611 MAIN STREET

CORBETT BLOCK

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings & Resources Committee
Researcher: M. Peterson
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During the decades leading up to 1900, Winnipeg's Main Street was transformed from a muddy track bordered mainly by wood-frame buildings into a paved thoroughfare with imposing brick and stone structures along its walkways (Plates 1 and 2). The small premises that served as shops and residences were replaced by modern buildings, offering commercial, office and residential space for the ever-growing population and local service industry.

Development of the transcontinental railway had created an entirely new situation by connecting Winnipeg with both eastern manufacturing interests and a burgeoning population to the west. The city actively promoted itself as the middleman between eastern supply and western demand. Its success had far-reaching economic, political and social effects. It also resulted in rapid physical change in what became downtown Winnipeg.

New residential districts extended the outer boundaries of the built-up area, while new warehouse, banking halls, offices and shops popped up throughout the downtown. Three distinct sectors developed around Winnipeg's large, imposing City Hall on Main Street: a warehouse district to the west, a financial section from Portage Avenue north to Bannatyne Avenue along both sides of Main Street and a commercial/retail area running north from City Hall to Higgins Avenue and eventually beyond.

This last area was dominated by smaller firms selling everything from shoes and boots to harnesses and fruit. They generally were housed in two- or three-storey commercial blocks with retail space on the ground floor and offices, suites or storage space above. This type of combined or mixed-use structure became increasingly popular as demand grew for downtown office and residential space. It also was a perfect small-scale investment for the new group of successful businessmen inhabiting the city.

In 1901, North Main was the site of yet another modest development, a brick and stone mixed use block with room for four retail shops on the ground floor and residential space in the second storey named the Corbett Block after one of its listed original owners, D. Corbett.
STYLE
The Corbett Block is a good example of a Two-Part Commercial structure, very common throughout the downtown regions of most North American cities. Especially popular after 1900, the design was used to reflect the varied activities housed in the different areas of the building. The ground floor held the retail spaces, often with recessed entrances and large display windows. A metal cornice or similar feature was often used to visually separate the ground floor from the upper floors, which included banks of large windows to light the office and/or residential space. Access to this upper floor was usually provided by an ornate entrance on the front façade.

Beyond this basic layout, this type of block saw a tremendous variation in materials and ornamentation. They could be small, simple wooden structures or large, multi-storey brick and stone buildings with a wealth of ornamental elements, often depending on the neighbourhood in which they were located and the amount of money available to the developer.

CONSTRUCTION
The solid brick building measures approximately 20.1 x 18.3 metres and cost $15,000 to complete in 1901.\(^1\) It is built on the east side of Main Street between Alexander and Logan avenues (see Appendix I for more construction information). In 1948, a 13.1 x 11.0-metre addition was built at the rear as additional space for the butchers shop in front.

DESIGN
The red brick front (west) façade, as was often the case in this age and scale of building, included recessed entrances flanked by large show windows (Plate 3). With four retail shops, the building features paired doors with a centrally placed fifth door giving access to the upper floor. The ground floor, including all the entrances, was modernized in the late 1940s, the new cladding

\(^1\) City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #206/1901.
including stucco, Vitrolite and stainless metal (Plate 4). Although the plans only detail the north entrances (#615 and #617), the south portion (#611-#613) was also renovated.

Today, a wide band of metal cladding holding signage blocks part of the ground floor and visually separates the ground and second floors. Above, the brick walls of the second storey are interrupted by rectilinear window opening with sandstone lug sills, radiating brick heads and keystones. Brick is used ornamentally as pilasters and corbelling and a date stone is centrally located at the roofline that is otherwise unadorned (Plate 5).

The south wall is a party wall, the north was originally a party wall prior to the demolition of the neighbouring building but is now exposed, the brick has been stuccoed and there are three small windows on the second floor (Plate 6). The rear of the building includes the 1948 brick-clad addition which had a metal-clad third storey added in 2005 (Plate 7). The south end of the original rear wall is exposed and features the original brick cladding and rectilinear window openings (Plate 8).

**INTERIOR**

The original interior was designed with four retail shops on the main floor and residential suites on the second floor. The rear addition of 1948 included a boiler room, fuel room and chute, a centrally-located conveyor and set of stairs and another set of stairs in the southwest corner (Plate 9). The ground floor held three rooms above the boiler room with floor grates, the central conveyor/stairs, a refrigerator area (northwest corner) and reinforced concrete slab floors (Plate 10). The second floor featured two skylights and open storage space. Access between the original building and the addition were found in the basement and first floor only.

In 1950, the addition’s interior was altered; a new hallway was built connecting the second floor with the original building. The second floor space was divided into six suites (2 @ 2-room and 4 @

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3 *Henderson’s Directory*, 1905-1993. The actual number of suites fluctuated between 14 and 18 in this directory.
1-room) each with a sink with a central washroom and three offices at the rear of the original building were converted into two suites with sinks (Plate 11).

In 1957, the layout of the 14 suites on the second floor of the original building (Plate 12) were changed, enlarging the suites and reducing their number to 7 (Plate 13).

Today the ground floor retail space has been altered into two shops (Plates 14 and 15); the upper floor continues to be used as residential suites (Plate 16). Some of the original butcher space and equipment still exists in the northern space (Plate 17).

**INTEGRITY**
The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good condition for its age, although the sandstone accenting on the front (west) façade are deteriorating (Plate 18). Alterations to the front façade, including renovations to the ground floor and the replacement of window units has negatively affected its appearance.

**STREETSCAPE**
This building is located on one of the City’s major downtown thoroughfares; in the middle of a block of several turn-of-the-century commercial buildings (Plate 19). It is an important contributor to this historic streetscape (Plate 20).

**ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS**
The listed architect for this building was well-known local builder James McDiarmid (1855-1934). The Scottish-born and trained McDiarmid, along with two brothers would form J. McDiarmid Company Limited, a construction and design business with contracts throughout Western Canada (see Appendix II for biographical information). McDiarmid has been given 10 points by the Historical Buildings and Resources Committee.
The contractors were all local builders: George Alsip, J. & J. McDiarmid Company (James and John) and Alsip Brothers.4

**PERSON/INSTITUTION**

The block’s original Building Permit lists the owners as D. Corbett and A. McKenzie, although it appears that the actual Corbett that owned the property was Dr. Samuel C. Corbett.5 Dr. Corbett was born near Perrytown, Canada West (Ontario) in 1846, graduating with his medical degree from Victoria University (Toronto) in 1867. After practicing in his hometown and near-by Port Hope, he moved to Manitoba in 1882, serving on the council of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba in 1888 and 1889 and its president in 1891.6 He operated out of an office at 521 Main Street in the mid-1890s.7

In the late 1890s, Dr. Corbett had a position with the Manitoba Health Board, assisting in the medical examination and clearance of incoming immigrants8 and in 1901 he was appointed a Dominion Health Officer, a role he filled until 1911.9 He died in Vancouver, B.C. in 1915.10

Dr. Corbett’s estate continued to own this building into the 1930s, finally selling to the owner of the adjacent building, 607-609 Main Street, clothier Louis Mindell. Mindell and his family owned the Corbett Block into the 1980s.11

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5 Loc. cit.
7 Manitoba Free Press, June 6, 1895, p. 8.
8 Manitoba Free Press, June 28, 1897, p. 8.
9 Manitoba Free Press, November 8, 1911, p. 5.
11 City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 13-080938000, 1900-1990.
Tenancy in the block has been varied, commercial renters have included: Moser Wintrob, clothing (1905); Lemire & Company, wholesale liquor (1905); Kluner Brothers, clothing (1923); City Home Made Sausage Company (1923); City Meat and Sausage, (1943-1979 – Plate 21); Norman’s Meats (1983-1994). Residential tenants included barristers, real estate agents, labourers and policemen. The growth of Winnipeg’s Chinese community was reflected in 8 tenants identified as “Chinese” in the 1923 Henderson’s Directory.

**EVENT**
There is no known significant historical event connected with this building.

**CONTEXT**
This building was completed at the beginning of the 20th century, the start of a decade-long period of economic growth and expansion. This translated into the construction of hundreds of modern commercial blocks along the City’s downtown thoroughfares. Shops of all description opened in these new spaces, which often also included second and third storey space for offices of small-scale businesses – doctors, lawyer, real estate and insurance agents – or for residential apartments for the newly arriving citizens. The Corbett Block is an excellent example of this type of development in terms of ownership, scale and tenancy.

**LANDMARK**
The Corbett Block is located on a busy downtown Winnipeg street, although the lack of significant ornamentation and its scale reduce its conspicuousness.
APPENDIX I

CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report
Assessment Record

Building Address: 611 Main Street (611-617)  
Building Name: Corbett Block

Original Use: mixed use (retail/residential)  
Current Use: mixed use

Roll No. (Old): 13080938000 (---)  
RSN: 8712

Legal Description: 11E St. John, Plan 11, Lot 3 with right-of-way for all purposes as appurtenant to said Lot 3 over and upon east 20’ of Lot 4, Plan 11

Location: East side between Alexander and Logan avenues

Date of Construction: 1901  
Storeys: 2

Heritage Status: ON NOMINATED LIST

Construction Type: Red and common clay brick and stone foundation

- 206/1901 $15,000 (original); 2948/1948 [PPD] $7,000 (rear addition, B&CF, 35 x 43’); 765/1949 [PPD] N/A (interior alteration to store, #613); 4422/1950 [PPD] $2,000 (interior alterations, #613); 2915/1957 [PPD] $800 (interior alterations [living quarters], #613); 1606/1966 [M-306] $10,000 (interior alterations to #615); 116988/2005 $300,000 (3rd storey addition); 141517/2005 $50,000 (interior partitioning); 143049/2007 $15,000 (interior alterations)

Information:
- 66 x 60 + 36 x 43 ft.
- Permit 116988/2005- addition to rear section, permit included removal of interior partition throughout building

ARCHITECT: McDIARMID, JAMES

CONTRACTOR: McDIARMID, J. & J., ALSIP, G.
PLANS AT CITY OF WINNIPEG STORAGE

Permit 2948/1948 – Rear addition:
Owner- L. Mindell; Architect- unnamed; Contractor- Dominion Bridge Company
13” reinforced concrete foundation walls, 13” brick superstructure;
Ceilings- B- 7’3”; 1st- 13”; 2nd- 10’2”;
Basement- hollow tile encased boiler room in northeast corner, fuel room and chute in southwest corner, doorways to connect to existing building, conveyor and stairs in centre and stairs in southwest corner;
First floor- three rooms with floor grates above boiler room, conveyor and stairs in centre and southwest corner, “Position of refrigerators” in northwest corner, “5” reinforced concrete slab in southwest corner;
Second floor- no partitioning, two sets of skylights.

Permit 765/1949 – Exterior alterations:
Owner- L. Mindell
Two sets of plans are on file, the first, found in the same plan roll as 2948/1948 is to alter the front entrance and ground floor of 615-617 Main Street. The second, identical plans, are found at 765/1949 with the numbers 615-617 scratched out and 613 written in. Based on the present façade, it appears that all the entrances were altered.

Both detail the renovation and recladding of the original storefront of the two side-by-side entrances, creating 1 store out of two.

Permit 4422/1950 – Interior alterations to 2nd floor of part of original building and rear addition:
Owner- L. Mindell; Architect- unnamed; Contractor- City Lumber Company
Existing- stairs, hall and 3 offices at east end of original building with no interior connection to the open rear area (addition).
Proposed alterations- 3 offices in original building into two rooms each with sink, new hallway to connect to rear addition, 2 @ 2-room suites at west end, 4 @ 1-room (all with sinks) and central washroom.

Permit 2915/1957 – Interior alterations to 2nd floor of original building:
Owner- L. Mindell
Existing- 14 suites, men’s and women’s washrooms and interior brick dividing wall
Proposed alterations- rooms along front (west) and south side all enlarged (from 13 suites to 7 suites), unchanged washrooms and small room to north.
APPENDIX II

James McDiarmid

James McDiarmid was born March 9, 1855 at Dunkeld, Perthshire, Scotland and trained with his father in carpentry and stone masonry. At the age of 28, he immigrated with his 22-year-old brother John (1861-1943) in April 1883 to join their older brother Donald and his family in Poplar Point, Manitoba (who had been farming there since 1880).

In 1884, James and John moved into Winnipeg, first forming the partnership Murray and McDiarmid with established builder and lumberman George W. Murray. This business lasted until June 1892 and was responsible for the construction of a number of rural railway stations, several Federal Government contracts and several Winnipeg homes. James McDiarmid also began designing buildings by the mid-1890s.

J & J McDiarmid Company was formed in 1892, first concentrating on building homes for clients and as speculative property and a few larger commissions. After 1900, however, their business increased dramatically, both in terms of number of contracts and scale of buildings. Reflective of the increase in business, J. McDiarmid Company Limited was incorporated in 1906 with James McDiarmid and Edward Cass (1849-1932), another long-time local contractor, as equal majority shareholders. Minority shareholders included: Peter Muir (civil engineer); J. M. McFarlane (accountant); Thomas Borgford (bricklayer/contractor); Peter McDiarmid (stone mason/contractor); and John McDiarmid (carpenter/contractor).

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3 A fourth brother, Peter (1857-1915), moved to Poplar Point with his family in 1887.

The newly formed company grew quickly on the strength of numerous large contracts with Canadian Pacific Railway for shop facilities and related structures from Fort William, ON to Vancouver, B.C. The provincial government hired the company in 1915 to complete the Legislative and Law Courts buildings after the original contractor, Thomas Kelly, was dismissed. The McDiarmids also participated in one of the consortia that built the Winnipeg aqueduct.

James McDiarmid was also a co-founder, board member and/or officer of the Winnipeg Building Society (1895), Winnipeg Machinery and Supply Co. (1901), Winnipeg Paint and Glass Co. (1902), Calgary Paint and Glass Co., Edmonton Paint and Glass Co., Winnipeg Construction Co. (1904), and the Marble and Tile Company of Canada (1912).

Among his other activities, McDiarmid was active in curling circles as a bonspiel competitor, a founder and president of the Granite Curling Club, and a president of the Manitoba Curling Association. He collected art, did some amateur painting, and supported the establishment of the Winnipeg Art Gallery (1912) and Winnipeg School of Art (1913). He also was a long-time member of the Winnipeg Public Parks Board and the Playgrounds Commission, the powers of which were transferred to the Parks Board in 1919. During his terms, which extended from the 1910s to 1931, McDiarmid was particularly noted for his work on the development of Kildonan Golf Course that opened in 1921 as a public facility. His contributions were recognized through honorary life memberships in both the Winnipeg Art Gallery and Parks Board.
James McDiarmid died in 1934 and after the 1943 death of his brother John, steps were initiated to dissolve The J. McDiarmid Co. The firm subsequently gave notice in late 1946 that it intended to surrender its charter.

A partial inventory of James McDiarmid’s work includes (*-denotes projects for which McDiarmid was named both architect and contractor): 

**Winnipeg**
- Broadway Drill Hall, 1884 (demolished)
- St. George’s Church, Isabel Street & Bannatyne Avenue, 1894 (demolished)
- * James Penrose House, 232 Bell Avenue (now 444 Logan Avenue), 1894, Grade III
- * St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, 425 Elgin Avenue, 1894-1895 (burned 1968)
- Great-West Saddlery Factory/Warehouse, 112-114 Market Avenue, 1898, Grade III
- Merrick-Anderson Building & adjoining Donald H. Bain Building, 115 Bannatyne Avenue, 1899-1900, Grade II
- Marshall-Wells Warehouse, 123 Bannatyne Avenue, 1900, Grade II
- Scott Memorial Orange Hall, 216-218 Princess Street (original design attributed to McDiarmid; final design to Samuel Hooper), 1900-1902
- Corbett Block, 611-617 Main Street, 1901
- * Cleland Block, 705-707 Main Street, 1901 (demolished)
- * Taylor Block, 241-245 Main Street, repairs, 1901 (demolished)
- Weston Shops, Canadian Pacific Railway, 1903+
- Manitoba Hall, 291½-295 Portage Avenue, 1903 (demolished)
- Winnipeg Paint and Glass Co. Building, 179 Pioneer Avenue, 1903 (burned 1907)
- Sandison Block, 302-306 Main Street, 1904 (demolished)
- * Manitoba Builders Supply Co. Storehouse, Point Douglas Avenue, 1904
- Point Douglas Church, 95 Macdonald Avenue, 1905
- Customs Examining Warehouse, 145 McDermot Avenue, 1908
- Winnipeg Paint and Glass Co. Building, 179 Pioneer Avenue, 1908 (demolished)
- St. Stephen’s Presbyterian Church (Elim Chapel), 546 Portage Avenue, 1910
- Canada Building, 352 Donald Street, 1910, Grade III
- Swift Canadian Co. Building, 312 William Avenue, 1911
- Somerset Block, 294 Portage Avenue, addition of upper storeys, 1911

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12 Province of Manitoba, *The Manitoba Gazette* 74, 10 (March 10, 1945), p. 248.
14 Drawn from the files of the City of Winnipeg’s Heritage Planner; the City’s Record of Building Permits; biographical material on James McDiarmid by sources previously quoted; and items in local newspapers and trade journals (i.e., *Construction and Western Canada Contractor and Builder*).
James McDiarmid work (continued):
* St. Stephen’s House (annex to St. Stephen’s Presbyterian Church), 299 Young St., 1911-1912
Cumberland (Nokomis) Block, 344 Cumberland Avenue, 1912
Bank of Ottawa, 363 Main Street, addition, 1912 (demolished)
* Winnipeg Industrial Bureau Exhibition Building, 267 Main Street, addition, 1912-1913 (demolished)
Notre Dame Investment (Commercial) Building, 169 Pioneer Avenue, 1912-1913 (demolished)
Pantages (Playhouse) Theatre, 180 Market Avenue, 1913-1914, Grade II
Dr. C.W. Gordon House, 54 West Gate, 1913, Grade II
Knox Presbyterian (United) Church, 400 Edmonton Street, 1914-1917
Completion of the Manitoba Legislative & Law Courts buildings, Broadway, 1915-1920
Public Press Building, 290 Vaughan Street, 1917, Grade III
Gardener’s Cottage, for R.A. Rogers, 64 Nassau Street, 1922 (demolished)
Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue East, 1930-1931
Science Building, University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus, 1931-1932

Outside Winnipeg
Participation in construction of the Winnipeg (Shoal Lake) aqueduct in a consortium with J.P. and J.H. Tremblay and Edward Cass, 1914-1919
Dominion Government Customs House, Calgary, pre-1916
Provincial Court House, Port Arthur, 1923
T. Eaton Co. Department Store, Calgary, 1928-1929
Canadian Pacific Railway roundhouses, machine shops and other facilities, Western Canada
Revillon Building, Edmonton, date unknown
Georgia-Harris Viaduct, Vancouver, date unknown
Plate 1 – Looking north on Main Street from William Avenue, 1886. Pictured here are: #1- the second City Hall; and #2- Police Courts, James Avenue. (Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg-Streets-Main, 1886-#1.)

Plate 2 – Looking north from the roof of City Hall, ca.1895, from the roof of City Hall. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 3 – Architect’s Plans #765/1949, “Proposed Alterations to Store Front - As At Present – Front Elevation and Floor Plan”. (City of Winnipeg.)

Plate 4 – Architect’s Plans #765/1949, “Proposed Alterations to Store Front - Front Elevation and Floor Plan of Alterations”. (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 5 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, front (west) façade, 2014. (M. Peterson, 2014.)

Plate 6 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, detail of front (west) façade, 2014. (M. Peterson, 2014.)
Plate 7 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, rear (east) and north façades, 2014. (M. Peterson, 2014.)

Plate 8 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, rear (east) and south façades, 2006. (M. Peterson, 2006.)
Plate 9 – Architect’s Plans #2948/1948, “Basement Plan of Addition”. (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 10 – Architect’s Plans #2948/1948, “Floor Plan of Addition”.  (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 11 – Architect’s Plans #4422/1950, “Proposed Rooms of Existing 2nd Floor Space”. (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 12 – Architect’s Plans ##2915/1957, “Existing Floor Plan”. (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 13 – Architect’s Plans #2915/1957, “Proposed Floor Plan”. (City of Winnipeg.)
Plate 14 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, north retail space, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)
Plate 15 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, ground floor, south side, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)
Plate 16 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, second floor hallway, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)
Plate 17 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, butcher’s block table, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)
Plate 18 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, detail of deteriorating front (west) façade sandstone accenting, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)
Plate 19 – Corbett Block, 607 Main Street (arrow), 2014. (M. Peterson, 2014.)
Plate 20 – Main Street looking north from Alexander Avenue/Disraeli Freeway. (M. Peterson, 2014.)

Plate 21 – Corbett Block, 611 Main Street, 1979. (City of Winnipeg.)