

245 McDERMOT AVENUE – STOVEL BLOCK (KAY BUILDING)
Hugh McCowan, 1893, 1900



The printing and publishing industry is one in which Winnipeg businesses traditionally have excelled. Among the most innovative of the city's early firms was the Stovel Company, a family enterprise organized in 1889 and incorporated a decade later.

Its founders, brothers John, Augustus B. and Chester D. Stovel, formerly of Mount Forest, Ontario, built a reputation for quality production. They were the first in Western Canada to make colour prints, to use electricity to run presses, to mechanize other printing operations, and to employ an intricate wax processes for engraving maps. Their output included limited edition books, Henderson's directories, journals that were distributed across Canada, and the first Harlequin novels. Their firm also was known for its strong art department.

The brothers initially rented premises on Portage Avenue. By 1893, however, growing demand for their services justified construction of their own building at northwest McDermot Avenue and Arthur Street in the warehouse district.

The two-storey structure, designed by Hugh McCowan, had a raised stone foundation, solid brick exterior walls and internal frame of square wooden posts and beams. McCowan was re-employed in 1900 to extend the building upward by two storeys and westward along McDermot by some 21.3 metres (70 feet) to King Street.

The resulting complex continues to display an integrated and symmetrical Romanesque Revival face. Its three finished elevations are relatively flat, but feature textured detailing, round arches, rows of large windows set between brick pilasters, and a curved corner bay. The basement is marked by high square windows and a heavy rusticated stone band. There are round-arched openings on the main and second floors, while most of the lights above are segmentally arched. Ornamentation is provided by brick string courses, stone lug sills, patterned brick window heads with keystones, a corbelled and arcaded brick cornice, and large pilaster caps. The altered corner entrance sits within a stylized rusticated stone arch and columns.

In addition to the Stovels' production facilities, the building housed a German weekly newspaper called Der Nordwestern and other business tenants. In 1912, the Stovels acquired land on Bannatyne Avenue between Dagmar and Ellen streets for future expansion. They built a one-storey warehouse on the site in 1914 and made plans for a larger factory/office structure. A scaled-down version of those plans had to be implemented in mid-1916 after a fire gutted 245 McDermot.

The Stovels rebuilt but did not reoccupy the latter block. They instead leased the space to the T. Eaton Co., then to various suppliers associated with the needle trades. The property was sold in 1940 to Kay's Limited, a dry goods enterprise that developed a region-wide trade after it was established by a Russian immigrant, Hyman Kay, in the early 1900s. In recent years, the basement and first two floors of the Stovel Block were renovated for nightclub use. Other notable physical changes have entailed entrance alterations.

The Stovel Company merged in the early 1950s with Advocate Printers Ltd. The new entity, Stove-Advocate Press Ltd., continued to operate until the mid-1970s. It initially was led by Richard H.G. Bonnycastle, a former Hudson's Bay Company and Advocate Printers executive and the founder of Harlequin Books Ltd. Bonnycastle later (1960-66) served as the first chairman of the Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg, a regional government that preceded Unicity.

Architect McCowan (1841-1908) was an Ontarian who trained in carpentry and studied architecture and sanitary engineering at Flint, Michigan. He worked as a contractor after moving to Winnipeg in the 1870s, but began to obtain design commissions in the early 1880s. His clients included the Winnipeg General Hospital, Winnipeg School Board, Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Baptist and other churches, and local businessmen such as meat packer J.Y. Griffin, insurance agent Robert Strang, realty investor W.J. Christie, and shoe merchant and livestock dealer James Ryan. Designers employed in McCowan's office in the 1890s and early 1900s included Charles Henry Walker and Robert E. Davies.