167 BANNATYNE AVENUE
ASHDOWN WAREHOUSE

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

31 August 1984
As in the beginning of Winnipeg's corporate existence, James H. Ashdown is of the essence of the commercial spirit of the Western Canadian metropolis. As the city has grown, the enterprise and fortune of Mr. Ashdown have grown. He has been the embodiment of Winnipeg's essentially commercial progress. [1910]

James H. Ashdown, the "merchant prince," not only made a fortune through the growth of Winnipeg but had a considerable role to play in causing that growth. Opening his first hardware shop here in 1869, Ashdown was a major influence on Winnipeg's history from its formation to his death sixty years later.

Born in London, England, in 1844, James Henry Ashdown immigrated with his family in 1852 to a settlement near Toronto. At the age of 18, he left home to apprentice as a tinsmith, later using his skills at various jobs in Canada and the United States. Ashdown arrived in Red River in 1868, walking north from St. Cloud, Minnesota, while his provisions and luggage jostled beside him in an ox cart. His first jobs in the tiny settlement included painting and working as a lumberjack.

The following year, Ashdown purchased the shop of the local tinsmith and went into business for himself. When local matters heated up months later, Ashdown was one of a garrison of fifty men who resisted Riel and were subsequently imprisoned in Upper Fort Garry for 69 days. Riel's occupation of the fort forced the Canadian government to send out an expedition to deal with the situation. Housing these soldiers stimulated a demand for building hardware, while the formation of the new Province of Manitoba in 1870 paved the way for substantial new long-term growth and a demand for local materials.

Ashdown's small business grew along with the settlement. In 1870, he purchased two lots on the corner of Main Street and Bannatyne Avenue, the location of his store for over one hundred years. The original frame building was replaced with a brick one in 1875, which was added onto twice by 1880. Large contract work and a vibrant wholesale trade increased his sales to the point where in 1880 Ashdown was personally worth $150,000 and had opened branch outlets in Portage la Prairie.
This aggressive versatility of Ashdown spilled over into other spheres. He was one of a committed group of businessmen who directed the growth of the town with an unshakeable optimism in Winnipeg's destiny as a metropolis. Ashdown led a citizens' group which lobbied hard for incorporation of Winnipeg as a city in 1873, although the population was only that of a village. The legislature finally acquiesced, thereby setting the legal substructure for the raising of funds for safety, sanitation, public works and regulated development. Ashdown was elected one of the first city councillors.  

A charter member of the Winnipeg Board of Trade at its formation in 1879, Ashdown was president of the Board in 1887. During that year, the Board of Trade took a hard run at the monopoly clause of the C.P.R. and its effect on Manitoba, the "disallowance question." Capitulating finally to pressure from this and governmental groups, the federal government finally abolished disallowance of provincial legislation in 1887.

J.H. Ashdown was elected mayor of Winnipeg in 1907. His years as mayor were typified by balancing of the budget and the raising of a municipal bond issue. Persuaded to run by a group of businessmen and the financial elite, Ashdown was returned by acclamation for a second term in 1908. By 1910, he was director of the Bank of Montreal and the Winnipeg-based Northern Crown Bank, president of the Canadian Fire Insurance Company, a founder of and governor of Wesley College, on the Board of Commissioners of the Greater Winnipeg Water District and a board member to a range of organizations from the Children's Aid Society to the Y.M.C.A. to the city hospital board. In 1910, a journalist observed that "in public affairs affecting the business and social progress of Winnipeg, he (Ashdown) has been at times almost aggressively prominent since the city's beginning."  

With his business booming in a series of wholesale and retail outlets across the prairies, Ashdown decided in 1894 to construct a warehouse in Winnipeg to maintain a large and ready supply of
goods. He engaged architect S. Frank Peters to design the warehouse, located at the corner of Bannatyne Avenue and Rorie Street. This first building is the far eastern portion of the massive present-day warehouse. Only three storeys high and five bays across, Peters' warehouse was built of brick and stone with little ornamentation in a Romanesque style. It measured 80 feet down Bannatyne Avenue and 130 feet down Rorie Street, and opened in January, 1896. Sometime between 1896 and 1900, the fourth floor was added above the arches, but from an 1895 drawing of the warehouse it is evident that this fourth storey was part of the original plan.9

In 1895, Peters also completed work on Wesley College, the Grundy Block at 435 Main Street and a series of costly residences.10

In 1900, J.H. Ashdown sent a train of 40 cars of goods west, each car loaded with hardware and labelled "Hardware from J.H. Ashdown." The train stopped at towns and settlements along the line, selling its load right from the tracks in one of the west's biggest publicity stunts. With his stores selling merchandise in most cities, his catalogues selling through suppliers in the rest of the west country and his new warehouse able to respond quickly to large and small orders,11 Ashdown was certainly a "merchant prince" with a large and lucrative fiefdom.

In 1902, under plans drawn up by J.H.G. Russell, the warehouse was given two additional storeys. A three-bay, six storey addition was made to the western end of the building in 1906, again by Russell and contracted by Malcom Brothers.12 By this time the warehouse was almost square, 130 feet by 132 feet and altered somewhat in appearance from the original 1895 building. While Russell had maintained the identical design that S.F. Peters had used on the first three arched floors, the fourth floor was visually tied to the added fifth floor while the sixth floor was different again.

In 1911, additions to the Ashdown warehouse brought it to its present appearance. Architect Russell was again engaged, this time to work with contractor Philip Burnett. The final three bays were added to the western portion of the warehouse, with dimensions of 80 feet by 133 feet and six storeys. The former Codville and Company warehouse was connected to this latest addition and two
floors were added to it so that it formed a continuous wall with the rest of the Ashdown Building. The features from the original four storey Codville structure can easily be seen in the far west section of the warehouse.

A driveway passed under the smaller twinned bays of the 1911 addition, giving more loading space. A spur track from the Transfer railway ran behind the building and two wagon docks were used along Rorie Street.

Again, Russell maintained the lines of the original warehouse, by and large, and used the continuation of the top two floors to tie the Codville warehouse into the Ashdown warehouse.

Taken as a whole, the Ashdown warehouse is massive in scale and powerful in its impact. Now darkened, the light brick matched the Stonewall limestone of the foundation and the Selkirk stone dressings of the upper floors. The arched stone trim around the various doorways is complimented by the stone arches over each bay on the third floor. The middle storeys have flat-headed windows with dressed stone heads while the sixth floor windows have brick voussoirs with limestone keystones. Bands of stone divide the structure horizontally into three distinct sections.

To carry both the weight of the building and its stored load, the 1894 foundation rests on concrete footings that varied from one and one-half to three feet of thickness. In the original section, thirty-two pillars supported the interior structure, while the heavy timbers of the floor posts and beams were described as "slow burning." the brick, stone and wood of mill construction is demonstrated here as state of the art in one of the largest and finest warehouses in western Canada.

From this remarkable warehouse, the J.H. Ashdown Company supplied a staggering variety of merchandise. Stretching the definition of "hardware" past its limit, Ashdown's carried housewares, dishes and cutlery in great variety. Every conceivable sporting good was available, as were automotive and electrical supplies. Tools, specialized agricultural tools and equipment, and plumbing supplies were sold. Ashdown's carried furniture and wood stoves in their catalogues.
Actual construction hardware and paints were handled and large, modern appliances became a specialty of Ashdown's in the decades after World War I. Many of the products were sold under Ashdown's own "Diamond a Brand," registered in 1904.

In 1904, the retail store on Main Street burned to the ground but was quickly rebuilt, and expanded in the 1950s. Its founder, James Henry Ashdown, died in 1924 at the age of 80 and the presidency passed to his son, Harry C. Ashdown, who died in 1971. The senior Ashdown's estate was valued at $1.6 million, of which at least ten local institutions received large donations. Winnipeg General Hospital was bequeathed $100,000, for example, while Wesley College and the Methodist Church received undisclosed large endowments. Ashdown was generous to the extreme to those organizations which he felt were worthy.

In its 89th year of operation in 1958, the Ashdown Company had a capital of $14 million. It operated wholesale and retail operations in twelve cities from Fort William to Calgary but the head office staunchly remained in Winnipeg. The company was sold upon the death of H.C. Ashdown in 1971.

James H. Ashdown dominated the commercial elite of Winnipeg from 1869 to 1924. He belonged to a group of men who considered Winnipeg their home and conducted a major proportion of its local enterprise. For them, advancement of the city implied the growth of their own business. In contrast, the period after 1918 saw an increased number of branch offices in the Manitoba economy. These pre-war businessmen were a select and powerful group.

The Ashdown warehouse proclaims through its massive architecture both the dominance of the J.H. Ashdown Company and the personal conviction of its founder to Winnipeg.
FOOTNOTES


12. City of Winnipeg Building Permits No. 84, 1902 (permit is missing), and No. 223, 3 May 1902, for two storey addition. Designed by J.H.G. Russell and constructed by Saul and Irish, and S.B. Ritchie for a total of $33,000. Permit No. 1930, 9 July 1906, addition by J.H.G. Russell and Malcom Brothers, 130 x 132 x 6 storeys for $22,000.

13. Ibid., No. 1005, 4 May 1911, 6 storey warehouse addition costing $73,000. No. 3065, 26 September 1911, 2 storey addition over existing Codville warehouse for $11,000.


18. *Gateway City, op. cit.*, p. 117.
J.H.G. RUSSELL

John Hamilton Gordon 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 architectural firm. 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 works. 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 managers. Russell died in Winnipeg in 1946.


2. J.H.G. Russell Collection, MG11 E2, P.A.M.
Plate 1 – Ashdown Warehouse, 167 Bannatyne Avenue, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

Plate 2 – Bannatyne Avenue East, 1900. Left of the Ashdown Warehouse (arrow), is the Codville Warehouse that was built by J.H. Ashdown in 1900 and eventually annexed to the Ashdown Warehouse. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 3 – Bannatyne Avenue East, looking west, ca.1903. The Ashdown Warehouse has been extended west by three bays and a fourth floor added. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N3585.)

Plate 4 – Ashdown Warehouse, ca.1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N1513.)
Plate 5 – Ashdown Warehouse, 1912. Note the two storeys added to the building. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg Saturday Post, August 17, 1912, p. 13.)

Plate 6 – Plans for the 1912 addition. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg Archives.)
Plate 7 – Caricature of J.H. Ashdown, 1909.  (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Collective Personalities, 3/9.)
Plate 8 – Ashdown Retail Store, northwest corner Main Street and Bannatyne Avenue, ca.1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N1515.)

Plate 9 – J.H. Ashdown (in white), with Premier T.C. Norris at the C.P.R. Station, 1915 (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2520.)