

**644 PORTAGE AVENUE
CASA LOMA BUILDING
*J.H.G. Russell, 1909***



Portage Avenue came into its own as one of Winnipeg's major commercial thoroughfares in the early 1900s. This development was most evident in the downtown. However, construction soon spread west beyond Wesley (United) College at Portage and Balmoral Street and an institute for the hearing and speaking impaired at Sherbrook Street.

One of the larger-scale projects that resulted from this activity was the five-storey, mixed-use Casa Loma Building erected in 1909 at southeast Portage and Sherbrook, kitty-corner to the institute.

This block was an investment by real estate and insurance agents Neil T. MacMillan and Robert Vollans. MacMillan was an Ontarian who first established a grain business in southern Manitoba, then after 1903 also formed companies in the real estate, property management, insurance, and warehousing sectors.

The Casa Loma was designed by John H.G. Russell, who also planned MacMillan's house (1908) on Wardlaw Avenue in Fort Rouge, and built by the Carter-Halls-Aldinger Company, a local firm that undertook major construction contracts throughout the West from 1907 to the mid-1940s.

The block is a solid brick structure on a stone foundation. Classical detailing was applied to its Portage (north) and Sherbrook (west) façades through the use of attached stone and brick pilasters, a full entablature with a prominent cornice, a stone-capped brick parapet, decorative spandrel panels, and quoin-like stone accents around a main-floor door and window at the southwest corner.

The exterior was designed in the two-part commercial style to distinguish clearly between the building's ground-level retail and other public spaces and its approximately 40 upper-storey residential suites.

The Portage façade originally held four retail outlets, including a bank at the northwest corner, which also took up much of the Sherbrook frontage. A broad stone belt course separated this level from the upper floors, which were divided into four bays, each with paired rectangular windows underscored by stone sills.

The Sherbrook elevation was sectioned by a deep, centrally located open court, which extended from the second to the top storey to increase the amount of natural light and ventilation available to interior suites. A stone and brick balustrade above the ground-floor belt course accompanied this feature.

Two other light wells were placed on the east elevation which, like the south wall, was built of common clay brick and contained numerous single and paired windows.

Original interior finishes included tin ceilings in the retail spaces and dark wood accents in staircases, hallways and suites. Apartments were equipped with fold-up Murphy beds, which were located in living rooms and had the appearance of fireplaces when not in use.

The building also had a hand-pulley-type elevator in a wooden shaft. This feature became a source of tragedy in 1928 when fire spread through the shaft, resulting in the deaths of five people, including veteran firefighter David Yeddeau.

One of the Casa Loma's first business tenants was the Dominion Bank (later Toronto-Dominion Bank), which remained on site into the 1990s. Other retail occupants over the years included grocer Alex Hendry, G.H. Wood and Company, Alfonso's Colour Centre, Linn Signs and Shodor Industries, and The Rosery florist shop. From 1915 to 1930, the property was owned by the City Securities Company, which as of the mid-1920s was managed by Vollans.

Architect Russell (1862-1946) was born in Toronto where he first studied his profession with H.B. Gordon. He came to Winnipeg in 1882, then worked and studied in the United States before returning to open a local practice in the mid-1890s. Over the next four decades, he planned some of the city's finest Presbyterian churches (Augustine, Knox and Westminster), as well as numerous houses, office buildings, apartment blocks, warehouses, schools, and other institutions. As of 2003, some 18 projects with which Russell was associated had been placed on the City of Winnipeg's Buildings Conservation List.