

181 HIGGINS AVENUE – CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY STATION
Edward and William S. Maxwell (Montréal), 1904-05



Winnipeg's early development was strongly shaped by two corporate interests -- the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

Prior to 1870, the HBC and associated Red River Settlement established the city's location, its basic patterns of internal growth and an economy oriented to trade, provisioning and agriculture. Arrival of the CPR in 1881 confirmed that Winnipeg would become the dominant transportation and marketing centre on the Prairies, at least during the region's formative years up to the 1910s.

Securing direct access to the transcontinental rail line had been a critical issue for the community's business and political leaders since the early 1870s. The failure of the first Pacific railway syndicate, and the Dominion government's subsequent inability to make significant progress with the project, gave Winnipeggers the time to lobby for publicly financed incentives aimed at drawing the CPR to the city, and for changes in the proposed route that would favour crossing the Red River at Winnipeg rather than Lower Fort Garry or Selkirk, Manitoba.

Those efforts paid off when the Conservatives under John A. Macdonald were returned to office in 1878 committed to an ambitious plan (the National Policy) for Canada's development, including a railway to connect all regions and rapid settlement of the West. Agreement was reached with a new CPR syndicate in 1880, followed early the next year by legislation enabling construction to proceed.

Winnipeg already was building a rail crossing, the Louise Bridge, over the Red River at Point Douglas to accommodate the proposed Manitoba and Southwestern (Colonization) Railway (MSWR) and a partially-built Dominion government branch line intended to connect the city to the main CPR route.

Local attention quickly shifted to the new CPR syndicate in a final, successful push to get the railway's main line, workshops, stockyards and other facilities located in Winnipeg. In return, City Council agreed to provide land for a station, perpetual exemption of CPR property from civic taxation, and a \$200,000 bonus. The Dominion government concurrently took steps to ensure a substantial portion of some 270 hectares of land it controlled northwest of Point Douglas was reserved for CPR use.

By 1882, Winnipeg was linked to Regina in the west and, in the following year, to Port Arthur in the east. The CPR's western span was completed in 1885, allowing through-traffic to begin moving between Montréal and Vancouver by mid-1886.

The CPR initially used the MSWR's depot and other facilities, built in 1879-80 near King Street and Sutherland Avenue. In June 1881, the company completed its own 1 1/2-storey, wood frame station near the corner of Main Street and Point Douglas Avenue. The site, transferred to the CPR by the City, consisted of six lots on the south side of Point Douglas between Main and Maple streets, plus a closed portion of Austin.

The unassuming 1881 depot gave way two years later to a more substantial, 2 1/2-storey, solid brick building that combined a station with offices for the CPR's western division. That structure, designed by Thomas Seaton Scott, formerly chief architect of the Dominion Department of Public

Works in Ottawa, fell victim to fire in March 1886. Its replacement took on similar dimensions, styling and interior layout, although the plans were prepared by another architect, Thomas Charles Sorby of Montréal.

By the latter 1890s, the Winnipeg depot had become obsolete in relation to the CPR's operational context and maturation as a corporate entity. The firm no longer held a monopoly over prairie rail transportation -- indeed, it soon would be in the thick of competition with the Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Pacific railways which were trying to organize alternative transcontinental lines. Nonetheless, the CPR's financial status had improved since the 1880s, helped by diversification into Pacific trade, ocean shipping, express and telegraph services, mining, tourism, and land development. Both its prospects -- and those for Winnipeg's role as a regional power -- were further boosted by the Dominion government's aggressive immigration drive from the mid-1890s onward. The pace of western settlement substantially increased as a result, stimulating all sectors of the economy and large investments in new infrastructure.

The CPR embarked on a multi-year redevelopment program in Winnipeg. Its yards and shop facilities were greatly expanded. As well, lots were acquired in 1899-1900 on Main, Austin and Maple streets to extend the station property southward to Higgins Avenue. Plans for a new depot, office and luxury hotel on this expanded site were announced in 1903, then again in 1904. Concurrently, construction proceeded on a new Dominion government Immigration Hall (1904-05) on Maple and a reinforced concrete underpass (1904) beneath the CPR's Main Street crossing. The latter project allowed uninhibited travel on Main for the first time since the CPR tracks cut through Point Douglas.

Work on the railway's four-storey station and adjoining office wing, which extended west from the corner of Maple and Higgins, was directed in 1904-05 by general contractor Peter D. Lyall and Sons of Montréal. The 1886 depot subsequently was demolished to make way for the Royal Alexandra Hotel (1905-06) at the northeast corner of Main and Higgins. Initially-publicized sketches indicated that the new facilities would be in the Chateausque style. By 1904, however, the CPR had chosen ornate neoclassical plans by brothers Edward and William Sutherland Maxwell of Montréal.

The Maxwells went into partnership in 1902 following separate architectural careers. Edward (1867-1923) apprenticed in Boston with Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge before returning to his hometown of Montréal in the early 1890s. He secured commissions from prominent members of the local business community, and designed several stations and hotels for the CPR, including its major Vancouver terminal (1897). William (1874-1952) studied at the École des beaux-arts in Paris, then associated with architect Bruce Price who had inaugurated the era of Chateausque railway buildings with his designs for the CPR's Banff Springs Hotel (1886-88) and Chateau Frontenac (1892-93) in Quebec City.

The brothers soon garnered a national reputation for their corporate work and public institutions such as courthouses, the Saskatchewan Legislative Building (Regina, 1908-11), and Montreal Art Association Gallery (1911). Upon Edward's death, however, this competitive stature peaked. William remained in the profession, but concentrated mainly on additions and alterations to the firm's earlier buildings. The CPR Station is the only known Maxwell brothers' design still standing in Winnipeg. Two other structures, the Royal Alexandra Hotel and a Balmoral Street apartment block, have been demolished. The partners also were unsuccessful entrants in the Manitoba Legislative Building and 1912 City Hall competitions.

The CPR Station rises from a concrete foundation to a steel superstructure enclosed by walls of Wisconsin red brick and contrasting light Tyndall stone. The largely symmetrical, Higgins and Maple facades are organized in three parts -- a stone-clothed basement and main floor, a two-storey, brick mid-section, and a top level highlighted by stone facing and small pairs of rectangular openings. The mid-section is distinguished by a wide stone band above the first storey and a decorative cornice over the third floor. Its large windows are set in two-storey arches topped by architrave bands of projecting brick. Additional detailing is provided by stone quoins, lintels, sills, keystones, elaborate surrounds on selected windows, shields, drops, and other carved reliefs.

A portico of smooth-cut stone, its massive double columns crowned by swagged capitals and a monumental pediment, marks the station's recessed main entrance. An illuminated Seth Thomas clock, 1.8 metres in diameter, dominates the centre of the pediment amid elaborate stone relief-

work. Behind the columns are three sets of hexagonal oak and glass doors with brass fittings. Arched transoms, stone pediments and large, multi-paned windows lighting an interior gallery extend above the doorways.

The building's interior features a large rotunda with a terrazzo floor of white Italian marble and a barrel vault ceiling supported on the sides by substantial columns set on marble bases. The ceiling originally contained a back-lighted arch of stained glass, softened by an outside layer of ribbed glass. It further was divided into a number of sections, each of which held a cluster of electric lights. The floor was bordered by marble bands of different widths and colours, and by marble baseboards. Bronze-coloured capitals originally topped the columns, while the walls were highlighted by ornamental plaster-work, including a series of rosettes in moulding which circled the space, each holding an incandescent light. Other fittings included marble wainscoting, a large electric timepiece by the E. Howard Clock Co., naturally-finished oak benches, and oil paintings of Rocky Mountain scenes.

The main-floor also accommodated a ladies' waiting room; men's smoking room; several ticket wickets on the east side of the rotunda; telegraph, telephone, parcel and baggage facilities; a travellers' aid room; news-stand; cafe; dining-room; and station master's office. The basement held a waiting room and lunch counter for second-class passengers and immigrants.

The complex, set back from Higgins, is accessed by driveways off both that avenue and Maple. Original landscaping included a substantial greenspace, complete with a fountain, in front of the office wing. In 1922, a monument designed by Coeur de Lion MacCarthy of Montréal, and dedicated to CPR employees who had died during World War I, was added to this area. The memorial was relocated to greenspace in front of the station entrance when the main grounds were converted to a parking lot.

An addition was made to the station in 1913 and a glass roof was installed over the track area in 1916. Interior modifications have included the application of Art Deco renovations in the rotunda.

At its peak, the station processed 17 trains a day and for many years its walls resounded with the

chatter of new settlers, fall harvest specials, troops, beach-goers, business travellers, and others. As well, the adjacent hotel long served as the city's social centre. From the 1950s onward, however, dependence on rail travel declined. The CPR closed the Royal Alexandra in the late 1960s, then demolished it in 1971 and turned the site over to the City for park purposes. The last CPR passenger train departed from the Winnipeg depot on October 28, 1978.

A dwindling number of company employees, plus Gus Uhmans's Turkish Bath and the Forum Art Institute, occupied the station-office complex until 1989 when the building was closed and put up for sale. The structure subsequently was given interim protection under the federal government's Heritage Railway Stations Protection Act. After extensive planning and negotiations, a coalition of local aboriginal groups was able, with government support, to purchase the site in 1992. The group has converted the premises to an Aboriginal Centre accommodating various community services, businesses, government agencies and training facilities. One objective of the project is to stimulate renewal of the surrounding area, especially Main Street north of City Hall.