

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)

C.M. Willmot and G.W. Stewart (1883)



Despite the collapse of Winnipeg's 1881-1882 real estate boom, wholesale grocer Alexander Macdonald proceeded with construction of this substantial twin to the Fortune Block on Main Street, confident in the city's - and his own - longer-term commercial prospects.

The Scottish-born Macdonald immigrated to Canada in the latter 1860s, working first near Seaforth, Ontario, then relocating to Winnipeg in 1871 where he became a clerk in W. Palmer Clark's general store. He soon began investing in land, while also establishing his own grocery (1876) and providing supplies to outlying traders through a chain of Red River carts.

These were the beginnings of the Alexander Macdonald Company that was incorporated in 1890 and grew by 1912 to include a factory and 10 wholesale grocery outlets across western Canada.

During the boom in 1882, Macdonald purchased a new, three-storey, retail-office block built at the southwest corner of Main and St. Mary Avenue by Mark Fortune, a realtor and former alderman. This solid brick structure on a stone foundation was designed in the flamboyant High Victorian Italianate style by architects Charles Mancel Willmot and George W. Stewart. It was constructed of plain local brick at a cost of \$35,000 by Grant and Gelley.

The next year, Macdonald had an almost identical extension erected for \$16,000 on the south side of the Fortune Block. While this building's architects are unknown, similarities in design point to Willmot and Stewart, Ontarians who produced several major edifices during a brief partnership from 1882-c.1884. Their projects included the Richardson, Carruthers and Stobart blocks, Winnipeg General Hospital and Mark Fortune residence on Broadway, all now demolished. Willmot subsequently returned to Ontario, while Stewart remained in Winnipeg until 1887, then moved to the United States where he practised in Dallas, Texas, Atlanta, Georgia and St. Petersburg, Florida.

The Macdonald and Fortune blocks formed an impressive visual landmark at the southern edge of the business district. Along the main floor of the front (east) façade were cast iron or carved wood columns and large plate glass windows with multi-pane transoms. Above, brick pilasters rose to an elaborate metal cornice highlighted by protrusions, wrought-iron cresting and a decorative fascia. Round-headed or Romanesque-style windows appeared along the second storey, some paired within larger segmental brick arches, while third-floor openings were set in layered arches with pointed heads. Further ornamentation was provided by a brick string course; use of coloured brick on window caps and second-storey arches; and corbelled brickwork below the cornice.

Macdonald's wholesale operations initially occupied the ground floor of 226-228 Main but soon expanded to the upper-storey offices. In 1895, continued growth demanded that two more buildings be erected behind the Main Street property at St. Mary and Fort Street. During this period, Macdonald also was active in civic politics, including a term as mayor in 1892, and in several other local corporations.

In 1901, construction began on a new brick and stone warehouse at 116-118 Market Avenue to

which Macdonald subsequently relocated. He sold the business in 1912 to his two sons and a number of employees. The company shortly thereafter completed yet another new facility on Pacific Avenue. In 1924, the various branches were grouped under the name of Macdonald's Consolidated Ltd. Within a year of Macdonald's death in 1928, this firm was absorbed by Safeway Stores, predecessor of Canada Safeway.

The Macdonald Block was sold in 1902 to Sam Spence who converted it to the Commercial Hotel early the next year. The renovations, costing \$3,500 were designed by H.S. Griffiths and completed by contractor S.B. Ritchie. At one point, Spence also leased a portion of the Fortune Block as a staff residence and possibly an annex for guests.

The interior, designed around two-storey light well clad in ornamental tin, features rooms on both sides of the O-shaped hallways, with staircases at both the east and west ends and common washroom and bathing facilities on each floor.

The Commercial continued in operation until the mid-1980s, after which the main floor was occupied by a private club and the upper levels were left as rooms.

Alterations over the years upset the exterior unity of the Macdonald and Fortune buildings – the most serious was the modernization of the ground floor. The Macdonald Block is an excellent example of an early 1880s development and, in combination with the adjacent Fortune Block and Winnipeg Hotel, forms part of a rare intact pre-1890 streetscape.

Elements of the building that would require approval if alterations were planned are:

Exterior-

- Three-storey brick building with flat roof located mid-block on the west side of Main Street south of St. Mary Avenue, its main façade facing east onto Main Street, its south façade facing a vacant lot, its north façade hidden by the neighbouring building and its rear
- (west) façade facing a back lane;
- Its main (east) façade with its upper storeys clad in polychromatic brick, divided into two bays by a centrally-place brick pilaster, a second brick pilasters at the south end and windows in thin roundheaded openings under larger segmental

brick arches (some with patterned brickwork) on the second floor and windows in pointed headed openings with layered brick arches on the top floor, a metal fire escape along the south end and an ornate metal cornice at the roofline; and

- Its uninterrupted common clay brick south façade.

Interior-

- Ornamental tin clad light well.