

234 PORTAGE AVENUE – OLDFIELD, KIRBY AND GARDNER BUILDING
J.D. Atchison, 1909



Retail uses sparked the development of downtown Portage Avenue in the early 1900s. When financial firms, office towers and the Post Office soon followed, they confirmed Portage as a major commercial corridor and a strong competitor to Winnipeg's original business district on Main Street.

One of the financial interests drawn to Portage from Main was Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Ltd., an investment, real estate and general insurance firm whose operations extended across Western Canada and attracted British capital to the region.

The founders – John Henry Oldfield (1857-1924), William Hicks Gardner (1873-1951) and Walter T. Kirby (1858-c.1950) – had separate careers as local financial agents before they entered into their partnership. Oldfield, a British immigrant, began working as a realtor during Winnipeg's 1881 boom. Gardner, also of British origin, was with the

realty firm of Nares and Gardner in the 1890s before he joined Oldfield in 1899. Insurance agent Kirby became part of the company in 1906.

The three had occupied various Main Street offices, but in 1909 they opted to establish a new headquarters on the south side of Portage Avenue just west of Fort Street. Their two-storey structure was designed by John Danley Atchison and built for approximately \$41,000 by the Carter-Halls-Aldinger Company and Davidson Brothers.

The building had a stone foundation, frame of cast iron columns and steel I-beams, brick walls, and reinforced concrete slab floors. It was modest in scale, but featured an eye-catching, cream-coloured terra cotta front manufactured by the American Terra Cotta and Ceramic Company of Chicago, Illinois.

The façade's symmetry and detailing were typical of the Classical Revival (Neo-classical) style of architecture favoured by the period's banks and other financial institutions. Fluted columns flanked the main entrance, their Corinthian Order capitals enriched with acanthus leaves, caulicoli and other elements. The columns extended up to an elaborate entablature and pediment that displayed the firm's name and date of origin, accompanied by winged cherubs, sheaths of grain, garlands, a modillioned cornice, and cable and other mouldings. Layered bands gave the end pilasters a rusticated look. The large recessed windows were framed by floral designs and separated by ornate spandrels. Granite lined the base of the facing.

A revolving entrance door led to the lobby, a staircase and a pair of brass and glass doors. Main-floor finishes included oak counters, plaster walls, decorative pilasters, and a high beamed ceiling that opened in the middle to a large glass skylight. The space contained several offices and a walk-in vault. Additional offices and vaults were on the second floor and a mezzanine. The basement held staff and utility rooms and another vault.

Much of the building's original design still survives, although the interior has been altered over time, as have some exterior elements.

Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner continued as the principal occupant through to 1963-64 when a new facility was built on Donald Street near the Midtown Bridge and emerging Broadway financial district. Various parts of the firm's business subsequently were sold and/or merged with other companies. Its main successors at 234 Portage were the North West Trust Company (to the mid-1990s) and Canadian Western Bank (to December 2003).

Architect Atchison (1870-1959) planned a number of terra cotta structures in the downtown, including the Allan, Killam and McKay, Boyd, Carlton, Curry, Great-West Life, and Union Trust buildings. Among his other Portage Avenue projects were the Edmonton Block and Hample, Kennedy and Willys Overland buildings. As of 2003, the City of Winnipeg had extended historical designation to a dozen structures of his original design.

Atchison opened his local office in 1905 after studying and practising in Chicago. He brought with him expertise in steel skyscraper construction and the Chicago School of architecture. He also contributed to town planning initiatives before moving to California in 1923.