70 ALBERT STREET
TELEGRAM BUILDING

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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This handsome structure, situated at the corner of Albert and McDermot Streets, was erected in 1882 as a warehouse for the R.J. Whitla dry goods firm. Massive in design and intriguing in detail, it enhances a prominent view of Winnipeg's old warehouse district and was certainly intended as a statement of success and prestige by its owners.

R.J. Whitla was indeed a success. Born of a prominent Irish family, he left his native Ulster to settle, first in New York and then in Arnprior, near Ottawa. His knowledge of business brought him to Winnipeg in 1878 and he formed R.J. Whitla and Company in 1882. It was a dry good wholesale interest, that sold both imported and domestic goods. The business operated firstly from a small warehouse on McDermot Avenue, one of the earliest warehouses in a district that had previously been entirely residential in character. This area was ideal for the wholesalers: lower costs for land, easier access to loading docks than the main streets, and proximity to markets and to the railway. By 1886, the warehouse district was well-defined, although there remained several residences until the turn of the century.

The dry goods wholesale did an excellent trade in a booming economy. As the gateway to the west and the centre of a maze of railway communication ties, Winnipeg grew at a tremendous rate. A manufacturing and distribution centre, the city profited from a hinterland that extended from Thunder Bay to the Rocky Mountains. The lure of free land enticed hundreds of thousands of homesteaders to the prairies and it was not for decades that the town of Regina, Calgary and Edmonton were large enough to rival Winnipeg's economic dominance. An army of 'travellers' peddled goods to the agricultural settlements. Whitla's own dry goods business expanded so rapidly that by 1882, he had to build a larger warehouse.

In 1882 he opened his second building, at the corner of Albert and McDermot. The entrance was located right at the corner. Four storeys high, the big brick warehouse was crowned by a sign of stand-up lettering that read: "R.J. Whitla & Co. Importers of British & Foreign Dry Goods." Both the building and the business were recognized as important, and they figured prominently on the
booster literature of Winnipeg in the 1880s and 1890s.\(^3\)

Whitla was also a leading citizen at the time. He was a member of the Board of Trade, and later served a term as president. During the insurrection in Saskatchewan in 1885, Whitla went to the front as a captain in the famed Ninetieth Regiment. He was a trustee of Broadway Methodist Church and became president of the Y.M.C.A. in 1892. He was also a founder of Wesley College, which later became the University of Winnipeg. In addition, Whitla was a sporting man, and his family home was a centre of culture and recreation for the leading families of Winnipeg. Unlike many of his peers, politics did not hold much interest for Whitla and he refrained from the common practice of the commercial elite dominating civic offices. Instead, he put his primary energies into building up his large business. Initially, the dry goods company used all of its 20,000 square feet. The architect, Mr. Hodgson of Ottawa,\(^5\) fitted the structure "de rigueur" for the time in taste and ingenuity, with modern hoists and steam heating. The style is Victorian in premise and eclectic in design, with an exuberance of detail in Romanesque forms. The fenestration emphasizes the mass and pushes across in diminishing layers that alternate rounded with segmented heads. With heavy pilasters, voussoirs and rich ornamentation in the bricks, the effect is like an arcade capped with detailed cornice. The method of construction is post and beam, combined with a bearing wall and resting on a stone foundation.\(^6\) A fire in the building caused alterations to the main and second floors which now have concrete slabs between steel columns. The upper floors have wooden joists with cast iron columns encased in wood.\(^7\) In 1947 the building was underpinned.

By 1888, part of the south portion of the warehouse was rented by the W.E. Sandford Company which manufactured clothing. Whitla's kept the larger part of the structure and used the entrance at the corner of McDermot and Albert, which was sealed off in 1910 in favour of an Albert Street entrance.\(^8\) The structure is nearly triangular, with a 22-foot frontage on McDermot that widens to 65 feet in width at the rear. Its depth down Albert is 100 feet.

Despite a stumbling economy during the period 1882-85, Whitla's continued with a relative degree of success, and certainly kept their good name. Lavish in its praise, an 1886 publication on Winnipeg's business houses described R.J. Whitla as one of the foremost operations in the west.
High commercial standards, advantageous prices and market influence were its hallmarks. The article continued:

Here may be found at all times a very complete assortment of staple and fancy dry goods, foreign and domestic, embracing a wide range in the varied departments of textile fabrics and affording an opportunity for selection rarely attainable outside of the great markets of the country, the goods having been selected with a perfectly comprehensive knowledge of the business and a nice discrimination as to the exact requirements of the trade.\(^9\)

Whitla's survived the depression to thrive again and in 1899, a third warehouse was built at 70 Arthur Street. The architect, J.H. Cadham, added further to this massive warehouse in 1906 to accommodate the Whitla subsidiary that began manufacturing men's and women's garments.\(^10\) A further manifestation of this vertical integration was the Imperial Dry Goods store, a retail subsidiary of Whitla's that sold dry goods and ready-made garments from a store on Main Street. Whitla's was clearly a giant in the western wholesale business, although they were eventually squeezed out by such department store chains as Eaton's and Robert Simpson.\(^11\) By 1931, the dry goods wholesalers had been by-passed by bulk purchasing from suppliers and Whitla's closed its doors.

R.J. Whitla and Company vacated the Albert Street warehouse in 1899 in favour of the new warehouse, and the Telegram Publishing Company purchased the structure. The Telegram was a weekly paper, established in 1894, and geared for the farmer's interests. It enjoyed a circulation of about 5,500 throughout Manitoba and the north-west. In June 1898, the Winnipeg Telegram began publication of a daily morning paper, more urban in character, and committed to challenge the "franchise monopoly of the Free Press."\(^12\) Publicly Conservative in its politics, the Telegram railed against everything that even sniffed of Liberalism in a manner that was acceptable at the time. Despite its old-time partisan leanings the Telegram was Winnipeg's most modern paper in every way. It boasted a new automatic printing press and was certainly the most modern in its layout and style. Newspapers were undergoing fundamental changes at this period too, brought on by faster methods of communication and the impact of such international news agencies as Reuter's Associated Press. The Telegram reflected these changes in technology and content better and sooner than the other local papers.
In 1901, the circulation of the daily and the still-printed weekly was over 5,000 each.\textsuperscript{13} That year, Sandford Evans, a prominent Conservative journalist from Toronto, purchased the Telegram Publishing Company and became editor until 1905.\textsuperscript{14} Although Evans continued to own the paper until 1920, he resigned to establish the W. Sandford Evans Company, a financial concern which continues business in printing, statistical and financial services to the present day. Evans became mayor of Winnipeg from 1909 to 1911 and used the paper openly to cultivate his support. In 1922, he became a Conservative member of the Manitoba Legislature and served as Leader of the Opposition from 1933 to his retirement in 1936.\textsuperscript{15}

Since 1908, the \textit{Telegram} published both a morning and an evening paper but in 1920, it discontinued the morning paper. On October 18, 1920, while it had a circulation of 39,000, the \textit{Telegram} was bought out by the \textit{Tribune} and both the paper and the publishing company folded.

In 1921, Jack Cohen, a manufacturer's agent, took over the Albert Street building, which continued to keep the popular name 'Telegram Building'. In 1926, Sures Brothers bought the building as a warehouse for its dry goods business and a factory for garment manufacturing. In 1966, a household appliance company moved into the building, and in 1976 the building was purchased and partly renovated by Modernage Furniture Company. A good deal of the ground floor has been bricked over but the appearance of the building is generally unchanged from its 1882 style.

This structure is significant for its two major owners, R.J. Witla and the Telegram Printing Company but it also was one of the first structures erected in the old warehouse area.
FOOTNOTES--


8. City of Winnipeg Building Permits, no. 2286, 1910. The architect of the new entrance was G.W. Northwood.


Plate 1 – Drawing of the Whitla Building in the *Winnipeg Sun*, 1888. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N902.)
Plate 2 – Telegram Printing Company Building, ca.1910. Note how the entrance has been moved from the corner to the Albert Street façade. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2353.)

Plate 3 – Looking south down Albert and Arthur streets, ca.1895. Note the large numbers of small retail, residential and ecclesiastic buildings in the warehouse district. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 4 – The same view of the Exchange District as in Plate 3, ca.1905. Note the nearly complete take over the area by large warehouses. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

Plate 5 – Telegram Building, 1979 with many of the ground floor windows partially bricked-in. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)