

167 BANNATYNE AVENUE - J.H. ASHDOWN WAREHOUSE

S.F. Peters, 1895

J.H.G. Russell, 1899, 1902, 1906, 1908, 1911



James H. Ashdown has been described as “the essence of the commercial spirit of the Western Canadian metropolis.” Winnipeg’s “Merchant Prince” not only made a fortune as the city grew, but he played a considerable role in promoting that growth. Opening his first hardware store in Winnipeg in 1869, Ashdown had a major influence on the development of Winnipeg from its incorporation to his death sixty years later.

Ashdown was born in London, England, in 1844 and emigrated to Canada with his family in 1852. He apprenticed as a tinsmith, traveled throughout the western United States and arrived in Winnipeg in 1868. He spent his first year cutting timber and accepting odd jobs. The following year, amid rumours of a Riel rebellion, Ashdown purchased the shop of disenchanted local tinsmith, George Mosher, and went into business for himself. As the settlement grew, so did Ashdown’s business. In 1870 he purchased two lots on the corner of Main Street and Bannatyne Avenue, the location of the Ashdown retail store for over one hundred years. Ashdown’s

successful real estate speculation, combined with his business acumen, made him a millionaire by 1910.

Urban historian Alan F.J. Artibise has written that “Winnipeg was established by businessmen for business purposes” and that the city’s commercial and social elites were indistinguishable. James Ashdown certainly fits this interpretation. He led a citizens’ group which lobbied for the incorporation of Winnipeg as a city in 1873, served as alderman in 1874 and again in 1879, and was mayor in 1907 and 1908. He was a charter member of the Winnipeg Board of Trade, director of the Bank of Montreal, president of the Canadian Fire Insurance Co., a founder and governor of Wesley College, and served on the Boards of the Children’s Aid Society, the Y.M.C.A., and the City Hospital. He was a member of the Manitoba Club, the Commercial Club, and the Masons.

With his business booming throughout the prairies, Ashdown commissioned architect S. Frank Peters, in 1894, to design a large warehouse to maintain a large and ready supply of goods. Peters had studied civil engineering at the University of Toronto and opened his Winnipeg office in 1892. His extant works include the London Building (1898) on Main Street and the F.W. Alloway Building (1898) on McDermot Avenue.

The 1895 portion of the warehouse is located on the corner of Bannatyne and Rorie Street, east of Main Street. By building on this site Ashdown expanded the boundary of the warehouse district which had been contained west of Main Street. He lobbied and successfully obtained a court decision that permitted the building of a rail spur line in the lane that ran between Bannatyne Avenue and Market Street. He ensured that goods could be delivered as well as shipped directly from his warehouse in boxcars. The Ashdown building was the first warehouse located in the heart of the city with railway facilities as good as if it were located in the railway yard. The spur line attracted other wholesalers to move into this locale.

The original warehouse was four storeys high and five bays wide. Facing Bannatyne Avenue, it was built of buff brick with a Selkirk stone foundation and Selkirk stone trimmings. Peters refused to call the ornamentation by any “high sounding name” but said that the building “is in

the modern commercial style.” The warehouse, with its large round-headed arches, projecting giant order pilasters, and paired windows took its inspiration from Henry Hobson Richardson’s Marshall Field Wholesale Store (1885-87) in Chicago.

A successful federal campaign to attract settlers into Western Canada along with the rapid expansion of the wheat economy meant that Ashdown’s wholesale enterprise continued to prosper. In 1899, architect J.H.G. Russell was commissioned to design a four storey stone and brick warehouse for Ashdown, but to serve Codville and Company, a grocery wholesale firm. Located at 179 Bannatyne Avenue, the building was located west of the 1895 structure, separated by a vacant lot. During the next eleven years Russell designed various additions that connected the two buildings and increased the overall height to six storeys.

The J.H. Ashdown Company supplied a wide variety of merchandise, stretching the definition of “hardware” to include housewares, sporting goods, automotive parts, electrical supplies and agricultural equipment. Ashdown also had small warehouses in Calgary, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Regina. James H. Ashdown died in 1924, but the firm remained a family business until it was sold in 1971.

Negotiations are currently underway attempting to convert the building into apartments. The enterprise will have a positive impact on the revitalization of the warehouse district and it is hoped that the project will catalyze other residential endeavours and further private sector investment in the Exchange District.