

2197 Columbia Avenue - Velvet Block



Velvet Block 2021

Heritage Register - Building

- 1) **Historical Name:** Velvet Block
- 2) **Common Name:** Velvet Hotel
- 3) **Address:** 2197 Columbia Avenue
- 4) **Date of Construction:** 1896/1897
- 5) **Design, Style, Architecture, Architect:**

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Description:

The Velvet Block is located on the southwest corner of the intersection of Columbia Avenue and St. Paul Street in Rossland, B.C. It is a substantial, two storey, flat roofed building of wooden construction and marks the entrance to Rossland's downtown core when arriving on Highway 3B from the south. It is located on a sloping lot and the back of the building is fully three storeys high with a business premise located in

the basement area, accessed by a door on south side of building. A variety of businesses are located in this building accessed by three separate entrances on Columbia Avenue.

Heritage Value:

This building was constructed in the “boom” years of Rossland’s early development, 1896/97, and is one of five remaining buildings in this block. It is a visual reminder of the type, style and construction of many of the commercial buildings erected in Rossland prior to 1900.

The Velvet Block is a landmark, with a significant footprint and location that has always marked the eastern edge of Rossland’s downtown core.

Character Defining Elements:

- Original footprint and location.
- Plaque on Columbia Avenue facade identifying this building as one of Rossland’s significant heritage buildings.



Velvet Block c.1900

HISTORY

The Velvet Block, on the corner of Columbia Avenue and St. Paul, was built in either 1896 or early 1897. Development of Rossland's downtown started in the western portion, focused first around Spokane Street and Columbia Avenue, but during the boom years of 1896 to 1898, many commercial buildings were erected along both sides of the three block length of Columbia Avenue and indeed, along Washington Street, from Columbia Avenue to First Street, providing an almost complete streetscape of two and three storey buildings in the business core. The Velvet Block is part of Block 43 of the original Township of Rossland which lies between Columbia and LeRoi Avenues and between St. Paul Street and Lincoln (Queen) Street.

The July 1897 Insurance Map of Rossland shows all the commercial buildings providing information about the size, height, and construction materials used. This Insurance Map labels this building at 2197 Columbia Avenue, as the "St. Elmo", a three storey, wooden framed building that because of the sloping lot, was actually a four storey building at the back (south) with a plumber's shop located in the basement. The main floor appears to be divided into two commercial spaces and the words, "Rooms Over" are also printed on the diagram of the building. This pattern of commercial space on the main floor and accommodation above was very common at that time. It is interesting to note that the Insurance Map also shows that seven of the ten lots on this Block had two and three storey buildings on them, that Lots #13 and #15 were empty and Lot # 20 had the Stone Block "under construction".

The first Tax Assessment Rolls in 1898, for the newly incorporated City of Rossland, show that Block 43, Lot #11 property and building were owned by John McLeod and A. W. MacNaughton. The land was valued at \$3,300 which was the highest valued property on this Block. The building value at \$3,000 shared the highest value for any of the eight buildings on this Block with the newly completed Stone Block.

An early picture, circa 1900, shows a two storey rectangular bay on the northeast corner of the building extending from the second floor to the roof line. Wooden detailing and different paint colors on the front facade visually separate the floors and is repeated under the parapet of rooftop. There are two entrances on Columbia, one lead to the rooms on the second and third floors and one to the commercial enterprise.

McLeod and MacNaughton owned the building but it would appear that they did not operate a business in the commercial spaces themselves. Harold Kingsmill in the "*First History of Rossland*", published in 1897, refers to, "Lockhart & Jordan - Importers and Dealers in Furniture, Carpets and Undertakers' Goods", opening their "commodious" store for trade in May of 1897. Kingsmill reports that it was the:

"largest and most complete stock of the kind in this part of BC; the firm is a buyer in car-load lots from the best factories of Canada; also an importer from the United States; includes everything from the plain but serviceable quality to the most exquisitely carved and upholstered furniture; business occupies two well-filled floors".

Kingsmill refers to both C. B. Lockhart, originally from Ontario and J. M. Jordan originally from Georgia, Alabama as experienced merchants and adds that Lockhart was a skilled undertaker

and a graduate of the U. S. College of Embalming. The *"First History of Rossland"* goes on to say that,

"Undertakers' goods form an important but inconspicuous part of the stock, and funeral directing, embalming and undertaking are a part of the business of the firm. In this connection, it is pertinent to state the firm owns two fine hearses, one white and one black."

Information about the early years of this building's use has been difficult to find. There is no mention of the St. Elmo other than on the 1897 Insurance Map. Reading the ledger of Licences for the City of Rossland, there was no liquor licence issued for the St. Elmo or The Velvet.

We only have two photos of this building in its early years, circa 1900 as shown above. Tax rolls tell us the building at that time was still owned by McLeod and MacNaughton but the signage in the photograph reads,

**J. M. JORDAN
FURNITURE, CARPETS, LINOLEUMS, OIL CLOTHS, ETC.**

There is no mention of Lockhart on the sign, or undertaking services, but an ad in the 1902 Rossland Miner newspaper refers to the location of this furniture store as St. Paul and Columbia Avenue. A sign between the second and third floors on the front facade, "Velvet" appears in the photo. The 1912 Insurance Map shows that this building was still being used as a furniture store on the main and basement levels with "Rooms Over". We know from other sources that in 1911 J. M. Jordan purchased the two buildings on the northwest corner of Columbia Avenue and Queen Street and opened there "the largest furniture store in the Interior of B. C." In 1914 E.H.S. Wynn purchased the building and sold it to Mrs. Life four years later. In 1920, W.K. Esling purchased the building for his Conservative M.L.A. headquarters until 1945.

Fortunately, the disastrous fires of 1927 and 1929 that destroyed so many of Rossland's early commercial buildings did not affect the Velvet Block. In the 1930s, the building also housed Rosslands only miniature golf course run by Alec Smith, the proprietor of the Allan Hotel. Shortly before Mr. Esling's death in December, 1946, the Velvet Block was sold to the Gospel Hall congregation. The main hall was fitted out and used as a meeting place but in 1950 an extensive renovation of the building was started. The first major job was the removal of the top floor. Subsequently new stairways were built at the back from each floor to exit door. Additional renovations included setting up 12 classrooms and a kitchen and the second floor. Over the next few years, the center posts on the main and lower floor were replaced with steel beams. In 1959, the final renovations were completed which included updating the exterior with stucco and brick veneer. In addition, all of the ornate woodworking which originally adorned the building was removed and replaced with an arch over the entrance and the patterned glass window in the front as described in the Oct 7, 1959 *Rossland Miner* article. It is believe that the Gospel Chapel remaining in this building until 1990. Subsequently, the building was converted to separate units and housed various commercial enterprises which it continues to do today.