

138 PORTAGE AVENUE – KEEWAYDEN BLOCK (JACOB-CROWLEY BUILDING)
James McDiarmid, 1909



This building, located just east of Winnipeg’s famous Portage and Main intersection, is a unique, pre-World War I office building that has been part of the downtown landscape since its completion in 1909.

This building is a modest example of the Chicago style commercial building, which has many examples in downtown Winnipeg. The style was popularized in North America from the late 1890s to the 1920s and is based on a newly evolving structural support system – skeletal steel and reinforced concrete – that allowed architects to design taller structures, skyscrapers. Ornamentation ranged from austere to extensive and was often confined to the lower and top floors. Sculpted stone and terra cotta were often used in this ornamentation while the middle floors were often plain brick with banks of windows in grid-like patterns.

The seven-storey building rests on a 76.2-centimetre concrete foundation with a reinforced concrete slab and beam supported superstructure and brick exterior walls with concrete accenting. Steel columns are employed on the top floor. The superstructure measures approximately 27.5 x 26.7 x 29.9 metres. Total cost of construction in 1909 was \$70,000.

The building was designed by one of the City's most influential architects/contractors, James McDiarmid (1855-1934). The Scottish born and trained mason came to Winnipeg in 1883 and organized a contracting business that a decade later had grown to include design work as well. McDiarmid oversaw the family business for many decades which grew dramatically after 1900 to include large contracts from Lake Superior to the Pacific Ocean. The company, J. McDiarmid Company Limited, was responsible for completing Manitoba's Legislative Building and Law Courts Building after the construction scandal in 1915 and was part of the consortia to build the Winnipeg Aqueduct. James McDiarmid was an influential and important Manitoba builder/designer.

The building's front (north) façade begins at grade with smooth-cut stone cladding rising to the sills of the large ground floor windows. A raised, centrally-located renovated entrance gives access to the interior. The upper storeys are divided into five bays by brick pilasters; on each floor the bays are filled with large rectilinear window openings and wide concrete spandrels. The pilasters end with modest capitals at a cornice below the seventh floor windows. Finishing this façade is a completed entablature with heavy overhanging cornice and stepped parapet. The frieze includes the word "KEEWAYDEN".

The rear (south) façade mimics the front in its use of pilasters to create five vertical bays, the rectilinear window openings and the wide concrete spandrels. There are several raised loading docks and the roofline is unadorned.

The west façade features a number of matched and unmatched rectilinear window openings on each floor and the east façade has four matching rectilinear window openings on each of the upper floors.

The building has seen a number of different uses over the years, originally serving as offices for a variety of tenants and then as a clothing factory. There is little evidence of the original layouts or finishes on any floor.

The building was originally owned by the Notre Dame Investment Company, a small-scale local development firm, and early tenants included architects, insurance companies and many merchants' agencies.

In the late 1920s, the building was occupied by the Jacob-Crowley Company, an important clothing manufacturer incorporated by Benjamin Jacob (1892-1975) and John H. Crowley (1879-1963) in 1919. Originally operating in the warehouse district, the company expanded from manufacturing working clothes to suits and coats and other clothing. From its headquarters on Portage Avenue, the company expanded rapidly, becoming a major national player in the clothing sector. During World War II, the factory produced 75,000 garments for the Canadian army and navy. Continued expansion necessitated a move to a modern factory in 1954. The business shut down in 1988.

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

Exterior-

- Seven-storey brick and concrete building with flat roof located on the south side of Portage Avenue, its main façade facing north onto Portage Avenue, its east and west façades facing parking lots and its south façade facing a back lane and parking lot; and
- The front (north) façade with small basement windows in rectilinear openings, a centrally-located raised entrance, wide brick pilasters dividing the upper floors into five bays, upper storey windows in rectilinear openings with wide concrete spandrels, a modest cornice beneath the seventh storey windows and a complete entablature at the roofline with the word "KEEWAYDEN" in the frieze;
- The west and east façades with rectilinear window openings on all floors; and
- The rear (south) façade with windows in rectilinear openings featuring wide concrete spandrels, brick pilasters and raised loading doors.

Interior-

- Concrete structural system.