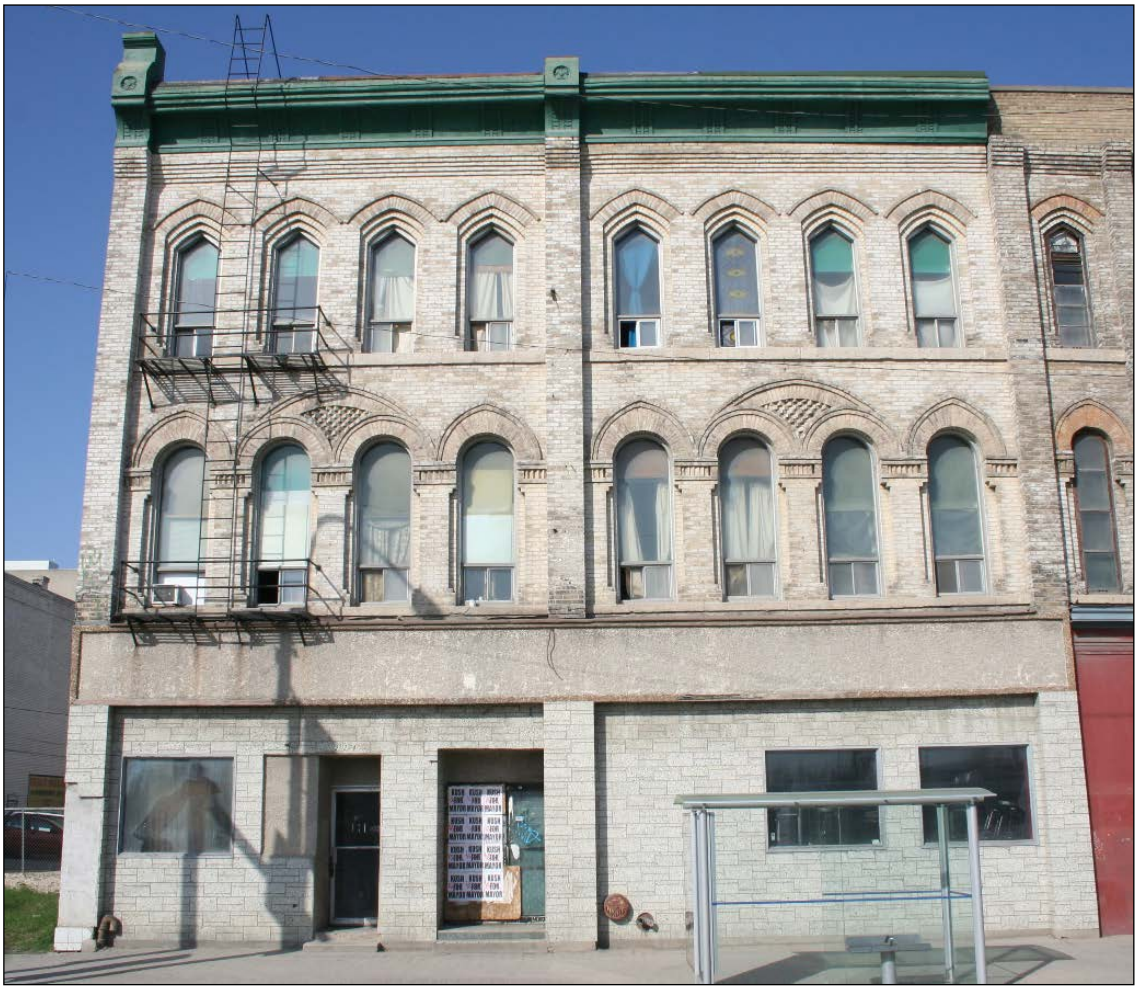

226 MAIN STREET

MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERICAL HOTEL)

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee
Researcher: M. Peterson
June 2015

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)

Main Street, as we now know it, began like all other overland routes in the vicinity of The Forks, first as a trail made by the First Nations groups utilizing the area for trade, for seasonal habitation, for hunting and fishing and for burial.[1] These footpaths were increasingly utilized with the arrival of the Europeans and the advent of the fur trade economy. Many of these well-used trails then evolved into the paired ruts made by the large wooden wheels of the Red River carts travelling along the important "Main highway" between the region's chief trading posts of the mid-1800s – Lower Fort Garry, was built between 1831 and 1839 about thirty kilometres up the Red River from The Forks, and Upper Fort Garry, built 1835-1837 (and expanded 1852-1854)[2] at the south end of what is now Main Street (Plate 1).[3] This was a much-travelled route and the Main Highway quickly became the tiny community's most important overland link.

With the end of the fur trade, the creation of the Province of Manitoba and the incorporation of the City of Winnipeg came a need for more permanent solutions to the dirt streets that turned into "Manitoba gumbo" when it rained. Dirt roads and wooden sidewalks gave way to concrete and asphalt, streetcar tracks and traffic lights in the 20th century.

As Winnipeg's primary road, Main Street saw a great deal of development and commercialization, especially during the early 1880s when the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) through the city and Western Canada caused a real estate boom. During this frantic period, fortunes were gained and lost in the speculation market. In 1882, Winnipeg's population doubled to 25,000

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1 Rodger Guinn, The Red-Assiniboine Junction: A Land Use and Structural History, 1770-1980, Manuscript Report Series #355. (Ottawa, ON: Parks Canada, 1980) cited in R.R. Rostecki, "130 Main Street – Upper Fort Garry Gate," report for the Historical Buildings Committee, June 1991 (below as Rostecki, 130 Main Street), p. 1.

2 The trip between the two posts usually took a full day. William Douglas, "'The Forks' Becomes a City," in Papers read before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Series III, No. 1. (Winnipeg, MB: Advocate Printers, 1945), p. 66 cited in Rostecki, 130 Main Street, p. 1.

3 Dismantling of the stone walls of Upper Fort Garry began in 1871 with the removal of part of the east wall. The last remnants of the walls and buildings (except for the remaining Gate), were removed by the summer of 1883. Brad Loewen, A History of the Structures at Upper Fort Garry, 1835-1887, unpublished manuscript on file, Parks Canada, Historic Research Section, Prairie Region pp. 95-101; "To Contractors," Manitoba Free Press, January 7, 1880, p. 1; and Manitoba Free Press, July 17, 1883, p 8, all cited in Rostecki, 130 Main Street, pp. 4-5.

and the value of construction hit the $5-million mark.[4] This incredible construction boom caused a shortage of materials and skilled labour and several of the new buildings were cheaply and/or improperly constructed, such as the enlarged City Hall that nearly collapsed in 1883 only months after the addition was completed and was demolished later that year (Plate 2).[5]

This increased population necessitated the construction of many commercial blocks and many business owners chose Main Street to sell their wares. Business blocks of all sizes and descriptions lined both sides of the street north of the old fort, and by the beginning of the 20th century, there were few empty lots between the fort and Portage Avenue. The magnificent Cauchon Block was constructed in 1881-1882 at the southeast corner of Main Street and York Avenue as an elegant residential/commercial complex (Plate 3). The east side of Main south of Notre Dame filled with many brick veneer buildings that replaced small dwellings and "peanut stands" (Plates 4-6).[6]

The Macdonald Block was one such boom time project, completed in 1883. It was built by Alexander Macdonald as a twin of the Fortune Block immediately north that had been completed a year earlier and then sold to Macdonald.

STYLE

The Macdonald Block is designed in the High Victorian Italianate style, very popular in the 19th century and used mainly on commercial buildings.[7] A picturesque style, buildings displayed a wealth of ornamentation, especially evident around window and door openings and at the roofline. The use of the segmental arch was extensive, and the buildings could be either symmetrical or asymmetrical, accented with pronounced mouldings, quoins, eaves and other

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4 "Winnipeg! Its Wonderful Growth in the Year 1882," The Winnipeg Sun, December 29, 1882.

5 Alan F.J. Artibise "Winnipeg's City Halls, 1876-1965," in Manitoba Pageant, (Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Historical Society), Spring 1977, p. 7.

6 "Main Street," Manitoba Free Press, December 30, 1882.

7 M. Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780 (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1969), p. 99.

detailing. Window openings were often paired and bays and towers were common features on residential structures where the style was most popular.[8]

In Winnipeg in the early 1880s, the combination of British-trained architects, available capital and the popularity of the style produced a number of fine Italianate structures. Extant buildings include: the Benson Block (146 Princess Street), the Bawlf Block (150 Princess Street), the Harris Block (154 Princess Street) and the Telegram Building (70 Albert Street), all built in 1882. All these examples are found within the Exchange District, the Macdonald Block represents one of the few remaining buildings of its style in downtown Winnipeg outside the Exchange District.

CONSTRUCTION

Built of solid brick walls and resting on a stone foundation, the Macdonald Block is a three-storey structure measuring approximately 15.3 x 21.4 metres and is located on the west side of Main street near the corner of St. Mary Avenue. Wooden beams and posts supply interior structural support for the floor joists and are tied into the exterior brick walls. It shares a party wall with the Fortune Block, 232-234 Main Street, to the north (see Appendix I for addition construction information). It was built as an extension of the Fortune Block and was completed during the 1883 construction season at a cost of $16,000.[9]

Ceiling heights in the building measure 2.1 metres in the basement, 4.0 metres on the ground floor, 3.7 metres on the second floor and 3.3 metres on the top floor. The solid brick walls measure 33.0-43.2 centimetres wide on the ground floor and 33.0 centimetres on the top floor. The flat roof is covered with tar and gravel.[10]

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8 Identifying Architectural Styles in Manitoba (Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, Historic Resources Branch, 1991), pp. 12-13.

9 Winnipeg Sun, October 20, 1883, p. 3.

10 City of Winnipeg Assessment Record, Roll No. 12-092978000.

Other materials present on the exterior include stucco (on the rear façade) and imitation stone cladding on the ground floor of the front façade.

DESIGN

Photographic evidence suggests several changes have been made to the front (east) façade of this building. Originally, the ground floor was designed with large display windows and multi-pane transoms, set in either cast iron or wood frames (Plates 7-9). Above the windows was an ornamental cornice, likely tin, with protrusions at either end and at its centre. Major renovations more recently have left the ground floor severely altered. Imitation stone and stucco now covers much of the area, two modern recessed doors and three small, unadorned windows have replaced the more open original design and the metal cornice was removed (Plate 10).

The second and third floors, with some minor exceptions, have remained virtually unchanged. The polychromatic brickwork of the upper storeys was masked when the façade was painted white in the early 1900s, although some of the varied colouring is again visible (Plate 11). The upper storeys are divided into two bays by a brick pilaster running to the elaborate metal cornice. Pilasters at the north (actually on the neighbouring building) and the south ends frame the building. Each bay holds four thin window openings on each floor: round-headed with some paired under larger segmental brick arches on the second floor; and pointed headed with layered brick arches on the top floor (Plate 12). Opening on both floors feature continuous brick sills. Corbelled brick tops the upper floor windows and leads to the ornate metal cornice above (Plate 13). Another minor alteration to the front façade is the metal fire escape at the south end.

The north wall is a party wall; the south is an uninterrupted brick wall (Plate 14). The brick of the rear (west) façade has been covered in stucco and includes a metal fire escape and newer windows (Plate 15).

INTERIOR

The building's present interior is a mixture of old and renovated space, the layout and some of the finishes date to its conversion to the Commercial Hotel shortly after the turn of the century.

The basement is used as storage, there are 30 residential suites on the upper floors. The building includes a skylight above the front staircase, an interior light well clad in ornamental tin and suites on both sides of the hallways (Plates 16-18). Original newel posts still grace the front staircase (Plate 19). The former bar space in the north end of the ground floor is now vacant.

INTEGRITY

The building stands on its original site. The building's chief structural problem appears to be the heaving of the basement floor. It has suffered from some alteration although the front façade is the most original of all the pre-1890 buildings on this block of Main Street.

STREETSCAPE

South Main Street has seen many changes since the construction of the Macdonald Block. At present, most of the pre-World War I buildings have been removed, replaced by more modern structures including the new Sports Manitoba structure to the south (200 Main Street) and the new Hampton Inn and Suites to the north, 260 Main Street (Plates 20 and 21). This having been said, the block north of 200 Main Street today is a rare example of an intact streetscape dating to the pre-1890 era.

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTOR

Although there is no documental proof that Charles Mancel Willmot (also seen as Wilmot) and George W. Stewart designed the Macdonald Block, it is highly likely that they were its architects, given its history and its resemblance to the neighbouring Fortune Block (built less than a year before and designed by Willmot and Stewart).

C.M. Willmot (1855-1936) was born in the Village of Yorkville, Canada West (now Ontario), the second oldest of five children of Edward, born in Somerset, England and Elize, Born Isle of Jersey (nee Langeworthy) Willmot.[11] He apprenticed with the noted Toronto architect, William G. Storm (1826-1892) from 1874 to 1875.[12] In Toronto, he designed the Cottingham Street School (1877). He spent the early years of the 1880s in Winnipeg before returning to Toronto, where he oversaw alterations to the interior of the Don Jail and designed a laundry (now known as the Don Jail Annex) on the west side of the complex in the late 1880s. Willmot also prepared the plans for a separate residence for the Governor of the Don Jail in 1888 and an addition to the Yorkville Fire Hall (1889).[13] Willmot, according to contemporary accounts, was one of the founding members of the Ontario Association of Architects in March 1889.[14] Also in 1889, he designed the Deer Park Elementary School in Toronto (demolished).[15] In the 1920s Willmot assisted the architectural partnership of Forsey Page and Stanford Warrington by supervising the construction of St. Clement's Anglican Church in North Toronto.[16]

His partner, George W. Stewart, was a civil engineer and Dominion Land Surveyor who continued his multi-disciplinary practice in Winnipeg until 1887 and then moved to the United States where he is known to have had commissions in Dallas, Texas, Atlanta, Georgia and St. Petersburg, Florida.[17]

INSTITUTION

The Macdonald Block is intimately connected to its neighbouring building, the Fortune Block. The latter was built in 1882 by Mark Fortune (1847-1912) who sold it soon after its completion to

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11 Family information from www.ogs.on.ca/ogspi/199/q1999l00.htm, no date.

12 "558 Gerrard Street East: Governor's House, Don Jail, Heritage Property report for Heritage Toronto (City of Toronto By-law 411-2000), no date, at www.app.toronto.ca/heritage/.

13 Ibid.

14 Canadian Architect and Builder, Vol. 2, Issue 4 (April 1889), p. 40.

15 "Architectural Index for Ontario," found in http://archindont.torontopubliclibrary.ca/, no date.

16 "558 Gerrard Street East: Governor's House, Don Jail, Heritage Property report for Heritage Toronto (City of Toronto By-law 411-2000), no date, at www.app.toronto.ca/heritage/.

17 Henderson's Directory, 1882-1888; D. Lyon, "Macdonald Block – Short Report," report of the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, July 1990, p. 2; Stewart designed a Spanish Colonial style post office in St. Petersburg, Florida in 1916.

Alexander Macdonald (1844-1928) who in turn built the Macdonald Block as an annex. Scottish born Macdonald had immigrated to Canada in 1868, settling in Seaforth, Ontario and developing a successful grocery trade in the area. He arrived in Winnipeg in July 1871 and after several years working for various grocers he founded his own business (1876), importing fruit and other goods from Eastern Canada and housing them in a warehouse on Market Avenue East. His novel approach, not employing travelling salesmen, meant a slow expansion of the business in the early years, but by the early 1900s his was one of the largest businesses of its type in Western Canada, having incorporated in 1890.[18] His wholesale business had expanded to every major city in Western Canada when it was sold to his two sons and several employees in 1912.[19] Macdonald's influence was not reserved to his grocery business: he help establish the Manitoba Free Press newspaper with W.F. Luxton in 1872; he was president of Great West Life Assurance Company (1894-1921); an alderman on city council in 1887 and 1888 and mayor in 1892; and honorary colonel of the 43rd Cameron Highlanders.[20]

Macdonald's wholesale operations originally occupied the ground floor of the Macdonald Block, but business expansion led to his use of the upper floor offices as well. In 1895, he built two more structures at St. Mary Avenue and Fort Street as well as occupying part of the Fortune Block.[21] In 1901, he built a modern warehouse at 116-118 Market Avenue and vacated the Main Street property in 1902.

The Macdonald Block was sold to local hotelier Sam Spence who hired architect H.S. Griffiths in 1903 to convert the property into a hotel – the Commercial.[22] So successful was this venture that Spence was forced to lease part of the Fortune Block as residential space for his staff and possibly

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18 Manitoba Free Press, July 1, 1921.

19 Manitoba Free Press, November 27, 1912. The companies would be joined together to form Macdonald's Consolidated Limited in 1924 and was purchased shortly after Alexander Macdonald's death in 1928 by Safeway Stores (now Canada Safeway).

20 Manitoba Free Press, July 1, 1921.

21 Winnipeg Evening Tribune, February 23, 1895, p. 8; and City of Winnipeg Plumbing Permit #785/1895, both cited in cited in R.R. Rostecki, "Fortune's and Macdonald's Blocks, 226-34 Main Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba" report for the Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, November 1989, p. 3 (below as Rostecki, 226-34 Main Street).

22 City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #7/1903, costing $3,500.

as an annex for guests.[23] The Commercial Hotel would continue to operate until the mid-1980s, when the ground floor was converted into a private club (now vacant). The upper floors continue to be used as residential space.

EVENT

There is no known significant event connected with this building.

CONTEXT

The Macdonald Block stands as one of Winnipeg's dwindling number of early 1880s structures (see Table 1). It was built at the end of the frantic real estate boom brought on by the construction of the CPR and the subsequent opening of the West to immigration. This event brought national and international attention to the small community of Winnipeg and was the beginning of its evolution into a prominent city on the global scene. Because of the boom nature of the period, many of the buildings of this era were built with questionable materials and unskilled labour and many of the buildings had to be demolished due to structural concerns. The Macdonald Block, on the other hand, has not only remained standing, it boast original elements on the upper floors of its front façade.

Its conversion into a hotel and its long-term use as a residential facility is testament to the need for hotel space on south Main Street due to the development of the union rail yards and the construction of the Union Station in 1908-1910.

TABLE 1 – EXTANT PRE-1890 BUILDINGS IN DOWNTOWN WINNIPEG[24]

ADDRESS	BUILDING NAME	YEAR BUILT	HERITAGE STATUS
Main St., 214	Winnipeg Hotel	1873	Nominated List

[23] Winnipeg Telegram, September 29, 1903, p. 8 cited in Rostecki, 226-34 Main Street, p. 3.

[24] Compiled from "The Exchange District. Part 1: A Property Survey" and "Winnipeg's Downtown: A property survey," reports of the Historical Buildings Committee (February 2001 and June 2003 respectively).

Main St., 466	Woodbine Hotel	1879	Grade III
Main St., 474	Duffin Block	1880	Nominated List
McDermot Ave., 175	Toronto Foundry Building	1881	Grade III
Albert St., 70	Telegram Building	1882	Grade II
Bannatyne Ave., 137	Swiss Building	1882	Grade III
Main St., 232	Fortune Block	1882	Nominated List
McDermot Ave., 177	T.W. Taylor Building	1882	Grade III
McDermot Ave., 246	Sures Building	1882	Grade III
Princess St., 146	Benson Block	1882	Grade III
Princess St., 154	Harris Building	1882	Grade III
Main St., 226	Macdonald Block	1883	Nominated List
McDermot Ave., 221	Bate Block	1883	Grade II
Princess St., 150	Bawlf Building	1883	Grade III
Princess St., 72	Oddfellows Hall	1883	Grade III
Smith St., 256	Holy Trinity Church	1883	Grade II
Princess St., 104	Princess Street Warehouse	1885	Grade III
William Ave., 294	Massey Building	1885	Grade II
McDermot Ave., 173	Grange Building	1886	Grade III
Princess St., 103	Galt Block	1887	Nominated List
Princess St., 86-88	Miller, Morse Warehouse	1887	Grade III

LANDMARK

This is one of the oldest buildings on south Main Street and although it is not heavily utilized, its construction and ornamentation give it a level of conspicuousness.

Historical Buildings & Resources Committee
THE CITY OF WINNIPEG

APPENDIX I

CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report

Assessment Record

Building Address: 226 Main Street (#226-228) Building Name: Macdonald Block (Commercial Hotel)

Original Use: residential/commercial Current Use: residential/commercial

Roll No. (Old): 12092978000 R.S.N.: 138296

Legal Description: 1 St. John, Plan 24135, Lot 13

Location: west side between St. Mary and York avenues

Date of Construction: 1883 Storeys: 3 + basement

Construction Type: brick and stone foundation

HERITAGE STATUS: ON NOMINATED LIST

Building Permits (Plans available: **[CS]** City Storage; **[M]** Microfilm):
- 7/1901 $3,500 (interior and exterior alterations); 327/1966 **[M301]** $3,000 (alterations); 2450/1967 **[M410]** $18,000 (alterations); 722/1984 $1,000 (interior alterations)

Information:

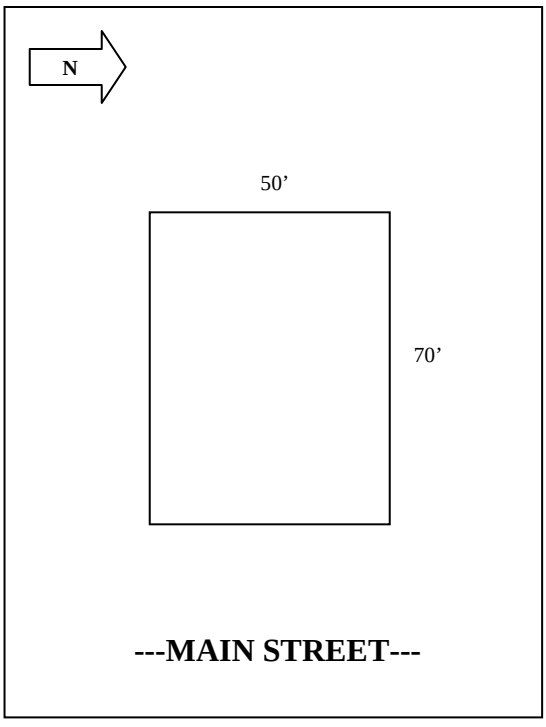
- Plan area- 3,395 sq. ft.; floor area above grade- 10,185 sq. ft.; total floor area- 13,580 sq. ft.

- ceilings- Basement- 7'; 1st- 13'; 2nd- 12'; 3rd- 10.8'

- walls- Basement- stone; 1st- 13-17" brick; 2nd & 3rd- 13" brick

- Permit 327/1966: renovate beer parlour

- Permit 2450/1967: renovate ground floor interior



ARCHITECT: UNNAMED (POSSIBLY WILLMOT & STEWART)

CONTRACTOR: UNKNOWN

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 1 – The location of Upper Fort Garry in relation to Main Street and Broadway. (Reproduced from Lincoln Park Gallery, http://www.lpgallery.mb.ca/fort_garry/aerial.html, no date).

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)

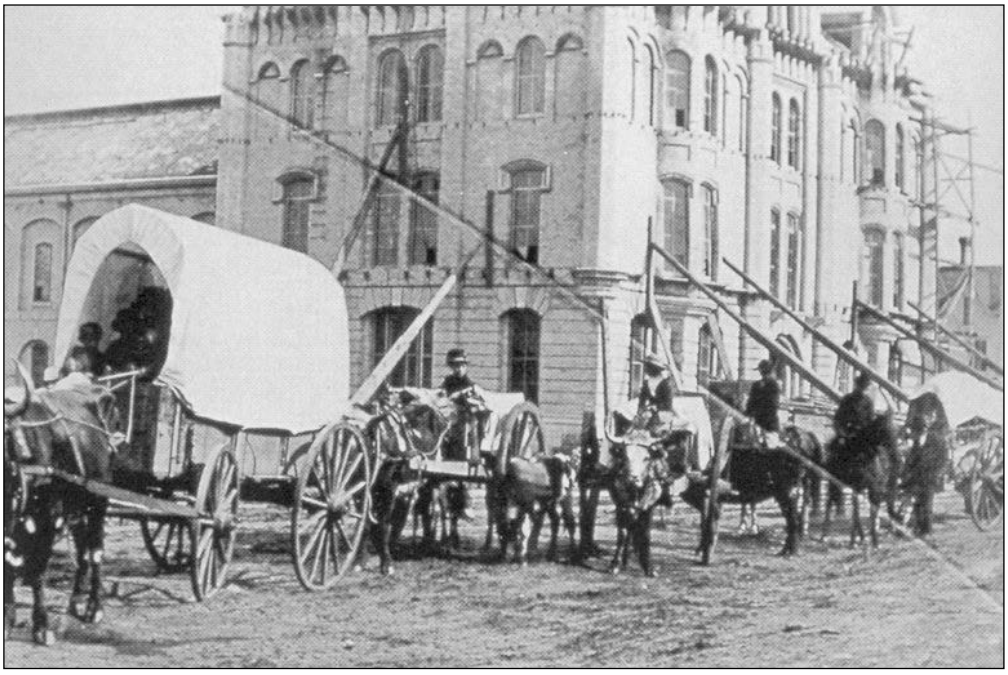


Plate 2 – The propped up City Hall, ca.1883. (M. Peterson Collection.)



Plate 3 – Cauchon Block (Empire Hotel), 171 Main Street, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)

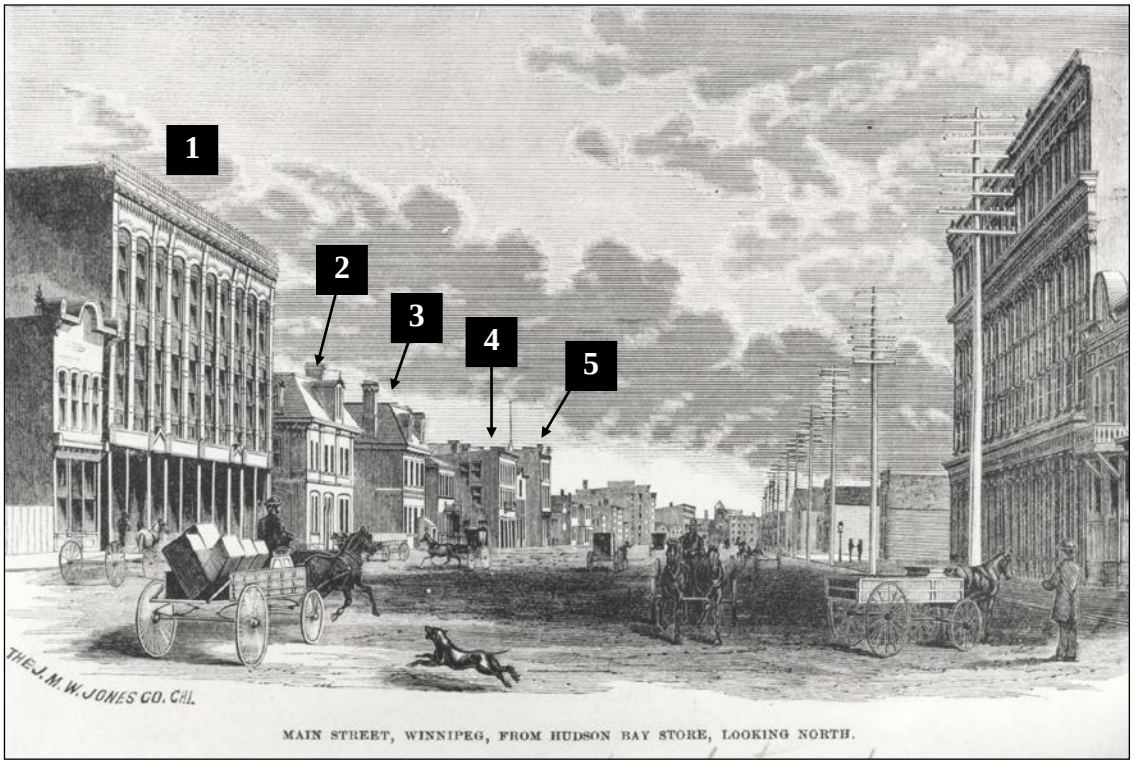


Plate 4 – Main Street, Winnipeg, looking north from Broadway, ca.1883. The large building on the right is the Cauchon Block, buildings on the left include the Hudson's Bay Company Store (#1), Customs House (#2), Dominion Lands Office (#3), the Winnipeg Hotel (#4) and the Commercial Hotel & Fortune Block (#5). (Archives of Manitoba, "Winnipeg-Streets- Main c1883- 2".)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 5 – West side of Main Street between York and St. Mary streets, 1892. Note the lack of empty lots as far as the eye can see north. Buildings on the left from south to north are: Dominion Lands Office; Trust and Loan Co. of Canada; Winnipeg Hotel; Dominion Hotel; Commercial Hotel and the Fortune Block. (Archives of Manitoba, Victor Acker Collection- 2, N842.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)

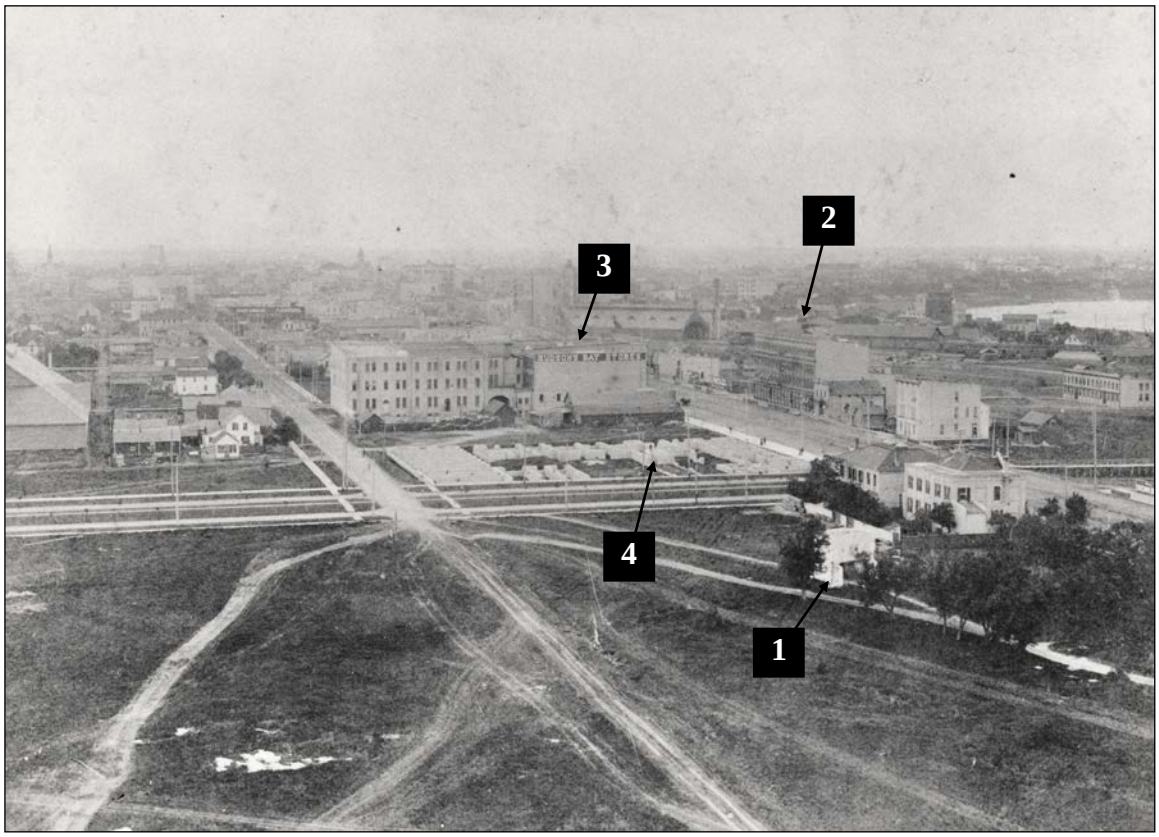


Plate 6 – A view of Main Street, 1902. Visible are the Upper Fort Garry Gate (#1), the Cauchon Block (#2) and the Hudson's Bay Company Building (#3). The foundation work has begun for the Fort Garry Court Apartments, northwest corner Main Street and Broadway (#4). (Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg- Views c1900- 5, N4555.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)

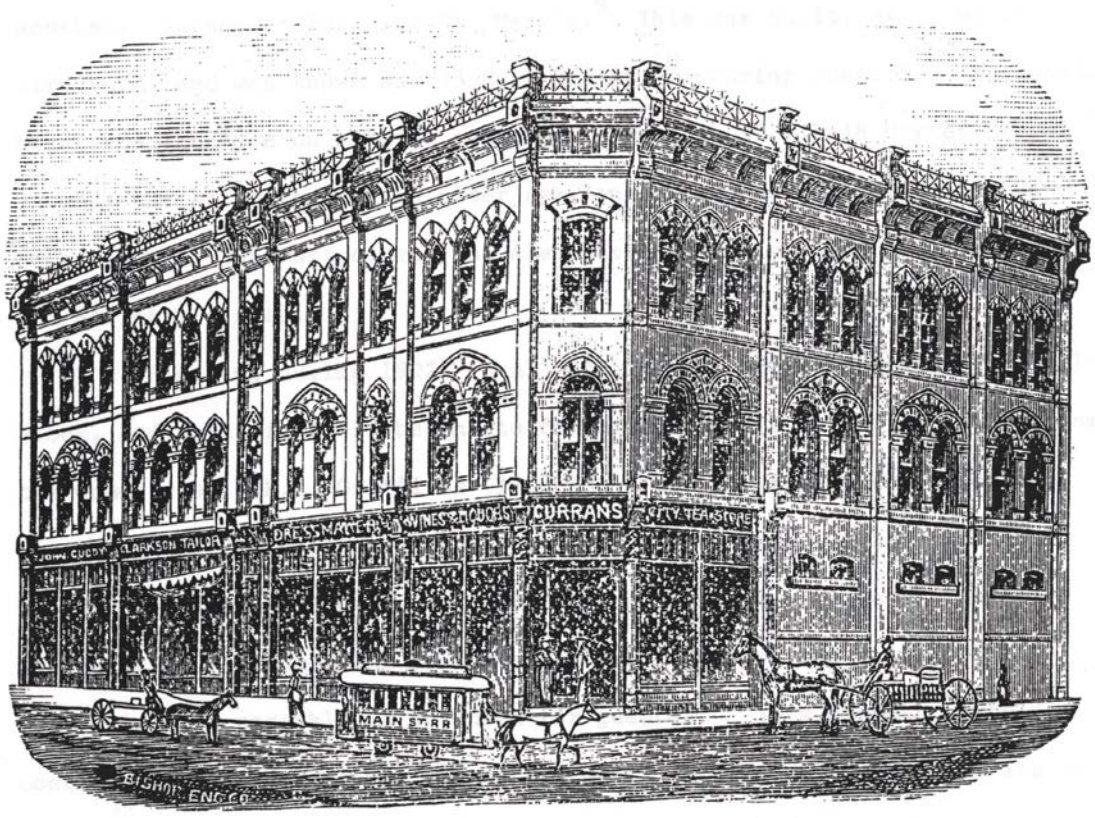


Plate 7 – An 1884 drawing of the Macdonald and Fortune Blocks, Main Street. Note the familiar retail front of the ground floor with its large display windows. The entrances do not appear to be recessed. (Manitoba Archives.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 8 – The Macdonald Block in 1892 still featuring the original retail front. (Archives of Manitoba, Victor Acker Collection- 2, N842.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 9 – The Commercial Hotel, 226-230 Main Street, 1926. The 1902-1903 conversion to a hotel does not appear to have altered the original design of the ground floor. Signage suggests the southern retail space was converted into a café. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba, Thomas Burns Collection- 542.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)

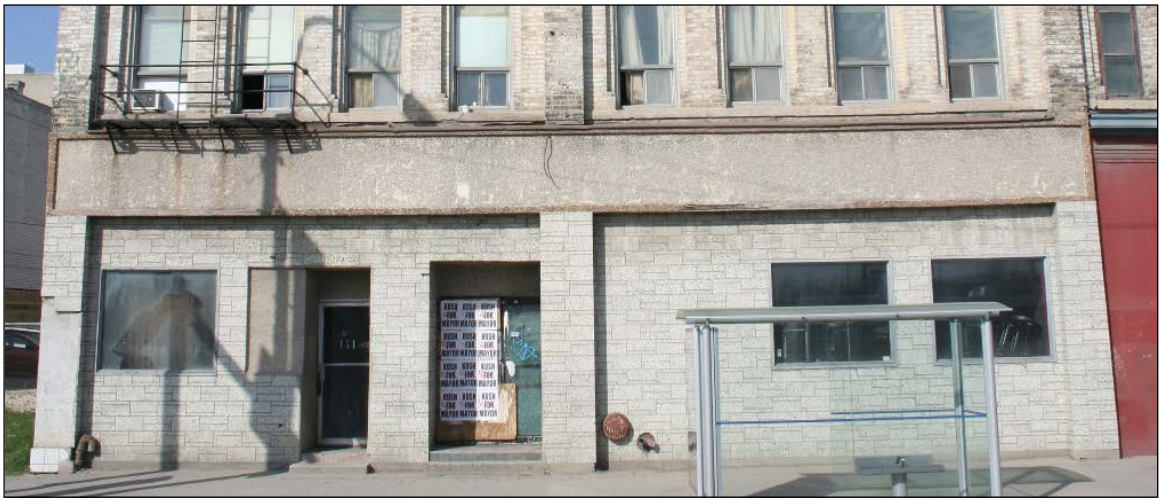


Plate 10 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, detail of ground floor of the front (east) façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)



Plate 11 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, detail of upper floor front (east) windows, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 12 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, detail of upper floor front (east) windows, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)



Plate 13 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, cornice detail, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 14 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, front (east) and south façades, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)



Plate 15 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, rear (west) façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 16 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, front staircase skylight, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 17 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, view of interior light well from roof, 2006. (M. Peterson, 2006.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 18 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, hallway, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 19 – Macdonald Block, 226 Main Street, front staircase, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 20 – Main Street looking north, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)



Plate 21 – Main Street looking south, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 22 – This 1926 photograph shows the Macdonald Block with its neighbours, from left to right, the Winnipeg Hotel, the former Dominion Hotel (severely altered, it became the Blue Note Café and then the Fat Angel Bistro), and the Fortune Block. (Archives of Manitoba, Thomas Burns Collection- 542.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 23 – The Macdonald Block, ca.1903. (Courtesy of Archives of Manitoba, Ernest Crocker Collection- 118.)

226 MAIN STREET – MACDONALD BLOCK (COMMERCIAL HOTEL)



Plate 24 – The Macdonald and Fortune Blocks, 1961. Note the unaltered main floor of the Macdonald Block. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg- Buildings-Business- National Auto Supply-2.)



Plate 25 – The Macdonald Block, 1978. Note the lack of the second door to the south of the entrance now present on the building. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg.)