



## **476 MAIN STREET - BIG 4 SALES**

**(FORMERLY: J.H. ASHDOWN HARDWARE STORE)**

City of Winnipeg  
Historical Buildings Committee  
July 1986  
Updated March 1998

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The modern façade of the Big 4 Sales store at the corner of Main and Bannatyne Streets camouflages an old building representing an even older institution. This structure was built in 1904 as the head office and retail arm of the hardware empire of James H. Ashdown. Ashdown had sold his wares from the very location since 1871, with the prominent corner site continuously occupied by the same business until it closed down exactly 100 years later.

This particular building was one of several Ashdown retail shops on this lot. The original frame tinsmith structure of 1871 gave way to a brick building in 1875 that was added onto in 1880 and again in 1885. The present six-storey brick building was erected after a fire destroyed the earlier structures in October 1904.

Paralleling this continuous growth was the remarkable progress of the Ashdown company itself. From the humble origins of a rudimentary tinware shop purchased in the village of Winnipeg in 1869, James Ashdown, Winnipeg's merchant prince, built his hardware business with the supply of quality goods to a rapidly expanding market. From his new and permanent shop on Main Street, Ashdown was not only an actor in the growth of Winnipeg but a causal factor in that growth. Born in England and partly raised in Ontario, James Ashdown moved to Red River in 1869 at the age of 25 years. Ambitious beyond his retailing skills, Ashdown led a citizens' group which lobbied hard in 1873 for the incorporation of Winnipeg as a city, although the population was only that of a village. Ashdown was elected one of the early city councillors.<sup>1</sup> A charter member of the Board of Trade at its formation in 1879, Ashdown became president of the board in 1887. Under his determined direction, the board took a hard run that year at the CPR's infamous monopoly clause.<sup>2</sup> Capitulating ultimately to government pressure and lobby groups such as the Board of Trade, the federal government abolished the clause in 1887. Ashdown was also elected Mayor of Winnipeg in

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<sup>1</sup> A.F.J. Artibise, Winnipeg – A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), pp. 16-18

<sup>2</sup> Diamond Jubilee of the J.H. Ashdown Hardware Company Limited, (Winnipeg, ca. 1929), p. 35. Below as Diamond Jubilee.

1907, serving a second term by acclamation. His business-like manner was an accurate reflection of the domination of city council by the financial elite in the early years of the twentieth century.

In other related fields, Ashdown was a director of the Bank of Montreal and of the Winnipeg-based Northern Crown Bank, president of the Canadian Fire Insurance Company, a founder and governor of Wesley College (now University of Winnipeg), on the board of such diverse institutions as the Board of Commissioners of the Greater Winnipeg Water District, the Children's Aid Society, the Y.M.C.A., and the City Hospital board. None of these did he view as honorary positions; Ashdown worked very hard for whatever he believed in. In 1910, a journalist observed that "in public affairs affecting the business and social progress of Winnipeg, he (Ashdown) has been at times almost aggressively prominent since the city's beginning."<sup>3</sup>

Ashdown's obvious aggression helped him build up his hardware business into a substantial empire. Reaping the benefits of boomtime expansion, Ashdown was able to consolidate and withstand the bust from 1883 to 1885. Adding onto his Winnipeg store in that year as the economy picked up again, Ashdown opened a branch store in Calgary in 1889. He also sold wholesale to a network of smaller retail shops in the burgeoning prairie west. As this wholesale component became even more important, Ashdown built a warehouse in Winnipeg in 1895 on Bannatyne Avenue east of Main. This local warehouse reduced the costly delays of winter travel for oncoming eastern merchandise as well as gave the only hardware wholesale west of the Lakehead a jump on supplying western markets. Additions to this massive warehouse in c. 1898, 1902, 1906 and 1911 reflect the opening of Ashdown Hardware stores in Nelson, B.C., Saskatoon and Edmonton. In a publicity stunt unrivalled in prairie commerce, Ashdown loaded up a train pulling 40 freight cars labelled "Hardware from J.H. Ashdown" which chugged through every town and settlement along the line in 1900, selling ware directly from the rail cars. As well, Ashdown's did a tremendous wholesale trade by catalogue.

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<sup>3</sup> "Winnipeg's Ever-Widening Circle of Millionaires," Winnipeg Telegram, January 29, 1910, quoted in A.F.J. Artibise (ed.), Gateway City: Documents on the City of Winnipeg (1872-1913) (Winnipeg: The Manitoba Record Society, 1979), p. 120.

To imagine the scope of the company's massive inventory, it would be fair to compare its operation to the modern Canadian Tire stores. "Tires" and "hardware" became mere euphemisms for a variety of goods. Ashdown's stocked tools, building hardware, paints, sporting goods, electrical and automotive supplies, housewares and household appliances (Plates 1 and 2).<sup>4</sup> Many of these products were sold under Ashdown's own "Diamond A Brand", registered in 1904.

Meanwhile, the rather ramshackle store on Main Street continued to be both the original Ashdown outlet as well as containing the corporate offices. As the city grew around it, the Ashdown store had a perfect location for its commanding trade. By 1900, the store was three storeys high, fronting onto both Main and Bannatyne streets, with a party wall on the north side with the Rialto Block (Plate 3).<sup>5</sup> In April 1904, the old building was in serious need of foundation repair. Architect J.H.G. Russell (see Appendix I for biography) and masons Malcolm Brothers refitted a new concrete foundation under the 1880s structure without disrupting business. The relatively high cost of the job, \$7,000, is a measure of how much work was done.<sup>6</sup>

The new concrete was barely set when the store was destroyed in a bad fire scant months later. On 11 October 1904, a fire began across Bannatyne Avenue in the Bulman Block. High winds caused the fire to jump the gap between the building. The fire fed quickly on the Ashdown merchandise, but when the flames located the paint and kerosene tins, a series of explosions occurred that dashed any hopes of saving the building.<sup>7</sup>

Although the building was a total loss, the foundation was, in part, brand new. This allowed Ashdown and Russell to rush up two floors of a new building on the same foundation that was completed and stocked to service the 1904 Christmas trade. Unseasonably mild weather in

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<sup>4</sup> Ashdown's General Catalogue, 1935.

<sup>5</sup> Diamond Jubilee, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> City of Winnipeg Building Permits (below as BP), #308/1904 ("concrete foundation and interior alterations to basement of retail store").

<sup>7</sup> Entire City Block Guttled by Fire – Loss Is Not Far From One Million," Winnipeg Telegram, October 12, 1904, p. 1.

November and December extended the building season well past its normal limits.

The new store, which measured 57 feet by 114 feet, was initially only two storeys of the planned six. The following four floors were erected in 1905, but for the winter, a temporary felt roof withheld the elements.<sup>8</sup> The contractors were William Grace and Company, an American firm based in Chicago and New York that specialized in large projects, steel and heavy masonry construction and railroads. They had already built the Bank of British North American and the CPR engine houses,<sup>9</sup> and would later construct the Nanton Building. In the spring of 1905, the Wm. Grace Company sub-contracted the remaining portion of the building to the Davidson Brothers of Winnipeg in partnership with another contractor whose name appears to be Hudson.<sup>10</sup>

Walls of solid red brick enclosed a steel skeleton over the rebuilt foundation. Although the new building was a store and office structure, it was built to handle heavy floor loads, with external walls that taper from 21 inches thick on the bottom floors to 17 and then 13 inches on the upper floors. Cast iron columns carry the interior floor load, making a combination of mill construction with steel girders. The ground floor was trimmed with limestone while terra cotta trims the upper five storeys. The building was installed with automatic sprinklers and two passenger elevators ran off the side entrance off Bannatyne for access to the office floors. The portion built in 1904 cost \$25,000 while the completed 1905 portion cost \$85,000 (Plates 4-6).

By reusing the old foundations, the architect was compelled to maintain the same lines as the 1880s structure. Hence, the rounded corner entrance was reinstated. The ground floor featured large plate glass windows that wrapped across the front to the side doors along Bannatyne. An iron cornice outlined the windows and emphasized the public portion of the new structure. Russell chose a simple style for his impatient client. The walls rise plainly between square-headed double sash windows. With the exception of a light stone band above the second storey, most ornamentation

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<sup>8</sup> BP #1684/1904.

<sup>9</sup> Advertisement in Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg, 1905, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> BP #777/1905.

was reserved for the top floor and cornice. Here, the windows are more frequent, and create a steady rhythm between terra cotta panels. A wide fascia sets up a bracketed metal cornice that articulates and draws the eye to its corner angle. The interplay of the red brick and cream trim was later altered when the fascia and cornice were painted a dark colour. A large marquis ran down the length of the store on the Main Street elevation.

In scale and its restrained classical detailing, the Ashdown store was very much in keeping with the commercial structures of this prominent portion of the city's main street. It was heralded as a fine addition to the street, a symbol of "the characteristic energy (of) Mr. Ashdown".<sup>11</sup> It was planned to have the Ashdown store and offices on the basement, ground and upper two floors only, but by the time the building was finished late in 1905,<sup>12</sup> Ashdown's in fact occupied the entire building. The offices were described as finished in hardwood and glass.

Having learned a lesson the hard way, the new building had large underground vaults for the storage of paints and other flammable chemicals. A night watchman patrolled the store at night and on the weekends. The loading docks were as they are today, in a cutaway section of the building rear on the north side. A freight elevator was installed here by 1917.

Ashdown's survived the street action of the 1919 strike, the death of its founder in 1924 and the evolution of the commercial district. But when its second president, Harry Ashdown, the son of the founder, died in 1970, the business was sold and closed its doors. In the meantime, a single-storey addition had been made to the north side in 1959,<sup>13</sup> following the demolition of the Rialto Block. Designed by architects Moody and Moore, this new addition prompted the dramatic changes made to the facade of the old building. The brick was plastered over and the windows covered on the front half of the Bannatyne elevation. The windows along the front of the building were completely reworked into broad horizontal frames filled with glass blocks. The segmented corner was retained

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<sup>11</sup> "Altered Trend: Great Growth of Retail Trade," Manitoba Free Press, October 30, 1905, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. There was even a sign on the building in the accompanying photograph stating, "Offices To Let."

<sup>13</sup> BP #1205/1951. The plans for this permit were consulted.

and cut in to further emphasize the angular segment. Most of the other windows of the building were painted over and the cornice was removed completely. The front of the building was completely altered to give the appearance of a new building. Blind windows and a monochromatic finish on the other three sides of the building have contributed to its more modern appearance. Only the window detailing, residual bits of cornice and fascia and the detailing of the Bannatyne entrance (Plate 7) alert the casual observer to the original historic lines.

Plate 8 captures a very momentous event in the life of this structure. Big 4 Sales purchased the building in 1970 and this photograph shows “Grand Opening” signs in the tall section of the building. The small 1959 section to the north, still with its Ashdown’s Sign, was being used by the hardware company to sell off its remaining stock. Shortly after this picture was taken, Ashdown’s closed forever, bringing to an end the Ashdown era which had begun on the site 100 years before.

With the death of James Ashdown in 1924, Winnipeg had grown from a scattering of crude shacks huddled on the prairie in the shadow of a faltering fur trade to a commercial metropolis with several hundred thousand people. Both the man and the business had been an active participant in that growth.

## APPENDIX I

### **John Hamilton Gordon Russell**

J.H.G. Russell was born in Toronto, Canada West (Ontario) in 1862, the son of a dry goods dealer. After attending school in that city, he went to work for H.B. Gordon, a prominent area architect. Russell was with Gordon from 1878 until his departure for Winnipeg in 1882.<sup>1</sup> From 1886 to 1893, Russell travelled throughout the United States, learning civil engineering, surveying and architecture in centres such as Chicago, Illinois, Spokane and Tacoma, Washington, and Sioux City, Iowa.<sup>2</sup>

In 1895, two years after returning to Winnipeg, he set up his private practice, coinciding with the city's period of unbridled growth. His designs were (and are) scattered throughout the city, province and western Canada, covering a variety of building types, sizes, prices and uses.

Russell was president of the Manitoba Association of Architects (1952) and served for three terms as the president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (1912-15). His chairmanship of the Presbyterian Church Board of Managers<sup>3</sup> and his devotion to Presbyterianism partially explain the large number of churches he designed for the denomination in Winnipeg and western Canada. Russell died in 1946.

A complete list of his designs would be lengthy indeed. Many of his earlier works have been demolished and therefore usually are no longer included in inventories of his portfolio.

Among his projects were:

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<sup>1</sup> G. Bryce, A History of Manitoba (Toronto: The Canada History Company, 1906), p. 480.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 480; and M. Peterson, "The Wilson House (Klinic), 545 Broadway," Report to the Historical Buildings Committee, May 1990, Appendix I, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> M. Peterson, op. cit., n.p.

Outside Manitoba-

Knox Presbyterian – Prince Albert, Sask.  
Knox Presbyterian – Kenora, Ont.  
St. Andrews Church – Moose Jaw, Sask.

Manitoba-

Starbuck Presbyterian (United) - 1904  
Treherne Presbyterian (United) – 1907-08 (originally Chambers Presbyterian)  
Pilot Mound Public School  
Killarney Public School  
Foxwarren Public School

Winnipeg-

Churches- Augustine Presbyterian (United), 444 River Avenue, 1903-4  
Crescent-Fort Rouge Methodist (United), 525 Wardlaw Avenue, 1906-11  
Westminster Presbyterian (United), 745 Westminster Avenue, 1910-12 (Grade II)  
Robertson Memorial Presbyterian (United), 648 Burrows Avenue, 1911  
Robertson Memorial Presbyterian Institute, Burrows Avenue, 1911  
Knox Presbyterian (United), 400 Edmonton Street, 1914-17  
Home Street Presbyterian (United), 318 Home Street, 1920  
St. John's Presbyterian (United), 250 Cathedral Avenue, 1923 (Grade III)  
Riverview Presbyterian (United), 360 Oakwood Avenue, 1925

Residences- J.H.G. Russell, 237 Wellington Crescent (demolished)  
R.R. Wilson, 545 Broadway, 1904 (Grade III)  
H. Archibald, 176 Roslyn Road, 1909  
Ormsby, 119 Campbell Street, 1910  
J.H. Ashdown, 529 Wellington Crescent (now Khartum Temple), 1913 (Grade II)  
R.R. Wilson, 680 Wellington Crescent, 1925

Commercial- Addition to J.H. Ashdown Warehouse, 157-179 Bannatyne Avenue, 1899-1911 (Grade II)  
Lake of the Woods Building, 212 McDermot Avenue, 1901 (Grade III)  
Hammond Building, 63 Albert Street, 1902  
Porter and Company Building, 368 Main Street, 1902-03 (demolished)  
McKerchar Block, 600-02 Main Street, 1902-03  
Additions to McClary Building, 185 Bannatyne Avenue, 1903 & 1904 (Grade III)  
Thomson Block, 499 Main Street, 1903 (demolished)  
Adelman Building, 92-100 Princess Street, 1903 (Grade II)

Commercial (continued)-

Bole Warehouse, 70 Princess Street, 1903  
Additions to the Bright and Johnston Building, 141 Bannatyne Avenue,  
1903 & 1907 (Grade III)  
Silvester and Willson Building, 73 Albert Street, 1904  
Green and Lister Block, 235-7 Fort Street, 1904 (demolished)  
Franklin Press, 168 Bannatyne Avenue, 1904 (Grade III)  
Addition to Daylite Building, 296 McDermot Avenue, 1904 (Grade II)  
J.H. Ashdown Store, 476 Main Street, 1904  
Allman Block, 592-4 Main Street, 1904  
Porter Building, 165 McDermot Avenue, 1906 (Grade III)  
Child's (McArthur) Building, Portage Avenue, 1909 (demolished)  
Glengarry Block, 290 McDermot Avenue, 1910 (Grade III)  
Dingwall Building, 62 Albert Street, 1911 (Grade III)  
Great West Permanent Loan Company Building, 356 Main Street, 1912  
(demolished)  
Eastman Kodak Building, 287 Portage Avenue, 1930 (demolished)

Other-  
Gladstone School, Pembina Street, 1898 (demolished)  
Casa Loma Block, Portage Avenue, 1909  
Chatsworth Apartments, 535 McMillan Avenue, 1911  
YMCA, Selkirk Avenue, 1911  
YMCA, 301 Vaughan Street, 1911-13, with Jackson and Rosencrans of  
New York, (Grade II)  
Guelph Apartments, 778 McMillan Avenue, 1912  
Addition to the Marlborough (Olympia) Hotel, 321 Smith Street, 1921-  
23  
Odd Fellows Home, 4025 Roblin Boulevard, 1922  
Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Portage Avenue, 1928  
Hugh John Macdonald School, William Avenue, 1928  
Aurora Court Apartments, 543 Ellice Avenue, n.d.  
Central Park Block, 389 Cumberland Avenue, n.d.  
Johnson Apartment Block, 524 Sargent Avenue, n.d.

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Plate 1 – Interior of Ashdown's Store, 476 Main Street, ca.1929. This is part of the sporting goods department. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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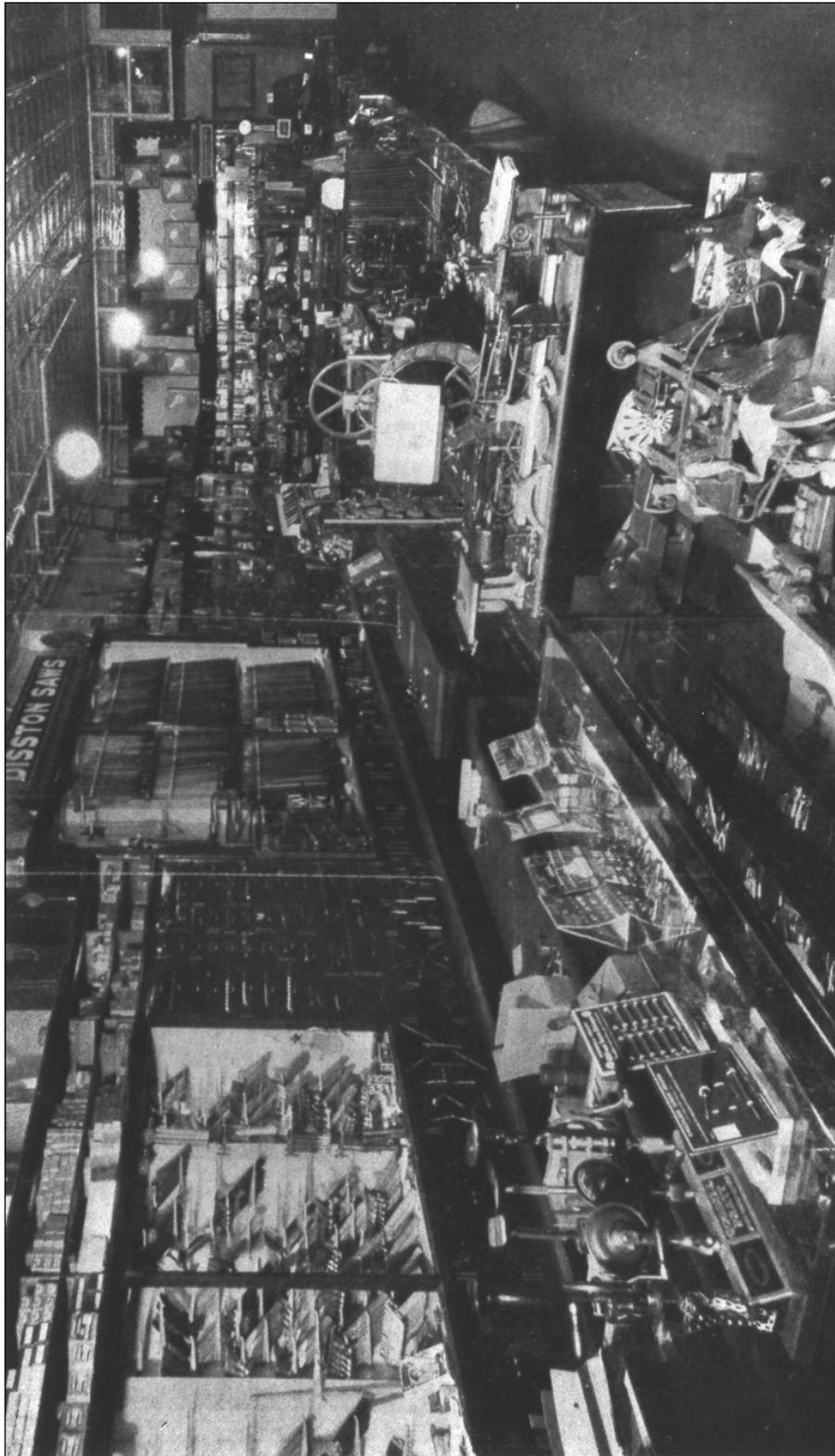


Plate 2 – Interior of Ashdown’s Store, 476 Main Street, ca.1929. This is part of the hand tools department. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 3 – Ashdown’s Store, 476 Main Street, ca.1900. The Rialto Block is next door. (M. Peterson Collection.)

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Plate 4 – Ashdown’s Store, 476 Main Street, ca.1929. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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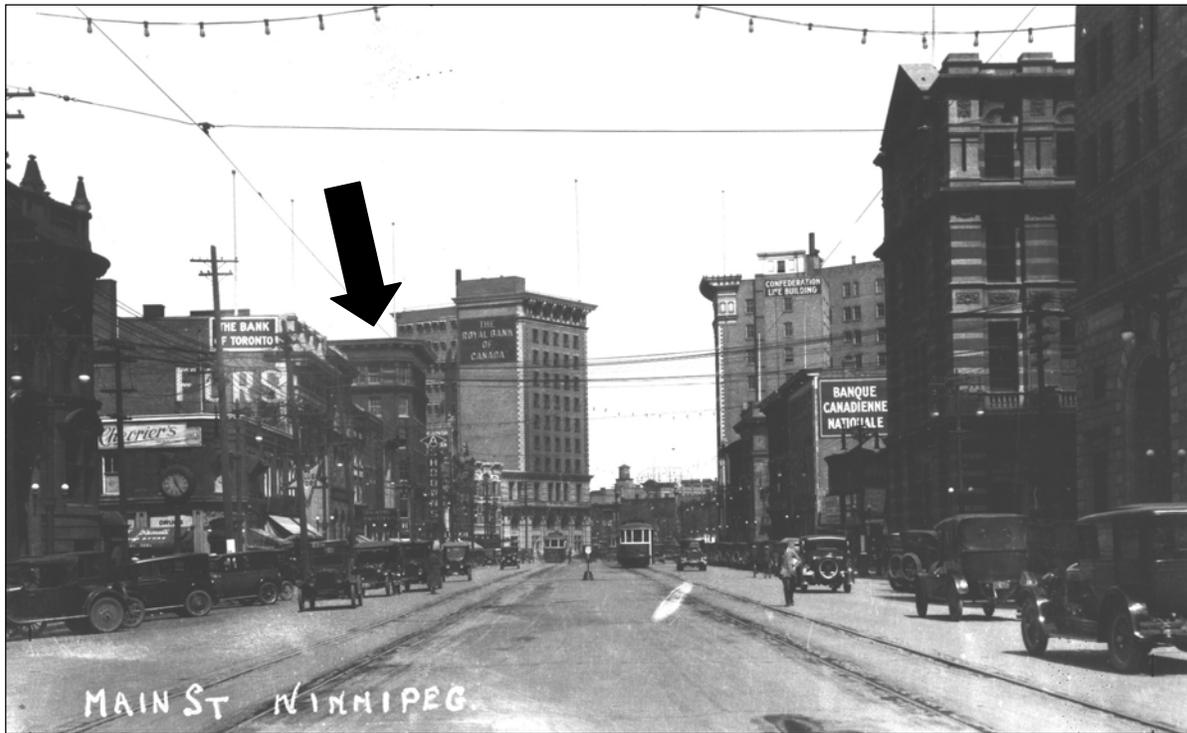


Plate 5 – Main Street, looking north from Lombard Avenue, ca.1930. Ashdown's Store is at arrow. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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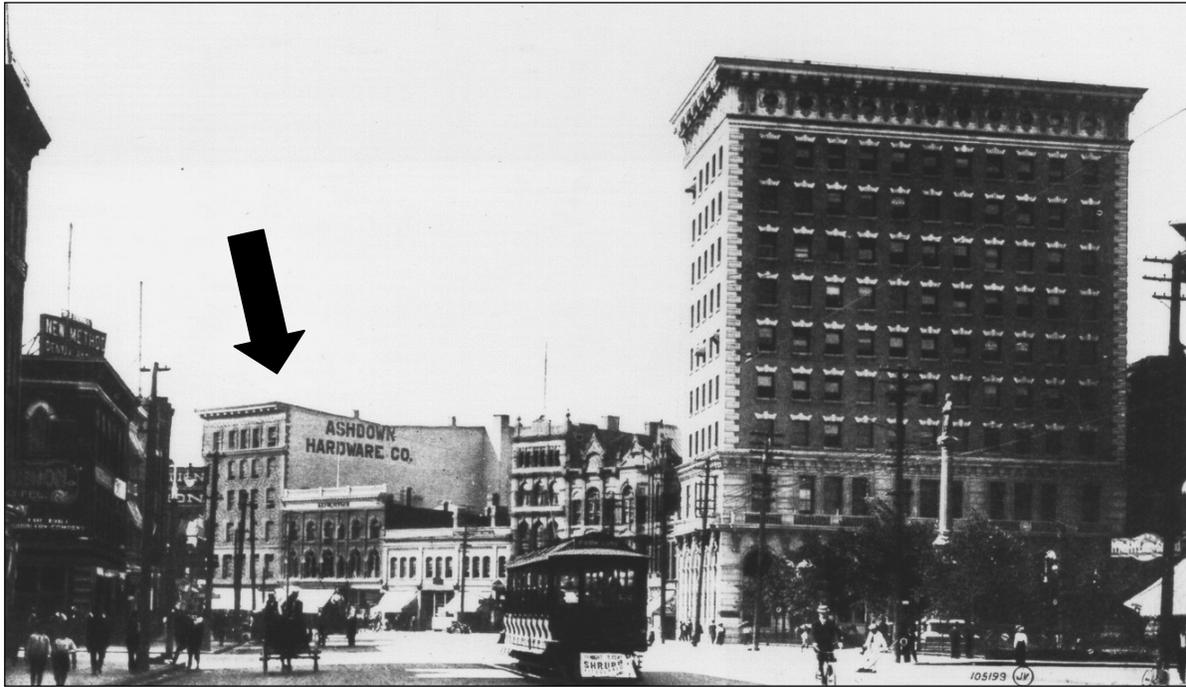


Plate 6 – Main Street, looking south from William Avenue, ca.1910. Ashdown’s Store is at arrow. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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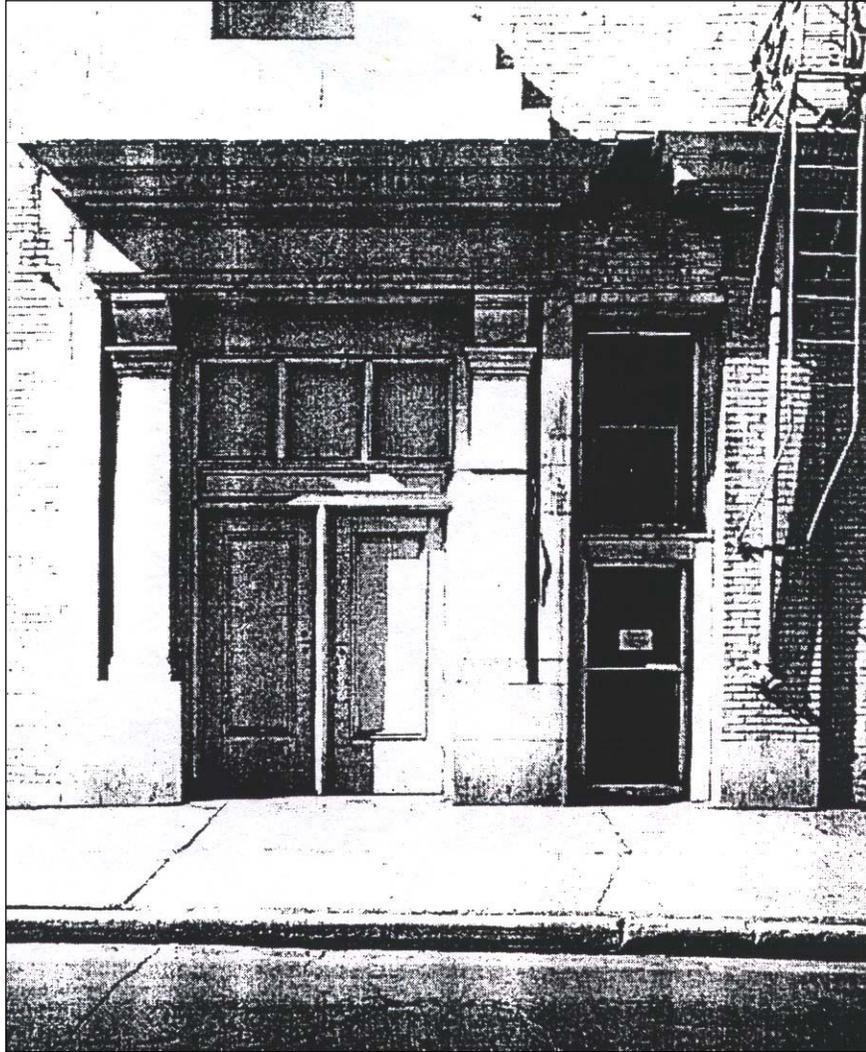


Plate 7 – Detail of ornamental doorframe, south elevation, ca.1970. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 8 – Ashdown's Store and Big Four Sales, 476 Main Street, 1970. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)