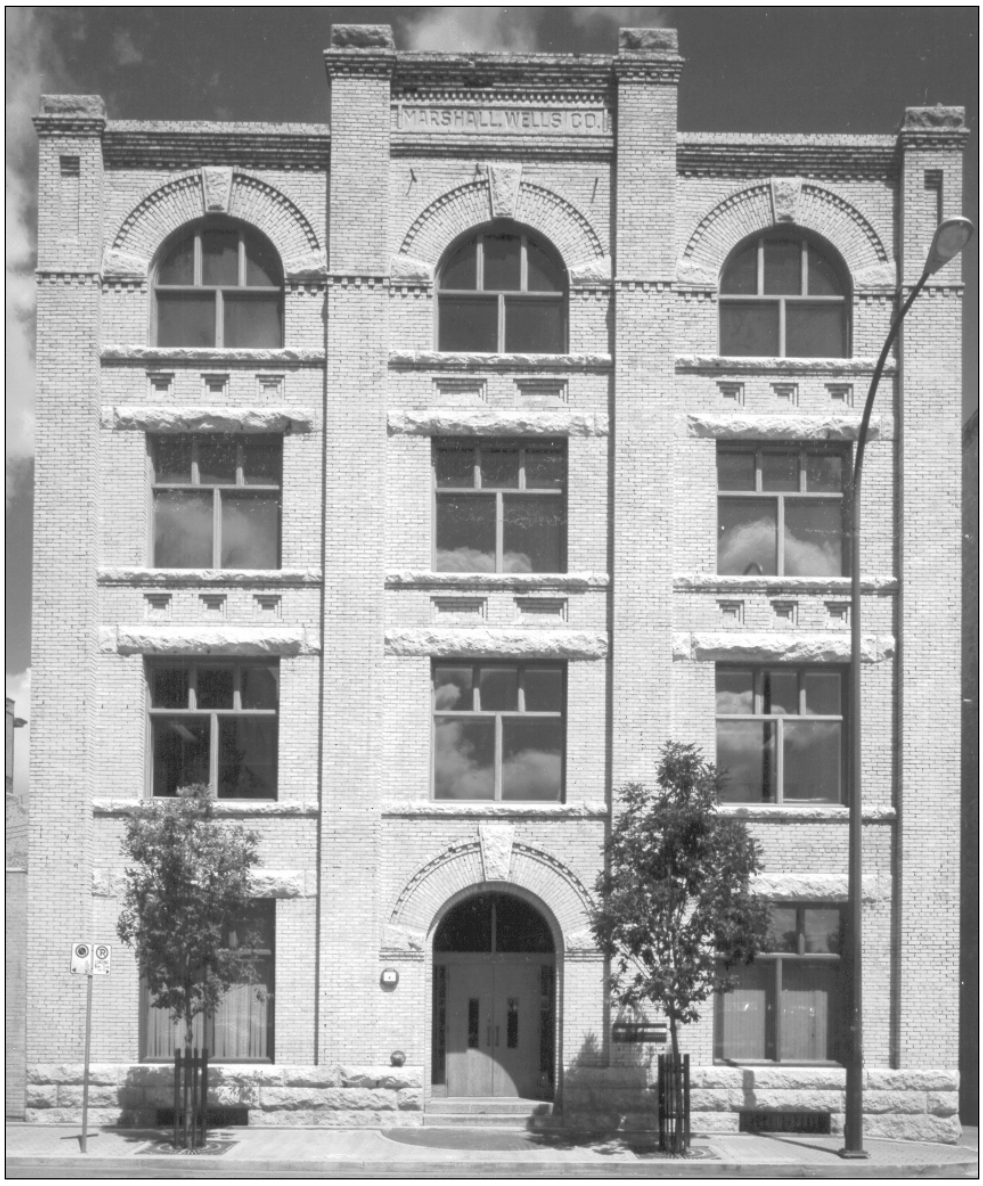

Plate 2 – 123 Bannatyne Avenue, Marshall-Wells Hardware Warehouse (built 1900), no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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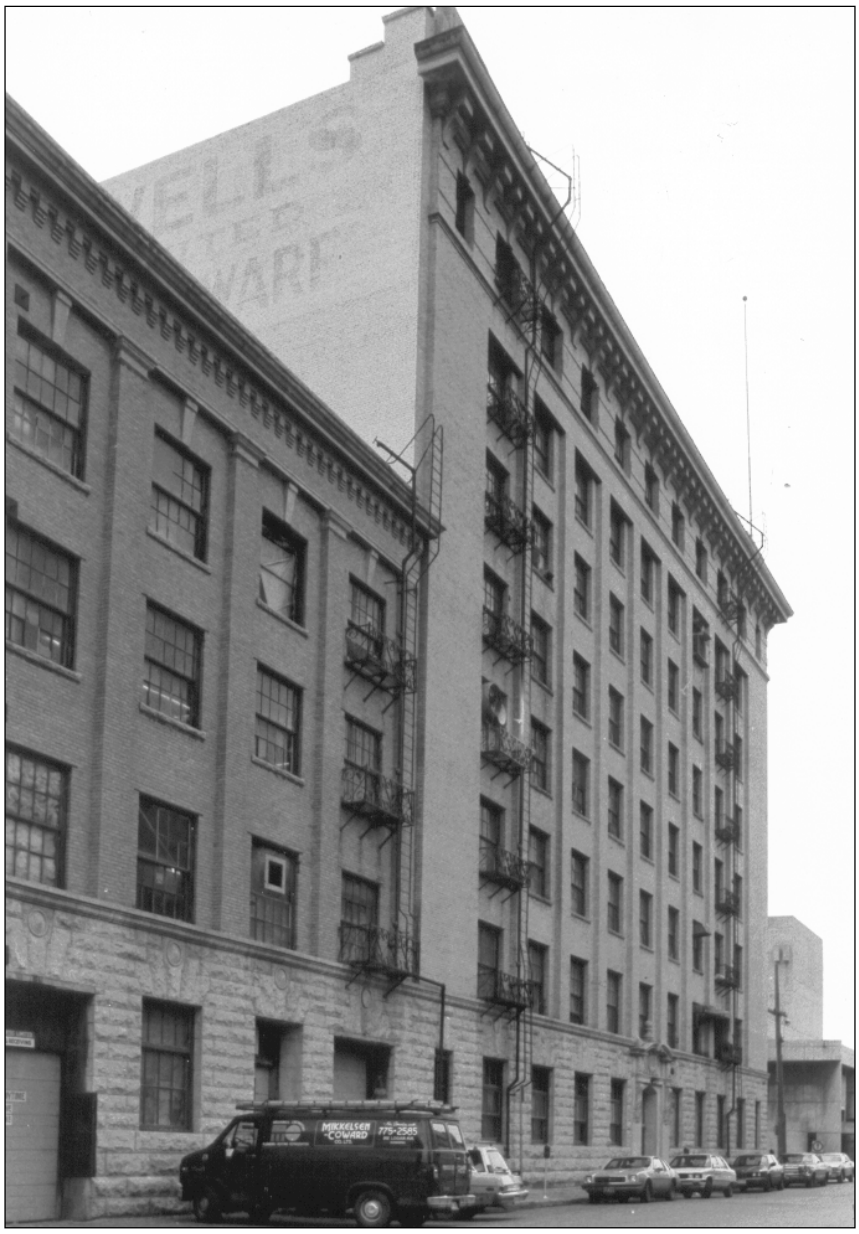

Plate 3 – 136 Market Avenue, north (Market Avenue) façade, 1987. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)