

**298 GARRY STREET – CANADA PERMANENT BUILDING
(COMCHEQ BUILDING)**
J. D. Atchison, 1909



Dominating the vista down Garry Street, south of Portage Avenue, this red sandstone block was for many decades the home of the Canada Permanent Trust Company. Erected in 1909, the building contained offices and banking facilities on the ground floor and additional office space in the two upper storeys with a separate entrance.

A world-wide crisis had ended by 1908. During the next four years there was renewed prosperity in Winnipeg, evidenced by the high volume of real estate transactions and increased building activity. During this period, two banks established head offices in Winnipeg, and over fourteen banks maintained regional head offices in the city. A variety of other financial services were also established, making Winnipeg a major financial center.

The Canadian Permanent Mortgage Company was founded in Toronto in 1854 by J. Herbert Mason and a number of investors who pooled their resources to provide mortgages for house construction for its members. In 1881, Winnipeg became the first expansion of Canada Permanent beyond its Toronto base, when an agent opened up a local office representing the firm. By 1900, the local office was located in a renovated block on the south-east of Portage Avenue and Main Street. In 1909, a new office location had to be found since the Bank of Montreal purchased the site to erect their Winnipeg landmark designed by renowned American architects McKim, Mead and White.

A lot was purchased by Canada Permanent on the west-side of Garry Street, immediately behind the Bank of Nova Scotia on the corner of Portage Avenue. Local architect John D. Atchison was hired to design the new western headquarters. An American by birth, he had studied at the Chicago Art Institute and had worked for William Le Baron Jenney and William B. Mundie, a well-known and prestigious team of Chicago architects. In 1895 Atchison began his own practice in Chicago; in 1905 he moved to Winnipeg, the “Chicago of the North.” For fifteen years he was the leading architect in the city whose projects included the Great-West Life Building (1911) at 177 Lombard Avenue, the Union Tower (1912-1913) at 191 Lombard Avenue, and the Bank of Hamilton (1916-1918) at 395 Main Street.

The three-storey building employed the latest fireproof technology using a steel skeleton and walls of concrete. Applying the vocabulary of the Renaissance Revival style, the building carries on the stylistic precedent introduced in 1829 by British architect Charles Barry for the Traveller’s Club on Pall Mall, London. The main entrance into the Canada Permanent Building is through a canted corner that provides unity to the two main elevations and gives the illusion of a much larger main façade. Salmon coloured sandstone is used for the two main elevations while granite, chiseled to a fine tooth surface, is used for the foundation and in the quoins. The corner entrance is elaborated with fluted columns, wreaths, and a date stone. The second storey windows, on the Garry Street elevation, linked horizontally by a string course, are elaborated with projecting surrounds that include entablatures. In keeping with the Renaissance Revival style, a massive elaborate cornice and parapet crowned the building. Sections of the parapet have been removed but a detailed carved cartouche remains, forming the base for a flagpole.

Within the building, the banking hall is spacious with a Roman coffered ceiling, white marble columns and a marble-tiled floor. Antique verde marble was used as wainscoting in the banking hall, the vestibule and the entrance to the offices. From a separate entrance to the south marked “Chambers” in the lintel-stone, a cage elevator and marble stairway provide access to the upper office floors completely separate from the banking hall. Much of the original fine materials and craftsmanship remain.

In 1964, Canada Permanent relocated its offices to Portage Avenue and the building became home for Guardian Finance Corporation. In the early 1980s, the building was purchased and sensitively renovated to be the head office for Comcheq Services Limited. Restored with great care, the building is now a showpiece and a superb example of the initiative now being shown by the private sector in recycling some of Winnipeg’s fine heritage buildings.