



**221 McDERMOT AVENUE**

**BATE BLOCK  
(FORMERLY LYON BLOCK & AIKINS BLOCK)**

CITY OF WINNIPEG  
HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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Originally called the Lyon Block, this large brick building was erected late in 1883 to house a grocery wholesale operation by the name of Lyon, MacKenzie and Powis. The principal owner of the business, William H. Lyon, was a pioneer merchant in Winnipeg. American-born, he had been an Indian trader until opening a store in Red River in 1860.<sup>1</sup> This small enterprise grew to be a large partnership with Kenneth MacKenzie and Edmund Powis. Just before they built the Lyon Block in 1883, the grocery wholesale was spread out in a series of small stores along the street, occupying space at numbers, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 100, 102 and 104 McDermot. With the grocery wholesale flourishing, W.H. Lyon retired in c.1890 to the United States but kept an eye on his many real estate interests in Winnipeg and the North-West. When he died in 1897, the press described him as "one of the wealthiest men of the country."<sup>2</sup>

The year 1883 saw a good deal of commercial development, particularly for retail outlets on Main Street and warehousing along Princess and its principal cross streets. The Winnipeg Daily Sun commented on the large amount of uninvested capital idle in the city from the boom of 1880-82, and observed that mortgages on new buildings were about the safest possible investment.<sup>3</sup> For Lyon, MacKenzie and Powis, it was simply a matter of acquiring the property because they were already established in the district.

Their building was three storeys high, made of solid brick, with dimensions of 67 feet by 100 feet. Designed for the storage of heavy goods, the building rests on a stone foundation with great 3 by 14 inch joists set nine inches apart. An all-season cellar for storing goods was also featured in its construction. The architect was listed as a Mr. Blackstone, with the Saul Brothers as general contractors and a sub-contractor by the name of Girvin for the carpenter work. The cost of construction was reported to be \$25,000.<sup>4</sup>

Blackstone's design was in the genre of Romanesque revival that was so fashionable for large brick buildings. The original three storeys (the building now has five) were rather more successful than at

present. Windows and doors were all headed with a semi-circular arch of radiating brick terminating in decorative brick work. The windows were all paired on the furnished façade of the south and west elevators, and there were entrances on both McDermot and Albert streets. Great brick buttresses ran the length of the façade and terminated in little gabled caps. The cornice between these formed rhythmical waves of brick work and pressed metal. The effect of the design as a whole was crisp and attractive, an aesthetic blend of junction and form.

Lyon, MacKenzie and Powis remained in the warehouse until 1893, where another large grocery wholesale by the name of Thompson, Codville and Company assumed occupancy. In 1899, it became simply Codville and Co., later situated in the Codville Building on Westbrook east of Portage.

On 15 April 1900, the Manitoba Free Press took over the Lyon Block, except for the offices of two smaller newspapers, the Icelandic weekly Heimsbringla and the Catholic journal Northwest Review.<sup>5</sup> The Free Press was one of the west's oldest surviving newspaper, commencing publication in 1872 for Manitoba and western Canada. It had grown to become a daily paper with a hefty circulation and a strong reputation for tough journalism. In the words of W.L. Morton, the Manitoba Free Press was the most representative voice of the Northwest.<sup>6</sup> In July 1901, John Wesley Dafoe came from Montreal to become the editor of the paper and, together with its new publisher, Clifford Sifton, they became a high powered team, promoting the interests of the Liberal party and the prairie west.<sup>7</sup> To a great extent, they were successful. Sifton was the powerful Minister of the Interior in the Laurier government since 1896 and it was through his personal energy that Canada developed an aggressive immigration policy. Sifton and Dafoe used the Free Press to advance their ideas, writing in 1904: "Reduced to its ultimate analysis, the essential and paramount need of the west is...Population...(and) to secure population there must be publicity."<sup>8</sup> This was the essence of Sifton's analysis, but the Free Press battled on many grounds for the west during the Sifton dynasty.<sup>9</sup>

When Dafoe became its editor, the Free Press had recently moved into the old Lyon Block. The paper was re-organized for a modern printing technology, particularly with new typesetting

machines and automatic high-speed presses.<sup>10</sup> At this time, the Free Press on McDermot was a part of Winnipeg's famous "Newspaper Row", but by 1905 the paper had again outgrown its quarters and moved first to Portage Avenue and on to its present location on Carlton in 1913.<sup>11</sup> Dafoe edited the Free Press until his death in 1944 while the Sifton family continues to keep a hand in its publishing.

In 1905 (Sir) J.A.M. Aikins purchased the empty Lyon Block on McDermot, announcing plans to re-model the structure into an office building. Aikins was the head of one of Winnipeg's most prominent and respected legal firms, Aikins, Loftis et al (Aikins, MacAulay and Thorvaldson). The son of a former lieutenant-governor of Manitoba in the 1880s, J.A.M. Aikins was knighted in 1914 and appointed lieutenant-governor in 1916.<sup>12</sup> From 1879 to 1896 he acted as Council to the Justice Department, later counselling on several pieces of legislation and on royal commissions. Aikins was intimately involved with establishing the Y.M.C.A. in Winnipeg in the 1870s and also had a life-time involvement with the administration of Wesley College.<sup>13</sup> On the national scene, he founded and established the Canadian Bar Association in 1914, an organization to bring co-operation and understanding among members of the legal profession across the country in the fields of legislation, the courts, business and legal rights.<sup>14</sup> Aikins reputation and impact was clearly felt at all levels of community and state. This wealth left an impression on Winnipeg too: two family mansions, one on Roslyn Road and the other now part of Balmoral Hall, the Aikins Building on McDermot and the present Sommerset Block on Portage Avenue at Donald.

In his plan to convert the former Lyon Block (renamed the Aikins Building), Aikins had architect J.H.G. Russell add two storeys and alter the ground floor façade. The addition of the two storeys was fairly sympathetic to the 1883 design and by "scraping" the old bricks, Russell was successful in matching the old and new colours.<sup>15</sup> It was probably with this addition that concrete chamfered columns and beams were included to reinforce the brick bearing walls for the extra weight and height.<sup>16</sup> The main floor offices of Aikins, Loftus were finished in oak while the exterior received its storefront windows, limestone columns and metal cornice. A handsome Otis-Fenson cage elevator was also added. The main floor was shared between the law offices and the temporary quarters for the Imperial Bank. Accountants, realtors, loan companies, insurance offices and lawyers made up

the rest of the renovated building's occupants in 1906.

When the Aikins offices moved into their Portage Avenue building, the Aikins Building on McDermot continued as office space for several years before gradually returning to a combination of warehouse and office space. The Albert Street entrances seemed to be sealed off around 1920 except for a private entrance to the rear stairway.

From about 1917 to 1923, the building was a nucleus for the film industry in Winnipeg. Principally, most of these half-dozen companies were film exchanges, made necessary because operators had to buy their copies of cinema films, which proved to be very expensive. Rather than travel with the films, as in the early days, the agents simply exchanged them with others to obtain a variety of shows in permanent theatres.<sup>17</sup> However, the filming of several of Ralph Connor's famous prairie novels around 1920 generated a great deal of creative and financial stirrings in Winnipeg.<sup>18</sup> The projects ultimately failed and by 1924, not even the film exchanges were to be found in the Aikins Building.<sup>19</sup>

By 1925, the building was a mixture of professional or service offices and manufacturers' agents. Such stores as the Royal Brand Clothing Company, the Office Specialty Manufacturing Company, Continental Clothing and the forerunners of Al's Restaurants have utilized the main floor space over the years. In 1942, the drug wholesale firm of Bate and Bate purchased the building, changed its name, and have occupied office and warehouse space on the third floor since.

In 1930, the old Tribune Building next door was gutted by fire.<sup>20</sup> When it was razed in June, 1930, the last physical reminder of Newspaper Row also disappeared.

Presently, the Bate Building contains several manufacturers' agents, some professional offices and several art studios, which is a recent phenomena for the old warehouse district. The cornice and storefront which Russell added in 1905 gives the appearance of a building of that era; the detailing of the second and third storeys tell the true tale.

## FOOTNOTES

1. "W.H. Lyon Dead" Manitoba Free Press 2 March 1897.
2. Loc. cit. See also Pioneers and Early Citizens of Manitoba The Manitoba Library Association Winnipeg c. 1971, p. 126. Also, W.P. Thompson et al. Winnipeg's Historic Warehouse Area Heritage Canada and the Manitoba Historical Society Winnipeg 1976 p. 19. Lyon also served a term as alderman on the Winnipeg City Council in 1878.
3. Winnipeg Daily Sun 31 March 1883.
4. Ibids, 20 October 1883.
5. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg, 1902.
6. W.L. Morton Manitoba: A History University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1957 p. 170. The paper also had the distinction of covering more territory in point of circulation than any other daily paper on the continent.
7. Ramsay Cook The Politics of John W. Dafoe and the Free Press University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1963 p. 15-16.
8. Manitoba Free Press 16 March 1905. Quoted in Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg a social history of urban growth 1874-1914 McGill Queen's Press 1975 p. 102.
9. Blair Fraser "The Many Mighty Sifts" MacLean's Magazine 19 December 1959, p. 18.
10. (W.J. Healey) Free Press 1872-1900 commemorative pamphlet, c. 1900, *passim*.
11. "80 Years of Publishing - Free Press 9 November 1952.
12. Letters of Congratulations presented to Hon. Sir James Aikins K.C. Winnipeg 1929 introduction.
13. Frank Schofield The Story of Manitoba Volume II The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co. Winnipeg 1913 p. 11.
14. Letters of Congratulations, *op. cit.*, p. 46. From the Hon. Sir Allen Aylesworth 22 November 1928.
15. Manitoba Free Press 6 December 1906.
16. Architectural Survey Map 1969 P.A.M.

17. Peter Morris Embattled Shadows A History of Canadian Cinema 1895-1939 McGill-Queen's University Press 1978 p. 18-19.
18. Ibid., p. 110-116.
19. In 1922, There were seven film-related companies in the Aikins Building: Famous-Lasky Film Service, Rialto Theatre Supply Co., Excelsior Film Advertising Co., Future Film Co., Horsefall Productions Ltd., Canadian Universal Film; and Fox Films Corp. Ltd.
20. "Razed Old Burned Block on McDermot Avenue This Week" Free Press 7 June 1930.

## APPENDIX I

Although little is known about the 1883 architect of 221 McDermot, J.H.G. Russell, who made the alterations and additions of 1906, is a well-known figure. Russell was born and educated in Toronto, coming to Winnipeg in 1882. From 1886 until 1893, he travelled and worked in the United States, learning the trade of civil engineering and surveying as well as architecture. Russell returned to Winnipeg in 1893 where he established a respected practice. Among Russell's many achievements were his designs of the McArthur (Childs) building, the J.H. Ashdown house, St. Augustine, Westminster and Knox churches, the Great West Permanent Loan building and the Casa Loma apartments.<sup>1</sup> Russell was a member of the examining board of the Manitoba Association of Architects and president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada for the year 1912-13.

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1. Compiled from J.H.G. Russell Collection, P.A.M. and Schofield's The Story of Manitoba Volume II p. 157.

## APPENDIX II

Sub-contractors to the 1905 alterations of 221 McDermot. From the J.H.G. Russell Collection account books, 1905, p. 342-3. The total cost was \$20,000.

William Grace Co. - builder  
Cummings Brass Co. - elevator end  
Jns. Wallace - galvanized iron cornices  
Standard Plumbing Co. - heating  
Hammon and Rodway - plumbing  
Vulcan Iron Works - iron work, columns  
Jones and Moore Electric Co. - wiring



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Plate 1 – 221 McDermot Avenue, Lyon Block, 1883. Note the original entrances before alterations on the McDermot Avenue side. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – 221 McDermot as the Free Press Building (arrow) in "Newspaper Row". The Tribune Building is located immediately east of it. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 3 – Another shot of "Newspaper Row" and McDermot Avenue, ca.1903. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – Unknown celebration at the corner of Albert Street and McDermot Avenue, ca.1910. Alterations have already been made to the storefront and two storeys added. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2697.)

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Plate 5 – The Bate Building, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 6 – The Bate Building, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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Plate 7 – Detail of the storefront, south elevation, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 8 – The cage elevator, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)