

103 PRINCESS STREET – G.F. & J. GALT BLOCK
Charles H. Wheeler, 1887; James H. Cadham, 1904



Winnipeg's dominance as an economic centre in Western Canada at the turn of the nineteenth century owed much to its wholesale trade. Local business interests recognized early on the many benefits that would accrue if Winnipeg could control the flow of supplies to an expanding prairie population. Those interests became assiduous in their pursuit of rail freight rate concessions and other measures that supported the city's development as a regional entrepôt.

A number of wholesale businesses were set up in the 1870s, but the trade's first major growth occurred during the boom of 1881-82 that accompanied development of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Among the new firms from that period was the G.F. and J. Galt Co. which handled groceries, liquors and cigars. Its principals were George Frederick Galt (1855-1928) from Toronto and his Montréal-born cousin, John Galt (1856-1933).

The Galts occupied two other Princess Street warehouses before building their own three-storey facility in 1887 on the southeast corner of Princess and Bannatyne Avenue. Their architect, Charles H. Wheeler, employed the Romanesque Revival style, noted for its arched openings and textured accents, to produce an imposing design for a prominent location in what is today known as the Exchange District.

The warehouse is of solid brick construction with a thick stone foundation and square timber beam/post support system. Its two main (north and west) façades have raised rusticated stone bases, brick walls, large arched windows set in singles, pairs and triplets within massive, full-height, arched brick bays, and stone and brick ornamentation. The main façades join at a rounded corner of rusticated stone. Each originally was divided into seven bays and had walls of white brick (which later were painted). The original roof was metal-clad.

In 1904, architect James H. Cadham was commissioned to expand the Galt Warehouse upward by one storey and southward along Princess Street by two bays, including an enclosed loading area and a party wall with the building at 89 Princess. Cadham gave the warehouse a simpler corbelled brick and stone cornice and stone-capped parapet compared to Wheeler's design.

In ca.1898, the Galts established a second enterprise, the Blue Ribbon Co., to distribute tea, coffee, spices, and baking powder. Blue Ribbon eventually eclipsed the G.F. and J. Galt Co. Its success demanded a move from 103 Princess to a new warehouse on King Street in 1901. A decade later, Blue Ribbon was reunited with the G.F. and J. Galt Co. in a larger facility on McDermot Avenue. Blue Ribbon became a limited stock company in 1928, the year of G.F. Galt's death. It was later (1959) acquired by a large spice firm in the United Kingdom.

The Galt Co. continued to own 103 Princess Street until the mid-1940s, but occupancy of the warehouse changed as its space was taken up by dozens of smaller-scale businesses. Longer-term tenants included the F.J. Tonkin Co., religious goods (1946-73) and Friendly Bears Co., children's furniture (1974 to present).

Despite the succession of occupants that followed the Galts, their warehouse has escaped major alterations. Significant exterior changes have been limited to the main entrances and main-floor windows. Parts of the interior have been modernized for retail and office uses, but some original open storage areas, with their high ceilings, remain.

The 1887 warehouse was one of Charles Wheeler's earliest Winnipeg projects. Born and trained in England, Wheeler (1838-1917) immigrated to this city in 1882 and worked with architect James Chisholm before establishing his own practice. He subsequently planned more than 270 buildings in Manitoba and the North-West Territories. Among his notable projects were Holy Trinity Church on Donald Street and Hugh John Macdonald House (Dalnavert) on Carlton Street. Wheeler also was a choirmaster at Knox and Zion churches and a music and theatre critic.

Contractors for the 1887 building included John Hall (excavation), Saul Brothers (superstructure), John Girvin (carpentry and joinery), J.L. Wells (plumbing and roofing), American Plumbing Co. (hot water heating), and McLennan and Delaney (block-paving in an original courtyard).

The Imperial Plumbing and Building Co. did the 1904 additions. Architect Cadham (1850-1907) had been among the Ontario militiamen sent to Manitoba in 1870 in response to the first Riel Rebellion. He remained in Winnipeg, working in the building trade before beginning to practice architecture in the mid-1890s. Many of his projects were in the Exchange District – and several of those have been given historical designations, including the Blue Ribbon Co. Building at 87 King Street erected for the Galts in 1901.

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

Exterior-

- Four-storey brick and stone building with flat roof with main facades facing west onto Princess Street and north onto Bannatyne Avenue, the south facade partially concealed by the neighbouring building and the rear facade facing east onto a back lane;

- The front (west) and north facades with their rusticated stone cladding at grade, recessed window bays separated by brick pilaster each holding large main floor windows in rectilinear and arched openings, single, paired and triple windows in arched openings on the second and third floors and large singular windows in arched openings on the fourth floor and corbelled brick cornice below the brick and stone parapet;
- Main entrance set in the northwest corner, the upper floors of the corner stone clad and rounded; and
- Rectilinear opening near the south end of the west facade with steel lintel leading to interior loading dock.

Interior-

- Steel structural system in the south addition;
- Walk-in vault on main floor of original building; and
- Examples of metal-clad fire doors.