

44 PRINCESS STREET – RYAN BLOCK
Blair and Northwood, 1906



This warehouse-office facility was the last in a series of major investments in downtown buildings made by entrepreneur and local politician Thomas Ryan to accommodate his ever-expanding shoe business.

Ryan (1849-1937), a native of Perth, Ontario, pursued the shoe-making trade after moving to Winnipeg in 1874. He initially was in a partnership known as McFarlane and Ryan, but within a few years became the sole proprietor. He also began to establish an import-wholesale business that at its peak extended from the Lakehead to the West Coast. He eventually was joined in the enterprise by three brothers — Michael, James and George.

Ryan was based in the 1870s in a wood-frame shop on the west side of Main Street between present-day Bannatyne and William avenues. He improved that facility on various occasions before developing an ornate four-storey stone block on adjacent property at 492 Main in 1883. Over the next decade, he sold his retail operation to George and moved the wholesale division west into the warehouse district. He spent a brief period at Princess Street and Market Avenue before erecting a new facility at southwest King Street and Bannatyne Avenue in 1895, followed by larger premises at 44 Princess near Notre Dame Avenue in 1906-07.

Ryan also led an active community life. He served as a Winnipeg alderman (1885-88) and mayor (1889), helped direct the affairs of the Methodist Church and Young Men's Christian Association, and was a prominent temperance advocate.

The seven-storey block at 44 Princess is of mill construction with a stone foundation on concrete footings, brick walls, and a front (east) facing of red pressed brick and stone trim. At the time of construction, it was the tallest wholesale block in Winnipeg. Designed by W.W. Blair and G.W. Northwood, it was built by S. Brynjolfsson and Co. for about \$60,000.

Like many other local warehouses, 44 Princess has a symmetrical façade divided into three parts and highlighted by Romanesque detailing. The main floor is dominated by three oversized arched openings with keystones. A belt course separates this level from the middle storeys, each of which contains three bays of rectangular windows set between brick pilasters. The top level is marked by a stone belt course, a stone cornice underscored by corbelled brick, and arched rather than flat-headed windows in the middle bay. A stone-capped brick parapet completes the design. Other ornamentation is provided by stone sills, stone pilaster bases and capitals, and patterned brickwork. Windows on the south and rear elevations have brick heads and stone sills.

The original interior accommodated a showroom on the main floor and storage above. The building also was equipped with a penthouse caretaker's suite. The plans were

drawn to permit the structure's future conversion to office uses. As well, Ryan acquired the lot to the north to enable expansion of the premises if required.

Architects Blair and Northwood had a short-lived partnership in 1906 during which they planned at least three warehouses and a dwelling. Both men had come to the city the previous year.

Blair (1852-1916) was born and trained in Ireland. In succession, he had practised as an architect or engineer in England, Ontario, Ireland, and Illinois before arriving in Winnipeg. His earliest known local commission was a branch of the Northern Bank at Main and Selkirk Avenue. Among his later designs were the Warwick, Roslyn Court and Princeton apartments, Farmer (Victory) Building, Great West Saddlery Warehouse, Fortune House, and work for the Canadian Pacific Railway in Edmonton and Balfour, British Columbia. He retired to Victoria in the early 1910s.

The Ottawa-born Northwood (1876-1959) took his final architectural examinations in 1900 after studies at McGill University in Montréal. Most of his early career was spent with Werner E. Noffke of Ottawa. Upon moving to Winnipeg, Northwood opened a local branch of their firm, but later became associated with Blair, then practised on his own. His career was interrupted by military service during World War I, after which he formed partnerships with Raymond Carey (1919-22) and Cyril W.U. Chivers (c.1928 into the 1950s). His portfolio included numerous pre-1914 Crescentwood homes and apartment blocks, plus work for clients such as the Bell Telephone Co., Telegram Printing Co., Northern Crown Bank, property agents Robinson and Black, and the Winnipeg General Hospital. With Chivers, his projects included the Wheat Pool, Winnipeg Stock Exchange, Canadian General Electric, Dominion Public (Federal), and Singer Sewing Machine Co. buildings, the Women's Tribute Memorial Lodge, and a St. Vital branch of the Imperial Bank of Canada.

Thomas Ryan and Co. Ltd. discontinued operations upon Ryan's retirement in 1928. Four years earlier, 44 Princess had been sold to the Estate of Edwin Bourke (1835-1915)

who had been a prominent St. James land-holder and politician. The property changed hands several more times before it was acquired by the current owner, Brown Holdings Ltd. Since 1994, measures have been taken to improve the plumbing, mechanical and electrical systems, windows, fire safety, and interior accommodations.