281 McDermot Avenue

Bedford Building
(former Stobart and Sons building)

Historical Buildings Committee

23 August 1983
281 McDERMOT AVENUE

BEFORD BUILDING (FORMER STOBART & SONS BUILDING)

Familiar as the home of Reiss Furs, this large brick warehouse occupies the prominent corner site of McDermot and King. The building was originally the wholesale dry goods firm of Stobart, Sons and Company.

Stobart’s, as it was generally called, was established in 1899, but its roots go back earlier to a small pioneer trade in the 1870s. F.E. Kew started a “general trading establishment” that sold supplies and purchased furs through the Catholic missions in the northwest. In 1874, D.W. Stobart, an English coal merchant, joined the company, buying it out in 1876. This second business, Stobart, Eden and Company, evolved into a dry goods firm with a Winnipeg base. It is unclear whether this was a wholesale or a retail business, but when the company was re-organized a third time in 1899, it became exclusively a wholesale dry goods operation.

Frederick William Stobart, the son of the founder, re-organized the company following his father’s death. At the time, it had a capital stock of $500,000, a sizeable amount for this period. F.W. Stobart was the general manager but he retired in 1905 to return to England and A.C. Bulling, with the company since 1882, became the manager. For several years, Stobart Eden and then Stobart, Sons and Company were located at 280 Portage Avenue but this building was much too small and far from the rail supply line.

The railway had opened up the northwest to thousands of settlers from Europe and the United States. The increased population and development in turn expanded the demand for consumer goods. As a transportation centre, Winnipeg grew into the role of a commercial nucleus for a dominance over a hinterland from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains. Supply companies, particularly those already well established, could scarcely keep up with the demand.
In 1903, Stobart’s built a large brick warehouse on McDermot and King. Architect James H. Cadham, one of the province’s foremost designers of masonry buildings, designed the five-storey structure. The stone foundation, a full metre thick, rests on concrete footings and was designed to support several additional storeys. The solid brick walls measured 92 by 133 feet for an interior space of 73,000 square feet. Built by contractors P. Burnett and C.H. Simpson at a cost of $81,000, the new warehouse featured pressed metal ceilings, gas lighting and a Grinnell turbine head automatic fire extinguisher. There was one freight elevator and one passenger elevator. The lower floors are girdered in steel.

The interior has natural lighting on three sides. Heavy goods were stored in the raised basement, such as the cottons, wools and heavy stock. The loading docks at street level fed stock into a large chute that slid the bales and cases to the basement. Here, packages were uncrated and distributed by the freight elevator to the appropriate floor. The company vault was also in the basement.

Stobart’s corporate offices, finished in oak and bevelled glass, were along the McDermot elevation. Storage and shipping took up the remainder of the space, with the exception of the cloak room and washrooms.

Woolen goods, dress goods and home furnishings were stored on the second floor. Fancy goods, small wears and women’s clothing occupied the third floor and the fourth contained men’s furnishings. The fifth floor contained the salesmen’s sample room, a packing room and light storage.

“Thoroughly modern and up-to-date”, the new warehouse was described as “the most conspicuous as regards size, appearance and location” of recent buildings in the warehouse district. With façades down both King and McDermot, Cadham made good use of the corner by making it both the entrance and a focal point of the building. Beneath an archway sided in the same rough-faced ashlar of the foundation were two massive panelled oak doors, ten feet high and four feet wide that swing on ball-bearing hinges. With three additional bays along King, the
building’s façades are not symmetrical, yet the fenestration gives it a rhythm and the big arched windows of the second floor give it balance. In 1907, the new storeys were added to Stobart’s warehouse which continue the 1903 details exactly and did little to alter the appearance of the building. In an article on Winnipeg warehouses, Leonard Eaton describes Cadham’s treatment of the building as “simple, direct, almost brutal” and continues:

If buildings reflect the personalities of the architects and their clients, then Frederick W. Stobart and James H. Cadham must have been memorable men.

Besides the distribution of dry good textiles, Stobart’s branched into manufacturing in 1903. Under the trademark “No. 1 Hard” (referring to grades of wheat), Stobart produced overalls and work shirts in a factory on King adjacent to the warehouse. In 1910, a second large warehouse was erected at McDermot and Lydia to accommodate further expansion of the dry goods business.

In 1914, F.W. Stobart, who had retired to England, was appointed as a purchase agent for the British Army. German blockades and production diverted to the war effort left Britain heavily dependent on North America for food and manufactured goods, which was a great stimulus for the dry goods industry. Stobart, with his forty years experience, was in a good position to assist his own company and competitors in the supply of shoes and clothing.

Clearly astute, Stobart was also able to recognize adverse trends emerging in the wholesale scene. As prairie cities grew, their stores had to compete with mail order houses and began to purchase directly from the manufacturers and insisting on wholesale prices. Automobiles gave farmers greater mobility to go to these larger centres rather than dealing exclusively with their small local merchant. Eaton’s typified both these trends, and caused many wholesalers to lose large quantities of sales. Firstly, the sheer size of the Eaton’s chair gave them purchasing power without the need of a distributor. Secondly, their mail order business, stepped up to a huge operation based in Winnipeg in 1920, gave country people direct access to city merchandise.
To capitalize on these trends, Stobart opened his own mail order business, Christie Grant Company, in 1914, that eventually took over all the Stobart, Sons and Company trade. The new company was formally announced by Stobart in 1916, but Christie Grant did not survive past c.1922. For his work in the war effort, F.W. Stobart was awarded the O.B.E. in 1918.

The Stobart Building may have stayed in the family past the closure of the mail order house. Frederick Stobart lived in Bedford, England and the name Bedford surfaced for the old Stobart block during the 1930s.

By the mid 1920s, the building was tenanted by a mixture of smaller wholesalers such as the George Lennox boot and shoe supplier and Barber-Ellis, the envelope supplier. During the early 1930s, the Bedford Building became an office supply warehouse with companies like Barber-Ellis and a range of paper agents and office equipment companies. Later in this decade, it had reverted to mixed use, one of the long-term tenants being the paint firm of Pratt and Lambert.

During the 1950s, the Bedford Block became once again a dry goods warehouse, with several clothing manufacturers including Brownstone’s Limited. This company occupied the main floor for several years, including clothing on a wholesale basis. The garment trade still accounts for most of the space in this large brick warehouse.

Alterations have been undertaken over the years to some of the floors. The first and second floors are probably the most altered but a considerable amount of the original building is still in evidence.

The significance of this building is the telescoping of Winnipeg’s warehouse district into one storey: the pioneer trade that grew with the city in range and sophistication into a great wholesale company, the erection of a large brick warehouse and the evolution of both business and building into mixed commercial use. The Stobart dry goods company operated in Winnipeg.
for forty years at a time when architects like J.H. Cadham were building a warehouse district
greater than any other prairie city.
FOOTNOTES:

1 Manitoba Gazette, 1899, p. 308. The executive of the company consisted of F.W. Stobart, his wife, his lawyer and Alfred C. Bulling, the general manager. The capital stock was $500,000.


3 Loc. cit.

4 City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 34, 6 March 1903. This initial permit gives the size as 140 by 98 feet but later permits and newspaper report list the dimensions as 90 by 132 feet.


6 Permits, op. Cit., No. 234, 18 March 1907. Malcom Bros. $23,000.


8 Permits, op. Cit., No. 2198, 10 August 1910 and No. 750, 11 June 1915.

9 “Buy Supplies for the British Army”, Manitoba Free Press, 2 October 1914.


11 op. cit., p. 138.

12 Manitoba Gazette, 1914, p. 711.

APPENDIX I

James H. Cadham

J.H. Cadham was one of the self-trained architects who learned his profession from years in the building trade. He was born in London, Ontario, in 1850 and trained as a carpenter. As a young man, he came to Winnipeg in 1870 and joined Wolseley’s historic Red River Expedition in the confrontation with Riel.¹ He remained in the city, where he worked for over twenty years as a contractor. Since 1895, he worked almost exclusively as an architect, primarily on the construction of large warehouses and stores.² From the following partial list of Cadham’s designs, it is clear that his influence was formative to the appearance of Winnipeg’s warehouse district. He died in 1907.

Cadham adopted a heavy masonry style for his buildings which drew their influence from H.H. Richardson of the eastern United States. He repeated the use of massive forms and plain materials to give impact, choosing window and door details to compliment this effect.

This is an incomplete list of Cadham’s Winnipeg buildings:

- 1897 - Merchants Bldg., 250 McDermot (originally George D. Woods Bldg.)
- 1899 - R.J. Whitla Bldg., 70 Arthur
- 1901 - Galt Bldg. on Bannatyne; G.F. Stephens Warehouse on Market
- 1902 - Gregg Bldg., 52-56 Albert
- 1903 - addition to Gaults Ltd. on Bannatyne; Kemp Manufacturing Bldg., 111 Lombard; Stobart Sons & Co., 275 McDermot
- 1904 - Miller Morse Bldg., 317 McDermot; Scott Block on Main; additon to Whitla Bldg., 70 Arthur
- 1905 - U of M Medical College on Bannatyne; addition to McLaughlin Carriage on Princess
- 1906 - Frost & Wood Bldg., 230 Princess; Kemp Mfg. Addition; McIntyre Block addition, Main

Also: Rat Portage Lumber Co.; Prairie Lumber Co. warehouse and the Champion Bldg.


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Plate 1 - Stobart and Sons Building, 281 McDermot Avenue, just after completion in 1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N3250.)

Plate 2 – Architect’s drawing of the Stobart and Sons Building, 1903. (City of Winnipeg Archives.)
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Plate 3 – The Bedford Building, 281 McDermot Avenue, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

Plate 4 – Stobart, Sons and Company Building, Portage Avenue, ca.1884. ( Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N4820.)
Plate 5 – The warehouse district in ca.1905. (Courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada.)