

352 DONALD STREET – CANADA BUILDING
The J. McDiarmid Co. Ltd., 1910



The early 1900s saw the emergence in Winnipeg of several large construction companies whose operations extended well beyond the city into western Canada and northwestern Ontario.

Such firms engaged in a wide variety of projects – from roads, bridges and other public works, to industrial plants, terminal grain elevators, government buildings, schools, hospitals, office towers, department stores, and other commercial structures. Some offered design as well as construction services by employing architects and draughtsmen. Some also managed enterprises that supplied building materials and equipment.

One of the forces behind the trend toward industry integration was James McDiarmid (1855-1934), a Scottish-trained contractor who came to Winnipeg in the early 1880s. He and a brother, John (1861-1943), worked with builder G.W. Murray, but in the 1890s formed their own partnership, J. and J. McDiarmid. They later (1906) joined with another brother, Peter (1857-1915), to incorporate The J. McDiarmid Co. Ltd. which

remained in business until the mid-1940s. James also became a co-founder and/or officer of several other firms in the building industry, including the Winnipeg, Edmonton and Calgary Paint and Glass companies, Winnipeg Construction Co., and Marble and Tile Company of Canada.

Among the McDiarmids' clients was the Canadian Pacific Railway for which they built shops facilities in Winnipeg and at various other points between Fort William and Vancouver. They also secured Dominion government contracts, including customs buildings in Winnipeg and Calgary. In 1915, the Manitoba government turned to them to complete the Legislative and Law Courts buildings after the original contractor was dismissed. They also participated in one of the consortia that built the Winnipeg aqueduct (1914-19).

From the mid-1890s onward, James combined an architectural practice with his construction work. His early projects included plans for St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (1894-95) and warehouses in the Exchange District. Other commissions followed in Winnipeg and across the West. Surviving local examples of his designs include the James Penrose House, Cumberland (Nokomis) Block, and Great-West Saddlery, Merrick-Anderson, Donald H. Bain and Marshall-Wells warehouses.

In 1910, the McDiarmids engaged in another facet of their industry by becoming the owner-developers, as well as designers and builders, of an office block on the west side of Donald Street between Ellice and Cumberland avenues – a transitional site between the Exchange District and downtown commercial core.

The seven-storey, \$80,000 structure rose from a reinforced concrete foundation to a reinforced concrete frame enclosed by brick walls with Tyndall stone and concrete accents. To enhance safety, a central interior wall was clad by tile and brick firewalls.

The building's five-bay front (east) façade was executed in the Chicago Style. The symmetrical facing was divided vertically by attached, squared columns and horizontally

by large rectangular windows. The top floor and roof-line were highlighted through the use of delicately detailed capitals, paired mini-columns, a full entablature, parapet, name plate, and shield displaying the date of construction. The original main entrance was recessed within an arch topped by a keystone and cornice. Later alterations placed this element in squared surrounds. The building's rear elevation displayed a reduced version of the front design, while the north and south walls had numerous rectangular windows, but no ornamentation.

The main-floor interior held an entrance lobby and retail shops, the occupants of which included watchmakers, tailors, barbers, and a photographic store. Upper floors were divided into offices that ran off central hallways. In addition to various small- and medium-sized companies, tenants included the Manitoba Power Commission, James Richardson and Sons, Dominion Bridge Co., Air Canada, Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corp., and Manitoba Heart Foundation.

The J. McDiarmid Co. sold the Canada Building in 1924 to Winnipeg barrister Allan Bronfman. He was succeeded as owner a quarter-century later by Brian Investments Ltd.