

212 MCDERMOT AVENUE – LAKE OF THE WOODS BUILDING
J.H.G. Russell, 1901, 1911



Development of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in the 1880s not only opened the West to homesteaders, but also gave rise to opportunities for new businesses to store, export and process prairie agricultural produce.

One such value-added enterprise was The Lake of the Woods Milling Co. Ltd. established in 1887 by several Montréal investors who held interests in the CPR and wanted to increase use of the railway. They established a large mill at Keewatin in northwestern Ontario to process prairie wheat into what became known as the Five Roses brand of flour. Other mills followed at Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, Medicine Hat, Alberta, and Brantford, Ontario, along with an extensive network of western grain elevators.

By the early 1890s, the firm had a regional office at Main Street and James Avenue in Winnipeg. It subsequently (1901) invested in new quarters on the south side of McDermot Avenue between Main and Albert streets, closer to the city's commercial core.

The two-storey structure was built in stages. The 1901 version was irregular in shape with a small, one-storey rear (south) section. In 1911, the latter area was increased in size and a second floor was added. John Hamilton Gordon Russell of Winnipeg designed both projects. The 1901 contractor was Edward Cass.

The masonry structure rose from a stone foundation to load-bearing brick walls and a frame that included steel I-beams. The exterior front (north) and east walls were finished in unusual materials for Winnipeg – dark brick with Twin City brown sandstone accents.

Typical of the Romanesque Revival style, the building's main-floor entrance and windows were set in large arches, its ornamentation was low-relief, and its base was given a rusticated finish, although not as bold or course as the bases of some other Romanesque structures in the Exchange District.

Ornamental features included a tower-like element at the northeast corner of the second floor, brick and sandstone belt courses, sandstone lug sills, squared and stepped brick surrounds for second-storey windows, and a full entablature with a metal cornice and modillions. The sandstone arch around the main entrance was adorned with pairs of attached, unfluted columns with acanthus-leaf capitals, carved mouldings, the company's name in stone, and its logo in leaded glass.

The main-floor interior initially incorporated an entrance vestibule and staircase, general and private offices, sample room, and vault. A boardroom, three bedrooms, washroom facilities, and storage space were on the upper floor. An additional vault and washrooms were in the basement. Interior finishes included hardwood floors, marble and wood wainscots, high decorative ceilings, and a boardroom fireplace. During the 1911

expansion, the ground floor was reorganized and additional office space was installed on the upper level. Despite major renovations since the 1960s, a number of original interior elements remain.

Architect Russell (1862-1946) was a prominent and prolific designer of commercial, church and residential buildings in the early 1900s. Among his surviving local projects are the Augustine, Westminster, Knox and St. John's Presbyterian churches, Crescent-Fort Rouge Methodist Church, the J.H. Ashdown Store, the Hammond, Adelman, Franklin Press, Porter, Glengarry and Dingwall buildings in the Exchange District, and the J.H. Ashdown and R.R. Wilson houses.

Russell was born and educated in Toronto. His early exposure to architecture occurred in that city in the employ of H.B. Gordon. Russell came to Winnipeg in the early 1880s, but then studied and worked in the United States from 1886 to 1893. After returning to Winnipeg, he maintained a professional practice from 1895 to c.1940, latterly with his son, N.C.H. Russell.

The Lake of the Woods Milling Co. expanded over time to control bakeries, bag factories and rival mills throughout Canada. It, along with the milling industry as a whole, was weakened by depressed markets in the 1930s, but revived during and after the Second World War when its products were once again in high demand. In 1954, however, most of the firm's stock was acquired by a major competitor, the Ogilvie Flour Mills Co.

Subsequent occupants of the Lake of the Woods Building included chartered accountants, jewellers, civic employees, Legal Aid Manitoba, and Mayberry Art Gallery.