



**529 WELLINGTON CRESCENT
KHARTUM TEMPLE
(FORMERLY J.H. ASHDOWN HOUSE)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

7 March 1983

529 WELLINGTON CRESCENT – KHARTUM TEMPLE (FORMERLY J.H. ASHDOWN HOUSE)

Conspicuous and familiar to Winnipeggers as the Shriners' Khartum Temple, this great mansion was built as the private home of the J.H. Ashdown family. The building is located on the north side of Wellington Crescent, with Shaarey Zedek Synagogue to the west between the Maryland Bridge and the temple.

James H. Ashdown was one of the city's foremost citizens, a millionaire, and the "merchant prince" of a virtual empire in the hardware track. Born in England in 1844, Ashdown came to rural Ontario (then Upper Canada) as a child. Eschewing the monotony of farming, he apprenticed as a tinsmith before practising his trade in the United States. On 30 June 1868, he arrived in Red River on foot at the age of 24.¹ The following year, he purchased a small hardware shop, moving the business in 1871 to the corner of Main and Bannatyne, where it was to stay for many decades. This was at a time when Winnipeg did not formally exist, but a motley collection of shops, houses, churches and farms extended sporadically from Upper Fort Garry at the junction to Point Douglas, Kildonan, St. Andrew's and the Lower Fort.

If the future of Red River looked slightly brighter, Riel's insurrection of 1870 was perceived as a major stumbling block. Like many of the young Canadian men in Red River, Ashdown became involved in the action, only to be rounded up and imprisoned with many others by Riel's supporters.²

With peace came prosperity and the new settlement of Winnipeg began to flourish. Growth and development was fuelled by the construction industry, to which Ashdown was a supplier. He imported his merchandise by ox-cart and steamboat from suppliers in Minneapolis. When the railway linked Winnipeg to eastern Canada in 1882, settlers poured into the city, loaded up with hardware and lumber and headed out to their homesteads. Ashdown, the entrepreneur, was ready and willing to take advantage of this business opportunity.

Ashdown's original 1870 building burned to the ground in 1904, to be replaced promptly with the present Ashdown store, now Big Four Sales. In 1895, he opened the first hardware warehouse west of the Great Lakes on Bannatyne and Rorie. This warehouse has been added onto twice, rendering it

nearly a block long of heavy mill construction.³ As if this wasn't enough, Ashdown expanded his wholesale and retail operations to Saskatoon and Calgary.⁴ In 1900, Ashdown had forty railway cars painted "Hardware from J.H. Ashdown", loaded up with hardware and dispatched to the prairie towns. Each car carried eight hundred tons of building material and hardware, all for sale. It was one of the biggest publicity stunts the west had ever seen.⁵

Besides his own business, Ashdown was involved in other financial and civic interests. He was an alderman for the city from 1874-79, and president of the Board of Trade in 1887, a time when it was a particularly effective lobby in the war against the CPR monopoly. In 1910, he was a director of the Bank of Montreal, the Northern Crown Bank and Northern Trust. Ashdown's initial grant of \$100,000 founded Wesley College in 1909,⁶ and his wealth and direction had a formative impact on both the YMCA and the Children's Aid Society.

In 1907, James H. Ashdown was elected Mayor of Winnipeg, returning to the position in 1908 by acclamation. These two years saw a worldwide depression that caused real estate speculation in Winnipeg to tumble and credit to tighten up. For the city, it was a period of a bond issue intended for capital projects. Rather than a period of great progress, it was a period of consolidation and postponement. In perspective nevertheless, it was a slowing down of the growth of Winnipeg, rather than a retreat.⁷

Ashdown was also a family man, with four children and a wife. To accommodate his brood, Ashdown built his first home on Euclid Avenue in Point Douglas in 1877.⁸ This large brick house was one of the finest in the city, serving the Ashdowns until their second house on Broadway was built in 1897. This building was palatial by Winnipeg standards. Designed by architect J.H.G. Russell, it was made of brick with a rounded tower and numerous dormers. When the Ashdowns moved to Wellington Crescent in 1913, the great house was taken over by the Adanac Club, and later became the Music and Arts Building, forerunner of these faculties at the University of Manitoba. In 1945, St. John's College took over the former residence until they moved on campus in 1962. Now demolished, the site for the house is occupied by the Monarch Life Building.⁹

When James Ashdown died at the age of eighty in 1924, the citizens of Winnipeg joined to pay tribute to one of its leading citizens.¹⁰ The newspaper had commented on his career:

Few, indeed, are the enterprises of public moment that he has not been concerned in and in public affairs affecting the business and social progress of Winnipeg, he has been at times almost aggressively prominent since the City's beginning.¹¹

Leaving an estate of \$1.6 million, Ashdown gave \$380,000 of it to charity, including the Children's Hospital, the YMCA, the Salvation Army and the Children's Aid.¹²

The family remaining in the home on Wellington Crescent, Mrs. Susan Ashdown died in 1928 but daughters Louise and Lilian stayed on until the house was sold to the Shriners in 1952.

Construction started on the Ashdown house in 1912 and was completed the following year. It was designed by J.H.G. Russell, who had a great symbiotic relationship with Ashdown. Russell designed the Ashdown houses on Broadway and Wellington Crescent, the 1904 Ashdown store on Main, the additions to the Ashdown warehouse on Bannatyne, the church on which Ashdown was on the board, and even the YMCA building when Ashdown was the Chairman of its board. The two clearly appreciated each other's talents.

In this house project, Russell collaborated with a well established contracting firm, the Davidson Brothers. The three-storey structure, with dimensions of 57 by 61 feet, cost over \$45,000 to construct.¹³ The foundation is squared limestone and the walls are of load-bearing masonry, possibly of solid stone. Half-timbering details the dormers and under the gables on the third storey. To offset the monochromatic effect of the stone and plaster, Russell used green Spanish tiles for the roof which have mellowed into mottled and subtle hues. It is likely that the trim was originally painted green also, while the plaster was left its natural beige colour. A closer look at the house reveals interesting details in the stone and wood, designed to evoke the image of a cottage in the

English countryside.

We are fortunate that the proud architect had the interior of the house photographed. These reveal a centre hall plan, with a large foyer and a large panelled staircase. The ground floor consisted of a parlour, a dining room, pantry, kitchen, library and sunroom. Besides the front door, a second set of doors led under a porte-cochère which remains on the west side of the building. The second floor had bedrooms and bathrooms as well as a screened sleeping porch over the sunroom. Bedrooms and servants' quarters were located on the second floor. The rooms are generally spacious and well-lit.

When the photographs were taken in c.1914, the decor of the Ashdown house was more Victorian than Edwardian. Dark polished woods and heavily ornamented furniture prevailed. Beamed ceilings were used in all formal rooms except the parlour, which had an ornamental plaster ceiling. This room also featured an electric fireplace with cylinders of glowing glass. When examining the photographs of the interior, keep in mind that the Ashdowns were so wealthy that they probably had the best construction materials and furnishings offered.

The grounds around the Ashdown house once looked quite different than the sea of concrete at present. Besides the natural riverbank growth, many trees and shrubs were planted to screen the house from the street. A circular driveway wound across the front, crossing a small bridge over a stream that trickled through the property. Part of this ravine can still be seen across the street in the front yard of St. Mary's Academy. Cast iron lamp standards and an iron fence accented the landscaping.

The garage behind the port-cochere was somewhat of a technological marvel. Built at a cost of \$5,000,¹⁴ it also features the stone walls of the main house but inside was a circular plate built into the floor. When a car entered the garage, it could be turned 180° to face outward by the use of this round-house floor. There was also a pit in the floor for servicing the vehicles.¹⁵

In 1952, the big house was purchased by the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic

Shrine; the Shriners. This is a fraternal organization often called the "playground of the Masons." The Shriners are a high order of Freemasons, and members must first be members of the 32nd Degree Scottish Rite or Knight Templar of the York Rite. The Shriners began in New York in 1872 when two Masons decided that other Masons just weren't any fun. They launched a new order based on showmanship, mysterious ritual, colourful ceremony and fun. The trappings of ancient Arabia were adopted and the "temples" named after Arabic cities, hence Khartum.

The organization became tremendously popular and highly visible. It spread rapidly throughout North America. In 1920, the Shriners turned their attention to the plight of crippled children, and became one of the greatest sources of charitable funding in North America.¹⁶ Twenty-one Shriners' hospitals exist across the continent, as well as burn centres and financial support for medical research. The Shriners opened their wing of the Children's Hospital in 1925, and built the Shriners' Hospital on Wellington Crescent in 1948, just in time for the polio epidemic.

Each year the Shrine Circus raises funds for charity, Shriners' parades of extraordinary colour and pageantry take place as well as participation in festivals and parades throughout the province. The Shriners' dress in wild costumes, ride around on camels, burros, pink motorcycles and flashy cars, and host circuses just to have fun for themselves and everybody else.¹⁷

Khartum Temple belongs to the Midwest Shriners' Association, which also includes Saskatchewan and five mid-western states. The Shriners' Hospital has now been taken over by the province, but the local Temple supports research into genetics and childhood arthritis, as well as assisting in the purchase of artificial limbs and in travel expenses for crippled children.¹⁸ Membership in the organization rests at one million Shriners in 166 Temples in Canada and the United States.

In 1955, the Shriners commissioned Green, Blankstein and Russell to design a one storey stone and brick addition to the rear of Khartum Temple.¹⁹ This addition matched the materials of the original building so as to blend in as much as possible. Its position is well screened and reasonably unobtrusive. Aside from this, there are no major alterations to the façade of the building.²⁰ The

grounds have not enjoyed the same fate. Considering its adaptation to a club and meeting hall with offices, the interior has escaped total alteration while retaining some of the charm of the Ashdown interior.

In 1970, one hundred years after its inception, J.H. Ashdown Co. Ltd. was sold. Both the store and the warehouse remain. Several members of the Ashdown family remain in Winnipeg. Unquestionably, the influence of James H. Ashdown, and his wealth, was felt in many areas of Winnipeg's development. He was seen as a self-made man, a pioneer tinsmith who built up his hardware empire through hard work and ability.²¹ His philanthropic work was admired and respected. This home remains as a symbol of his strong impact on the early city.

APPENDIX A--

J.H.G. RUSSELL

John Hamilton Gordon Russell was born to a large family in Toronto in 1862. Here he studied architecture before moving to the United States. After working in Washington and Chicago¹ he moved to Winnipeg in 1893. His family built one of the earliest homes on Wellington Crescent, which later became his own home.

In 1895, Russell opened his architectural firm. With the economy of Winnipeg booming, and construction at a peak, Russell had an active business. He was prolific. Not given to specialization, J.H.G. Russell designed houses, churches, warehouses and commercial buildings in good numbers. We are particularly fortunate in having an archival record of his account books, which itemize suppliers and costs for most of his works.² An incomplete photographic record of Russell's work also survives.

His best-known buildings include Augustine Church (1903); the McArthur Building (now Childs) (1909); Westminster United Church (1912); the J.H. Ashdown house (1912) on Wellington Crescent (now Khartum Temple); and the magnificent Knox Presbyterian Church (1914) on Edmonton.

Russell was president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada in 1912, the first year that it included all the provincial bodies. He was on the examining board of the Manitoba Association of Architects, involved in several local businesses, and Chairman of the Presbyterian Church board of Managers.

Russell died in Winnipeg in 1946.

¹ F.H. Schofield The Story of Manitoba Vol. III The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co. Winnipeg 1913 p. 156.

² J.H.G. Russell Collection MG11 P.A.M. E2

FOOTNOTES--

1. Frank Schofield The Story of Manitoba Vol. II. The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company Winnipeg 1913, p. 721.
2. Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914 McGill-Queen's University Press Montreal 1975 p. 29.
3. Selwyn Carrington "J.H. Ashdown Warehouse" in Early Building in Winnipeg C.I.H.B. Vol. IV 1975 p. 180.
4. Schofield, op. cit., p. 722.
5. Carrington op. cit., p. 182.
6. "Generous Donation to Wesley College" Winnipeg Tribune 1 September 1909.
7. Ruben Bellan Winnipeg First Century An Economic History Queenston House Publishing Co. Winnipeg 1978 p. 91.
8. Lillian Gibbon's Stories Houses Tell Hyperion Press Winnipeg 1978. p. 54.
9. Ibid., p. 92.
10. "Thousands of Citizens Join in Last Tribute to James H. Ashdown" Manitoba Free Press 9 April 1924.
11. Quoted in Artibise, op. cit., p. 30.
12. "Public Institutions in J.H. Ashdown Will" Manitoba Free Press 25 June 1924.
13. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 3529 13 September 1912.
14. Permits, op. cit., No. 3441 6 September 1912. The building measures 28 by 28 feet, with a stone foundation, stone walls and a peaked roof over its two storeys.
15. Thanks to Randy Rostecki for this information.
16. Michael Maunder "Shrintennial — a mystic order's big birthday" Tribune 29 January 1972.
17. Loc. cit.
18. "Khartum's potentate to greet 7,000". Winnipeg Free Press 21 August 1979.
19. Permits, op. cit., No. 4095 10 November 1955.

20. The sleeping porch has been glazed in. What seems to be a smaller porte-cochère on the north east corner has been removed.
21. "Millionaires in Winnipeg" Winnipeg Telegram 29 January 1910. From Artibise Gateway City Documents on the City of Winnipeg 1873-1913 Manitoba Record Society Publications Vol. V 1979 p. 121.

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Plate 1 – The Ashdown House, 529 Wellington Crescent, not long after its completion. The bridge is in the foreground. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 2 – House, ca. 1915. The archway in the rear on the right may be a second porte-cochere.
(Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 3 – House and grounds 1928. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 4 – The foyer and staircase. These pictures (Plates 4-8) of the interior date to about 1914. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 5 – The dining room. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 6 – The library. The sunroom is through the door on the left. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 7 – The parlour. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 8 – Another view of the parlour. Note the electric fireplace. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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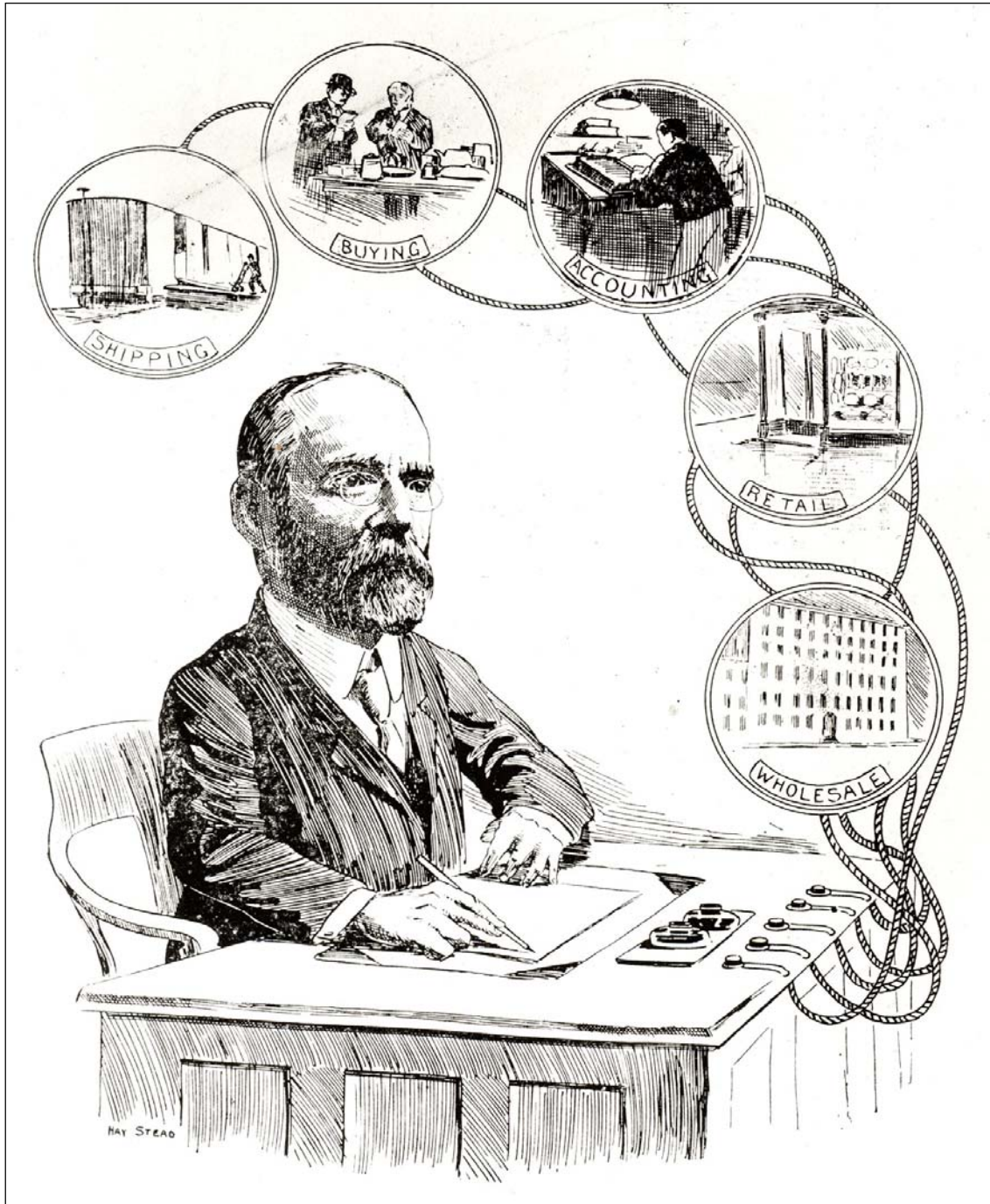


Plate 9 – J.H. Ashdown and his empire in 1909. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 10 – Ashdown and Premier T.C. Norris at the CPR station in 1915. Ashdown is on the right.
(Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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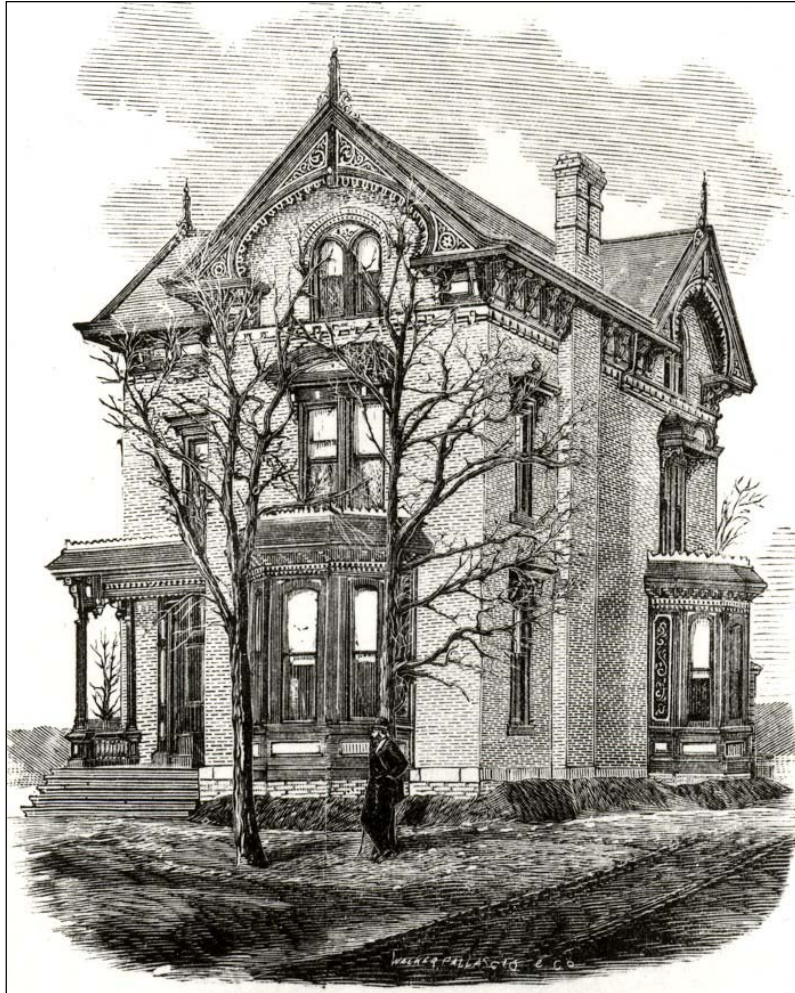


Plate 11 – The Ashdown House on Euclid ca.1879. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 12 – The Ashdown House on Broadway at Hargrave 1905. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

529 WELLINGTON CRESCENT – KHARTUM TEMPLE



Plate 13 – Khartum Temple in 1969. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)