62 ALBERT STREET
DINGWALL BUILDING

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

4 JANUARY 1984
The D.R. Dingwall Company, jewellers and silversmiths, was the tangible result of one man's ability and ambition. Donald Ross Dingwall was the consummate businessman with a knack for knowing just what to do. He built up his successful jewellery business partly on his remarkable ability and in part exploiting his own appealing personality.

Born in Scotland in 1851, Dingwall attended public school there before coming to Canada on his own as a youth. After learning the jewellery and watchmaking trade in a shop in Montreal, he opened his own small shop in Port Hope, Ontario in 1878. After a scouting trip west in 1881, Dingwall relocated to Winnipeg the following year. Two years later, he opened a jewellery retail store near the corner of Alexander and Main. As Dingwall Manufacturing Jewellery, he created and sold an exclusive line of men's and women's jewellery and watches, said to be "unexcelled for beauty and originality of design, superior and elaborate finish and artistic elegance".

For a luxury supply store to have survived the economic crash after the early 1880s boom is a testimony to the business skill of D.R. Dingwall. When prosperity returned, he moved his main shop to the McIntyre Block and subsequently relocated again to the McArthur Building at Portage and Main. The old store on north Main survived several years into this century before closing.

In 1911, Dingwall built this warehouse at 62 Albert Street to serve in part as a factory for his business. The Dingwall factory occupied the top two floors of the warehouse while the lower floors were leased to various tenants. The factory was devoted to the manufacture of the Dingwall specialty: fine gold and platinum work, diamond settings, silversmithing and watch repair. The use of high-grade metals and top quality gems indicate that Dingwall's (as it was generally called) centered to the top of the market.

Dingwall's also operated a wholesale and mail order trade from this Albert Street factory. The company employed 120 men in the two stores and factory.
From a strictly business point of view, Dingwall's was one of the largest and most successful operations of its kind in Canada. To the Dingwall family, it brought great prosperity. But the impact of the Dingwall Company went far beyond his immediate business.

D.R. Dingwall was a personable man with an advanced conception of corporate responsibility. Besides his personal involvement in several organizations, his company was also prominent in the non-commercial aspects of Winnipeg society. In both the sports of curling and lacrosse, the Dingwall Trophy was the highest goal of local competitors. The company donated generously to many local causes as corporate sponsors do today. In the Jubilee Day celebrations of Canada's 60th year in 1927, for example, Dingwall's smothered one of their trucks in maple leaves and flowers as a float in the giant parade. The theme of the parade was "history and industry", and Dingwall's fitted well into both categories.4

The Dingwall advertisements, frequently splashed across the local papers, were amusing and incorporated a distinctive local character. Both the pleasant character of D.R. Dingwall, and his company's role in the City are readily apparent. Dingwall built up his company in Winnipeg and Winnipeg, in turn, was loyal to him.

D.R. Dingwall died in 1913 but the company remained in family hands. At the time of his death, Dingwall was president of Dingwall Ltd., Canadian Finance Limited and Canadian Securities Co. He was vice-president of the Equitable Trust Co. and the Ontario, Manitoba and Western Land Co. as well as a director of the Pacific Coast Fire Insurance Co.5 His personal wealth from these business interests and some real estate left a considerable legacy for his wife and five grown children.6

During the 1920s, Dingwall's had a prominent location in the ground floor of the Paris Building, kitty corner to their main competitors, Birks. During this period, there was plenty of room for two leaders in the jewellery trade.

The warehouse on Albert continued to be the only actual Dingwall Building. Erected in two
sections in 1910 and 1911, it was designed by Winnipeg architect J.H.G. Russell (see Appendix A). The first section of the structure was three storeys high. Angled to face Albert Street's curve, the building has dimensions of 50 feet across to a depth of 85 feet and 107 feet. The building is solid brick on a stone foundation with concrete footings. The contractors were Saul and Irish, prominent in the construction of commercial buildings in Winnipeg.

The following year, three more storeys were added for a total of six. The total cost of the building was $60,000.00. Russell divided the warehouse into three defined sections in the fashion of the Chicago school. The narrow lines of the building are emphasized by sinking the two centre bays of windows to create a central arcade over the windows at the top of the sweep. Side windows are narrower with segmented heads while the store front windows on the ground floor and those of the top floor are flat, and blocked between the horizontal lines of the dentilled cornice and frieze and the string courses.

The original detailing on the ground floor was altered after a major fire in 1921. The entrance was offset left with a classical architrave topped by a small stone pediment. It was not recessed like the present entrance. Because the main floor was intended for retail space, there were large windows nearby to grade with transom above. The rest of the building was exactly as it is now, except for the signage.

A faulty electrical device started the fire, which raged in the freezing February 1921 weather until it caused an explosion of stored sulphuric acid. The fire began on the third floor and seemed to travel downwards but, effectively, the entire Dingwall Building was gutted. The ladies' wear store on the main floor and leather wholesale on the second floor were totally destroyed. Dingwall's mail order business was on the third floor while the factory itself was on the fourth and sixth floors. Although the most valuable jewels were safely stored in a vault, the sophisticated machinery used in the manufacture of jewellery and silverware were destroyed. A preliminary estimate put the loss at $100,000.00.

Nevertheless, the building proved sturdy and the damage was not structural. Dingwall's announced
immediately that repairs would be made, the factory had been relocated temporarily and that it was "business as usual". Carter Halls Aldinger rebuilt the interior for an estimated $30,000.00 that summer and the Dingwall Building re-opened in the fall. Into the lower three storeys moved Babson Brothers, wholesale and mail order suppliers of Edison phonographs and Stockholm Cream Separators. Dingwall's took the top two floors and Strain's photograph supplies occupied the fourth floor. Gradually, small businesses and manufacturers' agents came to be the principal tenants.

While Dingwall's could withstand fires, it could not defy the failure of the prairie economy of the 1930s. The collapse of the stock market and the dust bowl failure of the prairie wheat crop rendered two-fisted blows on the Western retail trade. By Christmas of 1932, customers were purchasing only utility goods as gifts. Although the price of luxury goods (Dingwall's stock-in-trade) had been reduced drastically, the goods were nearly impossible to sell. With its stronger eastern base, Henry Birks and Sons were able to absorb D.R. Dingwall Ltd. in 1933. In 1936, Birks-Dingwall was incorporated as a provincial company as Henry Birks and Sons Manitoba Ltd. with D.C. Dingwall, a nephew of D.R., as president. For many years later, it was popularly known as Birks-Dingwall, so Winnipeggers would not forget the Dingwall name.

For a couple of years after the takeover, Birks-Dingwall maintained space in the Dingwall Building on Albert Street, but this was soon phased out. Another jewellery firm by the name of McKenzie Clay (now Clay Law Ltd.) moved into the old Dingwall Factory on the top floor and have remained there until the present. It seems possible that the firm may have purchased some of the old Dingwall equipment.

In the post-war years, manufacturers' agents and small businesses predominated in the Dingwall Building. Max Guberman's Wholesale Shoes, the Nozick Commission Clothing Wholesale, Moffats Household Appliances and the offices of the United Cigar Store have been the principal tenants in recent years. There are now some vacancies in the building.

With one of the best-reserved streetscapes in the City, Albert Street is a visual feast of turn-of-the-century buildings. While the most prominent anchors of this block are the Telegram Building and
the Electric Railway Chambers, such structures as the Dingwall Building are no less important in the continuity of the streetscape. Had the building been destroyed in the fire in 1921, its replacement would inevitably have been an intrusion. As it is, the brick, stone, arches and cornice of the Dingwall Building create a solid example of masonry warehousing in Winnipeg's historic warehouse district.

In the Dingwall Company, we have a pioneer enterprise that reflected the zealous determination of Winnipeg's early businessmen to build this city into something great. Dingwall's was a success story for fifty years, a locally-based firm of national prominence that ultimately could not withstand the centralization of Canadian business in the 1920s and 30s. In the long run, the building proved stronger than the Dingwall Company.
FOOTNOTES:


10. Dingwall Advertisement *MFP* 4 February 1921.


See also Selwyn Carrington "62 Albert Street" in *Early Building in Winnipeg* C.I.H.B. Vol. IV p. 33 - 37.
John Hamilton Gordon Russell

J.H.G. Russell was born to a large family in Toronto in 1862. Here he studied architecture before moving to the United States. After working in Washington and Chicago, he moved to Winnipeg in 1893. His family built one of the earliest homes on Wellington Crescent, which later became his own home.

In 1895, Russell opened his own office. With the economy of Winnipeg booming, and construction at a peak, Russell had an active business. He was prolific. Not given to specialization, J.H.G. Russell designed houses, churches, warehouses and commercial buildings in good numbers. We are particularly fortunate in having an archival record of his account books, which itemize suppliers and costs for most of his work. An incomplete photographic record of Russell's work also survives.

His best-known buildings include Augustine Church (1903); the McArthur Building (now Childs) (1909); Westminster United Church (1912); the J.H. Ashdown house (1912) on Wellington Crescent (now Khartum Temple); and the magnificent Knox Presbyterian Church (1914) on Edmonton.

Russell was president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada in 1912, the first year that it included all the provincial bodies. He was on the examining board of the Manitoba Association of Architects, involved in several local businesses, and Chairman of the Presbyterian Church Board of manager.

Russell died in Winnipeg in 1946.


2. J.H.G. Russell Collection MG11 E2 P.A.M.
Plate 1 – Dingwall Building, 62 Albert Street, 1969.  (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey Collection.)
Plate 2 – Caricature of D.R. Dingwall.  (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N7077.)

Plate 3 – Interiors of D.R. and Dingwall Company, ca.1905.  (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 4 – Dingwall Company float in Diamond Jubilee Parade, July 1, 1927. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Events 34/40.)

Plate 5 – Dingwall Building after February 2, 1921 fire. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection, N1824.)
Plate 6 – Dingwall Building after February 2, 1921 fire. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)