



290 McDERMOT AVENUE

GLENGARRY BLOCK

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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With the railway station the warehouse is ordinarily the true civic monument of the North American city.¹

The melding of these two interests, railroading and warehousing, can be found in the Glengarry Block at 290 McDermot Avenue. The building's original owner, John Duncan McArthur, was not only head of a general contracting firm, which controlled several lumber and milling concerns, but he was also considered to be "Western Canada's greatest railway builder" having built the Grand Trunk railway from Thunder Bay to Winnipeg.²

McArthur initiated construction of the Glengarry Block in the summer of 1910 when Winnipeg was at the height of a building boom. At this time conditions were especially favourable for the construction industry with easy credit and with a flow of British and American capital investment into the Canadian west. In addition, the population was increasing because of the steady influx of immigration, attracted to prairie lands by bumper crop conditions. Hence for men like McArthur the prospects were more than propitious for making a fortune in railroads, building, and the distribution trades.³

The new warehouse was to be built on lots three and four on the south side of McDermot avenue, between Princess and King streets. It was designed by well known Winnipeg architect, John Hamilton Gordon Russell⁴, and was constructed by builder, A. Simmons, at a cost of \$51,000.00. The seven storey buff brick and Tyndall stone block was situated between the Wilson Building (1905) and the Daylight Building (1899). It had a frontage of 48'6" and a depth of 119'8¼".⁵

The semi-milled construction building stood on a stone foundation, 30" thick, which in turn rested on concrete footings with a spread of 8' and a depth of 2' and 1'6". The building rose on a girder post skeletal frame to a height of 95' from grade level. Including its brick enclosed tower, which held rainwater for the automatic sprinkler system, it rose to a height of 129' from

the street.⁶ The flat roof was composed of felt and gravel. It carried one chimney and had a scuttle access from the seventh floor. A particular feature of the roof was its skylight which opened out over the penthouse. The building had one staircase to the top floor and two elevators, one passenger and one freight. Heat and light were provided for by steam and electricity. Water came in from the city water main situated on the south side of the building near the loading docks. Ceiling heights from the basement to the seventh floor were as follows: basement — 10' 7", ground floor — 14' 6", second floor — 13' 0", third floor — 11' 6", fourth floor — 11' 0", fifth floor — 11' 0", sixth floor — 10' 6", seventh floor — 10' 6". The basement floor was concrete, but the upper floors were wood, likely fir or maple.⁷

From street level the building rose to the first floor in smooth cut Tyndall stone with a square arched entrance of the same stonework. The simple neo-classical design was carried throughout to stone frames for two well-matched large windows on the main floor, which were the same width as the doorway opening, giving a well-balanced structured appearance. The upper floors of the block were encased in local buff brick with a token to decoration in the rise of raised brick pilasters to a classical stone ledge marking the sixth floor. The windows were grouped in threes, becoming smaller with each ascending level. They were framed in brickwork with a smooth cut Tyndall stone sill. Single raised brickwork rectangles indicated the division between each floor. The sixth floor windows were set in arched brickwork alcoves and each alcove was designated on either side by a plain stonework design. The seventh floor was distinguished by a stonework band which underscored the galvanized iron cornice, which in turn was supported by brackets, creating an overhanging eave. The roof peaked slightly on the north facing, further enhancing the lightness and simplicity of design, yet, at the same time, the building had an air of dignity and stability.

The Glengarry Block, as many of Russell's buildings, offered many fire prevention features such as mill work construction and the "international" automatic sprinkling system, with its water tower (sprinkler gravity tank) on the roof and water sprayer outlets on every floor. The system was connected to a private hydrant. Additionally, the steam heat boiler was brick encased for safety, and the south side of the building carried a network of iron fire escapes.⁸

When completed J.D. Arthur let the building out to tenants, the first being Samuel Groff and Sons, importers and manufacturing agents, and to John Erzinger, a wholesale tobacconist.⁹ Eight years later the Winnipeg Fire Atlas described how the warehouse operated that year. According to the Atlas the ground floor and basement were used by John Erzinger's wholesale tobacco company. The second and third floors were rented by D.G. Specialties. Toys and novelties were stored and distributed from the fourth floor and there was a boot wholesaler on the fifth. Clothing was dispensed from the sixth and finally, the seventh floor was rented by G.K. Marshall, wholesaler of millinery, silks and ribbons.¹⁰

Today the interior of the Glengarry Block seems to be much intact. The ground floor is interesting, with its offices separated into compartments by what would appear to be the original glass partitions. The ceilings have been lowered with ceiling tiles, but an example of a pressed tin ceiling remains in the stairwell, which holds an oak staircase. At the time of building the wall covering on the ground floor was burlap, now it has been replaced by painted plaster and wood panelling. The warehouse continues to maintain its mixed function, presently offering space to several firms engaged in different aspects of Winnipeg's needle trade, from buttons to jeans.¹¹

The Glengarry Block at 290 McDermot Avenue provides a constant reminder of John Duncan McArthur's contribution to Western Canadian history. His influence on the shaping of the west can be seen as the distribution trade continues from buildings like the Glengarry Block, and can be heard as railway cars roll along western tracks carrying their warehouse goods to outlying markets.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ L.K. Eaton, "Warehouses and Warehouse Districts in Mid-American Cities," Urban History Review, xi (June 1982), 17.
- ² "Obituary," Winnipeg Free Press, 11/01/27, p. 89. John Duncan McArthur is best known for his construction of the Grand Trunk Railway, however, he was also connected to many other railroad projects in Western Canada. In Winnipeg he is particularly remembered for the Child's Building (formerly the McArthur Building) and for his extensive initiation and support of other building projects. See Manitoba History Scrapbook 1980-1982, p. 48; Manitoba Biography 1902-1905, p. 1389; Manitoba Biography 1924-1930, p. 89 and Manitoba Free Press 29/09/05. See Appendix C, Photographic Collection, P.A.M.
- ³ R. Bellan, Winnipeg: First Century. An Economic History (1978), pp. 94-108. Bellan points out that in 1910 more wheat moved through Winnipeg than any other North American market. That same year two banks with assets of over one hundred million dollars had established their head offices in the city and fourteen banks maintained regional head offices to supervise over a thousand branches operating in the west. 1911 was a record year for British investment, being twenty times what it had been in 1900-1902. Bellan cites a report from a Chicago newspaper in 1911, which predicted that Winnipeg would become the key area for the distribution trades in North America. See also L.K. Eaton, "Winnipeg: The Northern Anchor of the Wholesale Trade," Urban History Review (October 1982), p. 17. Eaton says that at the height of Winnipeg's prosperity just prior to World War I the city was connected by nineteen railway lines, which ran to other parts of Canada and to the United States.
- ⁴ See Appendix A - Biography of J.H.G. Russell. See also City of Winnipeg Building Permit 1970, 10/07/10. Note: photograph of Russell, F.H. Schofield, Story of Manitoba (1913).
- ⁵ See Historical Buildings Committee Reports on the Wilson Building (20/09/86) by Sheila Grover and the Daylight Building (06/01/87) by Kathryn Young, respectively.
- ⁶ Eaton, "Warehouses," (June 1982) pp. 22-26. Eaton points out the influence of the Chicago School in warehouse construction in North America, particularly the use of the skeletal frame for construction. Note: Russell spent some formative time in Chicago before opening an architectural office in Winnipeg. See Building Plan 1970/1910: Winnipeg, June 1910.
- ⁷ Winnipeg Building Plan 1970/1910 and Winnipeg Fire Insurance Plans 1918, p. 201. Also see City of Winnipeg Assessment Roll, Ward 4, 1911, p. 52. In 1911 the building was assessed at \$76,500.00 (land \$35,000 and building \$41,500).
- ⁸ Fire Insurance Plans, p. 201. See biography of J.H.G. Russell and Winnipeg Building Permit 1970/1910 and Building Plan 1970/1910. Also note Eaton, "Warehouses" (June 1982), p. 19, who points out the emphasis on fire safety in warehouse building coming out of the Chicago School, i.e., masonry construction (brick), automatic sprinkler systems....

- ⁹ Henderson's Directory, 1910-1920. From 1910 the warehouse tenants in the Glengarry Building steadily increased so that by 1920 it was let out to eight different businesses ranging from milliners to wholesale drugs.
- ¹⁰ Fire Insurance Plans, 1918, p. 201, and Henderson's Directory, 1918, p. 345.
- ¹¹ Some of the tenants in the Glengarry Block in 1987 are Kappies' Manufacturing, Canadian Shirt and Overall Manufacturing, Bleans Jeans and Raber Togs Manufacturing.

APPENDIX I

John Hamilton Gordon Russell (1862-1946)

John Hamilton Gordon Russell is “(o)ne of the pioneers in the architectural profession in the City of Winnipeg,”¹ At the time of writing, Russell was, indeed, one of the oldest and best known architects, having practised in the city for twelve years. J.H.G. Russell was born in Toronto in 1862 of Scots parentage. He was educated in Toronto schools, then, at sixteen years of age, he began the study of architecture under the tutelage of H.B. Gordon, a prominent architect. He worked with Gordon for five years after which he came to Winnipeg in 1882 for a brief time. However, he subsequently spent several years in Sioux City, Iowa, Tacoma and Spokane, Washington and Chicago, Illinois. In 1893 he returned to Winnipeg and two years later he opened an architectural office. J.H.G. Russell was the first Manitoba architect to become president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (1912-1913), as a member of the examining board of that body. In addition to his architectural interests he was vice-president of the Winnipeg Mercantile Trust Company and a director of Canadian Finance and Securities Company. He was also a Scottish Rite Mason, a member of the Assiniboia Lodge, Rotary Club, Canadian Club, and the Presbyterian Church.² Buildings to his credit include residences, office blocks, banks, warehouses, and churches.³

¹ Winnipeg Telegram, 18/09/06, p. 58.

² F.H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba, col. II, p. 154. Also see the J.H.G. Russell Collection in the Photographic Archives, P.A.M.

³ J.H.G. Russell built homes for J.H. Ashdown, J.D. McArthur, W.J. Christie, M. Ball, W.M. Windott, J.A. Aiken, E.M. Robinson, A.L. Johnson...He also designed several stores, office buildings, and banks — the Royal Bank, J.H. Ashdown Hardware Company, the Sylvester-Wilson Building, the Lake of the Woods Milling Company, Campbell Brothers (1907), McArthur’s Building (now Child’s Building) (1909), the Swiss Building (1903), the Glengarry Block (1910), and the (1904) addition to the Daylight Block. Russell was also responsible for designing many Winnipeg churches — Augustine Presbyterian (1903), Westminster United (1912), and Knox Presbyterian (1914).

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Plate 1 – Glengarry Block, 290 McDermot Avenue, 1970. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)