

104 KING STREET – RYAN BLOCK
H.S. Griffith, 1895



The four-storey Ryan Block, across from Old Market Square in the western half of the warehouse district, symbolizes the enterprise that abounded during Winnipeg's turn-of-the-century heyday as the transportation and wholesale distribution centre of Western Canada.

The office-warehouse was built in 1895 for Thomas Ryan, a journeyman shoemaker from Perth, Ontario who arrived in Winnipeg in 1874 with \$70 in stock and a desire to improve his lot. He and a partner soon formed McFarlane and Ryan, one of the city's first shoe merchants. Two years later, Ryan purchased the business and established Thomas Ryan Boots and Shoes. Success led in 1883 to a new store at 492 Main Street -- Winnipeg's first with all stone construction and an electric passenger elevator.

Ryan also embarked on a political career, sitting as a City alderman from 1884 to 1888 when he was elected as mayor. During his one-year term, his religious convictions were reflected in the passage

of by-laws to limit Sunday trading activities.

Ryan was well-placed to tap the opportunities offered by Winnipeg's position on the Canadian Pacific Railway's transcontinental line, and by the Dominion government's push to quickly populate the West. He sold the retail operation to his brother George in 1889 and shifted into wholesaling. Within six years, his volume of trade in footwear demanded a new warehouse.

The structure, on the southwest corner of King Street and Bannatyne Avenue, was designed by Hugh S. Griffith in the Richardsonian Romanesque style common in the warehouse district.

Griffith, an architect and draftsman, emigrated to Winnipeg from England in 1887. He worked for the Northern Pacific Railway and Land Titles Office before establishing his practice in 1893. Among his projects were many local residences, the Criterion Hotel, Baker Building, Moses Lechtzier's Turkish and Russian Bathhouse, the Norwood Cricket Club Pavilion, and St. Mary's Anglican Church in Portage la Prairie.

Griffith's Ryan Block, originally three storeys in height, displays the main elements of the Richardsonian Romanesque style -- rounded arches, rusticated base, symmetry, modest decoration and strong textures. It stands on a raised rubble-stone foundation faced with Tyndall stone. Solid red-clay brick walls enclose the large square timber beams, rafters and wooden floor planks characteristic of mill construction favoured during the period because of its strength, fire resistance and economy.

Three large round-headed arches with rough-cut Tyndall keystones dominate the main-floor entrances and windows on the King Street (east) facade. Brick pilasters rise from the arches to a brick cornice and parapet, separating bays of single windows on the upper levels. Tyndall keystones highlight brick voussoirs over the second-floor windows. Other ornamentation is provided by stone sills; brick belts and drip mouldings; a stone belt course between the third and fourth storeys; and stepped brickwork above both of these floors.

Most of the elements are continued along the Bannatyne (north) elevation. Its main-floor windows also are arched with brick voussoirs, drip mouldings and Tyndall keystones. Entrances occur on King and Bannatyne while a loading door is on the west elevation. The main-floor interior is finished with offices and sample rooms.

In 1903, Ryan commissioned Griffith to extend the warehouse upward one storey. Subsequent renovations do not appear to have resulted in substantial alterations.

Ryan relocated in 1906-07 to a new facility at Princess Street and Notre Dame Avenue, more than tripling his storage capacity. Operating under the slogan, "The pick of the Boston and Quebec markets is demanded and furnished", he opened branches in Calgary and Edmonton and maintained eight travelling salesmen. However, the business ceased when Ryan retired in 1928. He died in 1937 at age 86.

A series of wholesalers occupied the King Street warehouse after 1907. One long-standing tenant was Warkov and Safeer, a wholesale leather supplier. The building was vacant for four years before Gray's Auction Mart assumed occupancy in 1977.