



173 McDERMOT AVENUE

**GRANGE BUILDING
(FORMERLY THE MITCHELL BLOCK AND
THE GILLETT BUILDING)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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The date stone over the centre window of the top floor of this building reads 1886, making it one of the earlier structures of the block. It was built for the W.J. Mitchell Drug Company as a wholesale distributor for this successful local druggist.

The architect of this structure was Arthur T. Timewall, a British architect and contractor who became a founding citizen of Brandon. Timewall is known in Brandon chiefly for two buildings. The first Brandon Fire Hall, torn down amid controversy in 1911,¹ was fondly recalled as Timewall's contribution to the new city. As well, he designed the 'Crystal Palace', a wood frame octagonal building constructed in 1883 as the main exhibition hall of the fledgling Brandon Agricultural Exhibition.² While the Exhibition grew in size and prestige, this building was destroyed in a storm in 1904.

This solid brick building measures 26 feet by 80 feet and is three storeys high on a stone and concrete foundation. It was fully modern in its finishing, with hot and cold running water and steam heat. It was constructed by railway contractor A.P. Cameron at a cost of \$7,000.³ Contemporary engraving of the original building show some interesting details that have not endured. In a symbolic gesture to the Mitchell Drug Company, Timewall placed a mortar and pestle rising from the centre of a broken pediment over the doorway. Stone urns capped the pilasters on either end of the parapet while a scrolled and ornamental carving peaked the centre, giving the building a very distinctive roof line. These features have been removed.

The upper two floors looked very much like they do now. The three bays rose between brick pilasters punctuated with flat-headed windows. Each window had a sill and lintel of a light stone, while the uppermost centre window has a date stone as a lintel. The mullions on each window are shaped like small Tuscan columns with an actual capital, shaft and plinth. Large storefront windows flanked the main entry, making the ground floor both interesting and inviting. In 1887, the warehouse was described as "one of the handsomest and finest appointed buildings in the country".⁴

When the new warehouse was opened 1 June 1887, the newspapers praised the comfort of the solid and commodious interior as well as its pleasing appearance. This gave the W.J. Mitchell Company the kind of profile that the firm sought. Established in 1875 by Messrs. Trolt and Melville, Mitchell joined the company in 1880 and bought it out in 1883. It was Winnipeg's first drug store. With a big retail store on Main Street doing a good business, Mitchell then decided to expand to the wholesale trade. Accordingly, this new warehouse contained a sales office on the ground floor, with a large stock of surgical instruments and an elaborate display of potent medicines. Here was also the fireproof vault for storing the expensive chemicals, presumably heroin, morphine and other drugs in common use then.

The second floor was the laboratory, Mitchell's "wet and dry department", where various tinctures and drug preparations were mixed. Such concoctions as cough syrup, wild cherry and spruce gum, camphorated eye water, Mitchell's Botanic Bitters, Mitchell's Liver Pills, Mitchell's Carbolic Cerate, Urquhart's Worm Specific, Prairie Pain Relief and Prairie Condition Powders were produced here, to be sold across the west by Mitchell's traveleers.⁵ In 1886, this was the only wholesale chemist based in the northwest. On the third floor were stored various bottles and corks for the preparations while oils and chemicals were stored in the basement.⁶

Although W.J. Mitchell continued to own this building until c.1910, as well as the lot west of it,⁷ he sold the wholesale portion of his business in 1890 and concentrated on the successful retail store. The drug wholesale was then operated by Martin, Rosser and Company. Later McLeod J. Holiday operated a smallwares wholesale from the buildings.

In 1910, the E.W. Gillett Company purchased the warehouse, renaming it the Gillett Building. This was an American manufacturing firm, with a factory in Toronto that produced Royal Yeast Cakes, Magic Baking Soda and the staple Gillett's Lye. The company had opened a branch warehouse locally in 1898⁸ but sales had been even better than expected. A manufacturer of lithograph printers' ink by the name of Sinclair and Valentine shared the Gillett Building for many years.

During the 1930s, 173 McDermot Avenue was known as the Grange Building after its principal occupant, the Grange Stationery wholesale. Sinclair and Valentine remained until the 1950s and were eventually joined by Empire Spice Mills. The name Grange Building was still used late into the 1970s. Architect Jack Ross, the Fleet Galleries jewelry designer David Rice all rented space in the building in recent years.

This building has been extensively renovated on the ground floor exterior, as well as on the interior. Its façade had been painted, the cornice and parapet removed, and the windows and door on the ground floor replaced. Despite these changes, it has retained the flavour of the historic streetscape. Such features as the date and the upper floor windows anchor the design firmly to the nineteenth century. Its historic significance is representative of Winnipeg's growth from a burgeoning city of opportunity for pioneer entrepreneurs to a distributing centre which dominated the prairie west until the 1950s.

FOOTNOTES

1. Letters to the editor Brandon Weekly Sun, 16 February 1911, p. 6. He is incorrectly referred to as Charles Timewell, Arthur Timewell's son and partner.
2. "Display Building Number 11 Brandon," Historic Resources Branch publication Winnipeg 1984, pp. 9-10. With thanks to Elaine Kisiow, HRB.
3. "The Building Boom," Winnipeg Sun, 29 September 1886, p. 8. Also, "About the Streets," Sun, 15 July 1886, p. 4.
4. "W.J. Mitchell & Co.," The Winnipeg Sun Mid-Summer Holiday Number, 1886, p. 21.
5. Loc. cit.
6. "A Handsome Building," MFP, 2 June 1887.
7. City of Winnipeg Assessment Roll, Ward No. 4, 1908, No. 1131 for 173 McDermot Avenue.
8. "An Enterprising Concern," MFP, 27 June 1898, p. 10.

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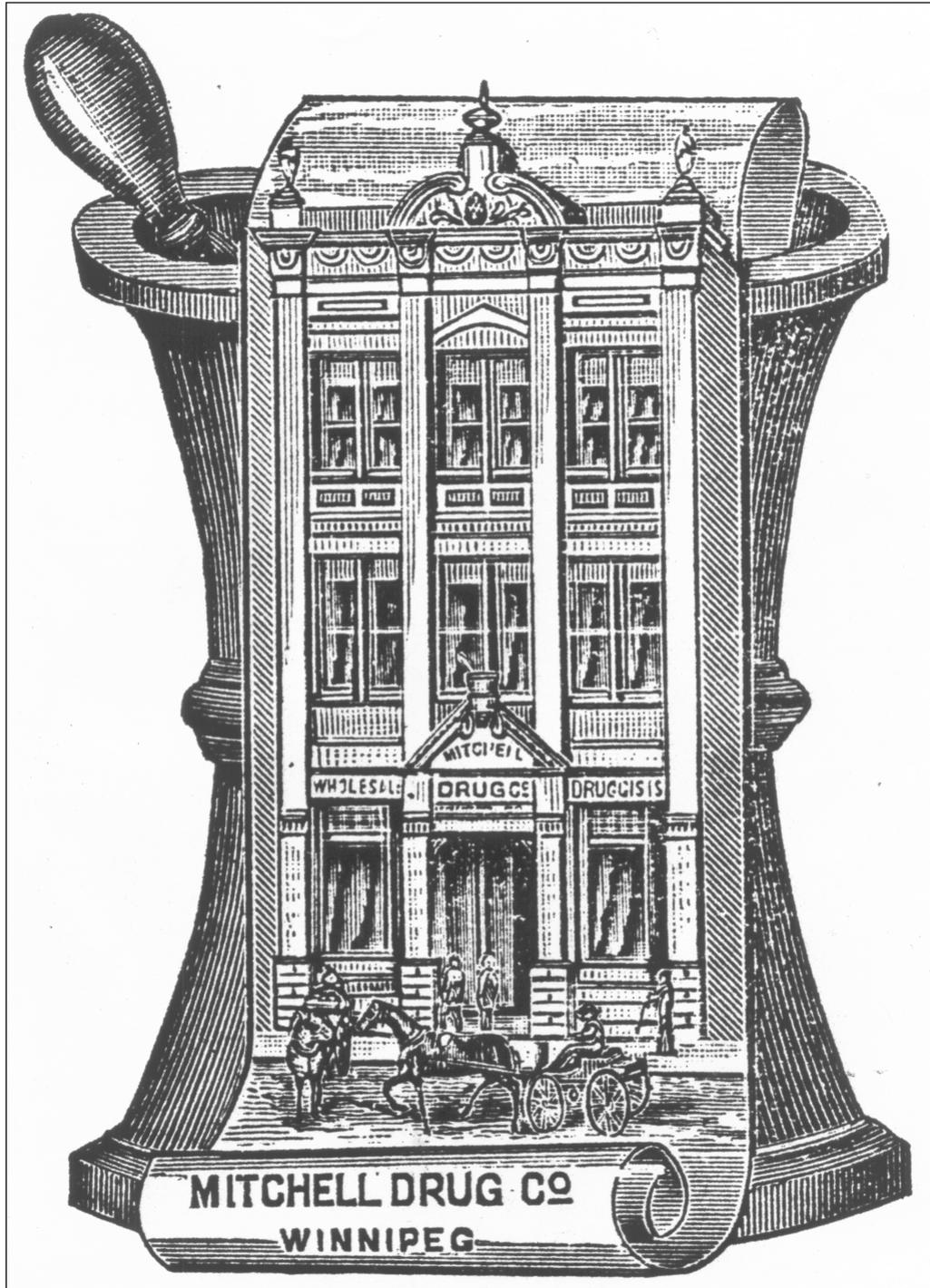


Plate 1 – Drawing of the Mitchell Drug Company Building, McDermot Avenue, 1886.
(Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 2 – North side of McDermot Avenue, 1969. 173 McDermot Avenue is at arrow. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)