

276 PORTAGE AVENUE
BIRKS BUILDING
(FORMER YMCA BUILDING)

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

April 1991

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There is not a citizen who can afford to let this opportunity pass of adding his or her quota to this grand work. To the mothers we would say, this is a work which reaches after the welfare of your sons. We would ask the sisters if a work which seeks to save your brothers is not a work which claims your every assistance. To the employer we would point out the great advantage which must accrue to him if the young men in his warehouse or office are brought under the influences of an association like this. And to the young men of our city we would say, who can estimate the value to yourselves of a home such as the association is contemplating?¹

And so the call for support went out in June 1890, just four days after the Winnipeg branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) had purchased land at the corner of Smith Street and Portage Avenue.² It indeed had been a long and amazing journey from the beginning of the association in England in 1844, to British North America's first organized group in Montreal in 1851, to a YMCA reading and meeting room above a Main Street store in Winnipeg in 1879. By the end of 1899, there were over 6,000 associations worldwide, with over half-a-million members speaking 35 languages in 50 countries. Canada could boast 47 associations.³

The original intent of the YMCA was to foster Christian attitudes among the newly arrived city dwellers in England. But as time progressed, the goals of the organization moved away from these evangelical roots. As one observer commented, the openly religious attitudes and programs were slowly replaced by "a low key spirit of 'practical Christianity'." ⁴ As the 19th century came to a close, the YMCA also moved quickly to adopt a more holistic approach to the well-being of its members. Athletics and other programs were introduced to provide for the health of the body and to

¹ Winnipeg Tribune, June 7, 1890, p. 3.

² Winnipeg Tribune, June 5, 1890, p. 4.

³ Manitoba Free Press, January 18, 1901, p. 1.

⁴ Winnipeg Tribune, March 23, 1979, p. 26.

address physical, mental and moral fitness.⁵

Designing the YMCA's new Winnipeg structure was not as simple a process as one might expect. It took several years and numerous redrafts by local architect George Browne before the international secretary of the YMCA in New York approved the design. During this period, Browne was sent by the association to study YMCA buildings in several U.S. cities.

All through 1898, 1899 and early 1900 articles appeared in Winnipeg newspapers discussing the plans for the new building, describing the standard interior organization and commenting on the need for endorsement of the plans from officials in New York.⁶ One of the most obvious and important departures from the standard plan was the inclusion of retail space at street level. The YMCA hoped to cash in on the rapid growth of this sector along Portage Avenue and attract a steady flow of capital through rent,⁷ and a steady flow of pedestrians through their facility.

Finally, with plans accepted by all levels, the immense task of raising the necessary funds to build the structure began in earnest. As money poured in, work on the building progressed. When completed, the superstructure cost \$68,500,⁸ interior furnishings and the land added \$10,000 each.⁹ Only \$15,000 of the \$88,500 total was not covered by initial YMCA fund-raising activities.¹⁰ The facility was officially opened on January 18, 1901.¹¹

⁵ Y-One Hundred: A Winnipeg YMCA Commemorative Publication (Winnipeg-c.1979), p. 7. Below as Y-100.

⁶ Winnipeg Tribune: February 18, 1898, p. 4, April 1, 1898, p. 4, May 3, 1898, p. 3, May 11, 1898, p. 5, May 20, 1898, p. 4, June 11, 1898, p. 8, June 21, 1898, p. 8, July 26, 1898, p. 4, August 4, 1898, p. 8, February 28, 1899, p. 8, March 11, 1899, p. 8, June 26, 1899, p. 5, January 11, 1900, p. 8, January 12, 1900, p. 5, January 13, 1900, p. 6, and January 19, 1900, p. 3.

⁷ Winnipeg Tribune, June 26, 1899, p. 5.

⁸ City of Winnipeg Assessment Records, #932241 (old number 16942), Ward 1, PC 40. (Below as AR).

⁹ Manitoba Free Press, January 18, 1901, p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹ Manitoba Free Press, January 18, 1901, p. 6.

Because the YMCA Building at 276 Portage Avenue was altered so completely by its second owner, the Birks jewellery company, it will be treated as two buildings. Therefore, the Style, Construction, Design, Architect and Person/Institution categories discussed below will reflect this duality.

STYLE

Browne's original design of the YMCA was simple yet striking. The symmetrical front façade contained the heaviness of design, roughness of texture and round-headed arches of the Romanesque style (Plate 1). This style emerged in the late 1880s directly influenced by American architect H.H. Richardson and was often called Richardsonian Romanesque. It was prevalent throughout North America well into the 20th century, finding particular expression in the large warehouses in city wholesale districts. Notable characteristics included the use of rough textures (usually masonry), round arches and short towers, and an overall bulkiness and massiveness.¹² Ornamental features were stylish yet subdued. The inclusion of two simple towers on the YMCA Building was consistent with this style.

The alterations carried out by the new owner of the structure, the Birks Company, did more than simply add some colour to the façade. The exterior was transformed into an ornately rich, yet delicately treated showpiece displaying elements of the Italianate style. Symmetry of composition, finely cut ashlar façades embellished with quoins, ornately framed windows, entablatures, pediments, smaller square upper or top-storey windows, and other classical accents all distinguished this style.¹³ Large public buildings featured rusticated bases and attic levels embellished with elaborately bracketed cornices.¹⁴

¹² L. Maitland, et al., A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles (Peterborough-1992), pp. 84-5.

¹³ J. J.-G. Blumenson, Identifying American Architecture (Nashville-1981), p. 39.

¹⁴ L. Maitland, op. cit., pp. 58-9.

CONSTRUCTION

The YMCA Building was built of solid brick, measuring approximately 27.0 x 39.6 m (88.5 x 130') and rising four full storeys above the southeast corner of Portage Avenue and Smith Street. A three-storey rear section also was included in the original building. The land is legally described as 1 St. John, Plan 19302, Block 3, Lot 6.¹⁵ General contractors for the building were J.A. Girvin and P. Burnett.¹⁶

The conversion to the Birks Building added terra cotta, granite, bronze and Tyndall stone to the building's composition.

DESIGN

George Browne's YMCA Building was an attractive, well-designed structure (Plate 2). The centre of the Portage Avenue façade was emphasized by a two-storey bay window topped with a tower. This tower was highly visible, as seen in the panoramic view of Portage Avenue (Plate 3). Two-storey pilasters framed the many windows of this elevation and the Smith Street façade. Third-storey windows were finished with round-headed brick arches, rusticated keystones and a cornice that led to the fourth floor. Here small rectangular windows grouped in threes supplied ample natural light for the interior space.

The structure was completed by another, slightly simpler cornice and plain parapet. A second, smaller tower was placed atop the Smith Street elevation. As mentioned previously, behind this second tower was a three-storey area that continued the organization and design of the four-storey façades. Ornamental relief was provided by rusticated stone accents throughout the two main façades.

When altered by the jewellery company, this building became a city showpiece, replacing subdued

¹⁵ AR.

¹⁶ Y-100, p. 8.

ornamentation with an energetic display of exterior decoration. Montreal architects Nobbs and Hyde created an incredibly rich and unique façade, one that would have had (and still has) the desired effect of attracting attention to the building.

The Birks Company began alterations shortly after occupying part of the building in 1909. Two permits totalling \$29,000 were taken out in 1910 (see Appendix II for a complete list of permits) to alter the interior of the first floor and add a solid bronze front to the Portage and Smith façades (Plate 2). This work was designed by Winnipeg architect J.D. Atchison.¹⁷

Other changes included the addition of a \$30,000 mezzanine and the \$25,000 terra-cotta façade in 1914 (Plate 4), and the 1951 alteration of the ground-floor show-window area. The new ground floor included a granite base and Tyndall stone facings surrounding the solid bronze show windows. Corner columns and vestibule walls were lined with Travertine marble. Including interior changes to the showroom, the 1951 alterations cost \$150,000.¹⁸

The second- to fourth-floor windows are different in shape and rest on continuous terra-cotta sills. The seven second-storey windows are rectangular and set within frames boasting raised quoins and projecting heads. The seven round-headed windows of the third floor have terra-cotta drip moulding completely surrounding the openings.

Above the third-floor openings are six terra-cotta medallions depicting the sources of the materials used by jewellers (a seventh medallion is found at the same level on the Smith Street façade). These terra-cotta elements include: turquoise, portraying semi-precious stones, an elephant for ivory, a Kimberley Negro searching for diamonds, a man diving for pearls, an oceanic wave delivering the riches of the sea (mother-of-pearl, coral and a tortoise shell), a precious metal-smelting gnome, and a

¹⁷ City of Winnipeg Building Permit, (below as BP) #659/1910 and #2794/1910; and The Dominion, I, No. 3 (December 1910), p. 86.

¹⁸ BP #3861/1951 and supplementary BP 9375/1952.

silversmith surrounded by the tools of his trade.¹⁹

Above the medallions are seven groups of small rectangular windows arranged in triplets which support the mosaic described in one article as a "frieze of pageantry." Designs for this frieze were created in half-size by Percy Nobbs and Ramsay Traquair of McGill University. Once completed, the designs were photographed and enlarged to scale.²⁰ Rather than paraphrasing, a description of the frieze is reproduced in full below:²¹

To best view the storied frieze, one should start from the centre. To the left is the king (Solomon) and his court followers, to the right, the queen (of Sheba) and her entourage. The queen is kneeling to receive the gift of a pearl necklace. At the left end of the frieze a ship lies in the Harbour of Tyre, while at the right of this portion are seen the gates of Jerusalem. Also shown is the passing of the gifts by the customs authorities at Tyre.

Hyran, king of Tyre, is next shown taking toll. The camel on which the queen may be supposed to have ridden, preceded by a Negro carrying a parrot and an Indian with peacock, is depicted next. They are followed by an ape seated on a horse and a gigantic Negro groom carrying on (sic) ivory tusk. The master of the apes, in trouble with one of his charges, is next to the queen and her attendants.

At the other end, members of the guard can be seen issuing from the gates of Jerusalem. To celebrate this great occasion, some of the ladies of the court are dancing and singing, ahead of the guards. Preceding this procession is the Rose of Sharon, borne by two Negroes with plumed head-dress and led by a body of kilted warriors.

Following the chariot from which the king has just descended to bestow his gift on the queen are the three wise men: the first a historian with his scroll; the second an astrologer with a divining rod and crystal sphere, the third a philosopher. Immediately behind the king, two guards stand at attention. Behind both monarchs is an owl in a circle, the symbol of knowledge. The "lily of the field" blooms nearby.

¹⁹ Winnipeg Free Press, August 5, 1967, Leisure Magazine, p. 6.

²⁰ Construction, Vol. 9, No. 9 (September 1916), p. 295.

²¹ Winnipeg Free Press, August 5, 1967, Leisure Magazine, p. 6.

Above this terra-cotta masterpiece are heavy wooden eaves complete with decorative brackets.

The Smith Street façade is a continuation of the Portage Avenue elevation and includes the seventh medallion above the third-storey windows and a section of the heavy eaves.

INTERIOR

Many of the interior furnishings of the new YMCA building were unique to Western Canada and among the best anywhere in the Dominion. Upon entering the structure from Portage Avenue, wide oak stairs led to a naturally lit rotunda complete with fireplace. Off this open area were the general offices, the general secretary's private office, a public reading room (facing Portage Avenue), a cloak room and a parlour leading to a lecture hall that could seat 150 people. There were three fireplaces on this level.²²

Moving up five or six steps, visitors arrived in the gallery of the main 600-seat auditorium or 'Association Hall' as it became known. Entrance to the main floor of this hall could be gained by using the Smith Street entrance or descending a small set of stairs found in the rotunda on the Portage Avenue side. The rear of the second floor featured the upper running track of the gymnasium and the balcony of the Association Hall. The front portion was accessed from a central staircase ending in a large reception area. Offices, a large lecture room, a parlour, recreation room, and reading room were located off the reception area.

The second floor also contained a reception area, along with boys' quarters (with reading room and parlour), two meeting halls, several classrooms, the members' library, and a boardroom for the association. At the rear of this area (over the Association Hall) were furnished bedrooms for young men.²³

²² Manitoba Free Press, January 18, 1901, p. 7.

²³ Ibid. p. 7.

The entire fourth floor was comprised of over 20 dormitories for young men, along with a kitchen, sitting rooms and a common bathroom. Several rooms on both the third and fourth levels were rented out on a monthly basis to residents in order to provide the association with another source of fixed revenue.²⁴

The gymnasium was in the rear section of the building. Measuring 13.1 x 20.1 m (43 x 66'), the gym contained an upper level padded running track, gymnastic equipment, dumb-bells, striking bags, and wrist and wrestling machines. Members were especially proud of the specialized equipment for 12-16-year-old boys.²⁵ Below the gym was Winnipeg's first indoor pool, called a 'plunge bath,' measuring 4.5 x 10.5 m (15 x 35') and from 1.2 to 2.1 m (4-7') deep. Also in the basement were showers, a locker room and two bowling alleys.²⁶

Conversion of the building for retail purposes by the Birks Company created an opulent jewellery showroom on the ground floor and office space and workshop areas on the upper floors. Many of the Building Permits listed in Appendix II concern these types of interior alteration.

A 1991 site visit to the then vacant building revealed that the basement, first, second and third floors had all been substantially altered by the Birks Company.²⁷ This did not apply to the fourth floor, which was virtually unaltered from the YMCA period. The original dormitories were intact, including wallpaper, fixtures and the layout of the area.

INTEGRITY

The building stands on its original site and structurally is in excellent condition. As seen by the list

²⁴ Ibid., p. 7; and Y-100, p. 9.

²⁵ Y-100, p. 8; and Manitoba Free Press, January 18, 1901, p. 7.

²⁶ Manitoba Free Press, January 18, 1901, p. 7.

²⁷ According to one staff member, the basement swimming pool was used to store the blue Birks jewellery boxes before it was filled in.

in Appendix II, alterations have been numerous and major in scope. The exterior, save for the ground floor, dates to the 1910-14 period and has suffered little in the way of alteration since then.

STREETSCAPE

The Birks Building is surrounded by buildings of similar vintage and use. The Paris Building, Curry Block and Bank of Nova Scotia are just some of the structures along Portage Avenue that give downtown Winnipeg its unique character.

ARCHITECT

As previously stated, the original architect of the building was George Browne who came to Winnipeg from his birthplace, Montreal, after working as an architect in New York, the British Isles and Europe and after homesteading south of Holland, Manitoba (see Appendix I-a for biography).²⁸

While Browne was responsible for most of the structural elements of the building, it was Percy E. Nobbs of the architectural firm of Nobbs and Hyde of Montreal who designed the building's present exterior. Nobbs was born on August 11, 1875 in Scotland and after nearly 30 years in Russia, Scotland, Italy and England, moved to Montreal as head of the School of Architecture at McGill University (see Appendix I-b for biography).²⁹ This appears to be the only structure in Winnipeg designed by Nobbs and Hyde.

Browne has received 10 points from the Committee while Nobbs has not been evaluated to date.

PERSON/INSTITUTION

It is apparent from reports at the time that all of Winnipeg was proud of the new YMCA facilities in

²⁸ Canadian Architect and Builder, X (January 1897), p. 4.

²⁹ I. Murray (ed.), Percy Erskine Nobbs (Montreal-1986), pp. 17-18.

1900. But it became just as obvious to the YMCA board members that changes had to be made almost immediately after construction. Prohibitive costs for water and lighting resulted in two major projects being completed in 1903. An artesian well was dug in the centre of the basement to a depth of 95.2 m (312') below street level to supply the enormous amounts of water needed and a basement lighting plant was installed.³⁰

It also became apparent to association members that the rarity of their new facility made it tremendously popular with Winnipeggers – so popular in fact, that less than 10 years after it was completed, talk of larger facilities began. In the Y.M.C.A. Annual Report for 1909, it was reported that,

The present building has been outgrown for the past four or five years and the Association work is at a standstill until a larger and more modern as well as a more economically arranged building is at our disposal.

The association also was concerned about rising property taxes along Portage Avenue. The building's Portage Avenue retail space had been the address of such firms as Canadian General Electric (1900-1905), Forrester and Hatcher, pianos (1900-1904), Great West Permanent Loan and Savings (1904-1906), and the New York Hair Store (1905-1910).³¹ But even with this capital, the association felt that if a downtown site could be on a side street, the savings would be large. Thus the association once again began planning and organizing, fund-raising and studying, moving slowly towards the construction of a second downtown building.

Among the issues to be resolved was the disposal of the Portage Avenue building. As it happened, an expanding company headquartered in Montreal wanted to increase its visibility in Winnipeg along with the physical size of its retail operations. The firm, Henry Birks and Sons, had moved to

³⁰ Y-100, p. 10.

³¹ Henderson's Directory, 1898-1920.

Main Street in 1903, making the Winnipeg store its second oldest branch in Canada.³² Two of the founder's sons, William Massey Birks and Gerald Walker Birks, were deeply involved in the Montreal YMCA movement. This connection with the association might have been instrumental in leading the company to occupy and later purchase the YMCA's Winnipeg building (for \$290,000).³³

The ultimate acquisition made sense for various reasons. It would have been more expensive to build a like structure in 1912 than to buy the existing building. Frontage on Portage Avenue near Main Street would not come cheaper, if it were available at all. Moreover, the building was well-known to the average citizen and large enough to provide a huge ground-floor showroom with office and workspace on the upper levels.

For all these reasons, the Henry Birks and Sons Company decided to purchase the building from the association in September 1912.³⁴ The YMCA officially moved out of their Portage Avenue home on January 1, 1913,³⁵ ending a short but very successful tenure on Portage Avenue.

The history of the Henry Birks and Sons Company is long and successful. Henry Birks was born in Montreal in 1840 and at age 17 joined the Montreal jewellery firm of Savage and Lyman, becoming part of the Birks tradition of jewellers that dated back to Richard Birks, a silverworker in the sixteenth century.³⁶ The Savage and Lyman firm was considered the finest business of its kind in the Dominion but depression forced its liquidation in 1878.

Undeterred by this set-back, Henry Birks opened the first "Birks Store" on March 01, 1879 on St. James Street in Montreal with \$4,000 capital (\$1,000 of which was borrowed from his wife's

³² K.O. MacLeod, The First Century (Montreal-1979), p. 30

³³ Y-100, p. 16.

³⁴ Province of Manitoba, Land Titles, #193767, dated September 7, 1912. Below as Titles.

³⁵ Winnipeg Telegram, October 22, 1910, p. 12; and Winnipeg Tribune, January 2, 1913.

³⁶ Canadian Architect and Builder, X (January 1897), p. 4.

holdings). Birks and his three employees immediately set their store apart from others in the Dominion with two simple rules: no bartering and cash sales only. Because of this and the fact that the opening coincided with a regional boom, the business soon outgrew its humble beginnings and its first store.³⁷

In 1893, again following centuries of family tradition, Birks reorganized the company to include his three sons, William Massey, John Henry Metcalfe ("Harry"), and Gerald Walker Birks. The sons immediately began to adopt more aggressive business practices to strengthen the company, and in 1898 drew up plans for expansion to other parts of Canada. Henry's rejection of the proposal was accompanied by the now famous quote that, "We are making all the money that is good for us."³⁸

But by 1900 Henry's oldest son William was at the helm and expansion plans began in earnest. In 1901, Ottawa became the site of the first branch store. On May 02, 1903 Winnipeg boasted the second Henry Birks and Sons branch in a small store on Main Street near Portage Avenue.³⁹ By purchasing the Ryrie Brothers Company of Toronto and Trorey Limited of Vancouver, the company had moved into the major markets of the country. Expansion continued to the point where five out of eight Canadians in 1975 lived within 16 km or 10 miles of a Birks store.⁴⁰

In Winnipeg, the company became owner of 276 Portage Avenue in September 1912.⁴¹ The Henderson's Directory for 1914 lists 16 separate tenants occupying the upper floors of the building including dentists, the Knights of Columbus, seven vocal teachers, a roofing contractor, and two residential suites. By 1915, all tenants were gone, leaving Henry Birks and Sons as the lone

³⁷ K.O. MacLeod, op. cit., pp. 16-18.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 27-28; and letter from G. Drummond Birks to G. Bugailiskis, dated May 7, 1990.

⁴⁰ K.O. MacLeod, op. cit., pp. 28, 65.

⁴¹ Titles.

occupant.⁴²

Subsequent expansion of the firm in Winnipeg included the take-over of a local jewellery company, D.R. Dingwall Limited, in 1933⁴³ and in 1987, the vacating of the old YMCA Building in favour of new space in the Portage Place facility.

EVENT

Other than the meeting of an ancient king and queen high above the street, there is no known significant event connected with this structure.

CONTEXT

As the YMCA Building, 276 Portage Avenue was representative of the success of both the association and Winnipeg. Especially in new urban areas, the YMCA became a sort of calm in the cultural storm. With the transient, single male population growing throughout Canada (and especially on the Prairies), there was a need for a stable environment that provided companionship in a controlled setting. As time went on, physical activities assumed a more important role for the association while the moral teachings and sermons lost their original zeal.

As for Winnipeg, the opening of the first YMCA reflected the growth in population and recognition by many citizens that the newest Winnipeggers had to be given every chance to succeed and become model citizens. The association was seen as the perfect means for achieving these goals.

As the Birks Building, this structure provides us with an example of the type of post-1900 development occurring on Portage Avenue, transforming the area into the city's retail and office centre. The largest of Canada's retailers, the T. Eaton Company and the Hudson's Bay Company,

⁴² Henderson's Directory, 1915.

⁴³ K.O. MacLeod, op.cit., p. 28; and letter from G. Drummond Birks, op.cit.

and many slightly smaller firms, including Henry Birks and Sons, sought to locate along both sides of Portage to take advantage of the thoroughfare's increased pedestrian and motorized traffic.

As for jewellery stores, the Birks company established the kind of opulent, extravagant showroom that not only attracted the city's wealthiest people, but also developed a reputation for high quality that drew less affluent customers as well. The little blue Birks box became known city- and country-wide due to this reputation. Because of this effort to create a rich atmosphere, the company had a very unique store (both inside and out).

The Birks success in Winnipeg also showed the type of development common to many sectors of the economy. Local firms, in this case D.R. Dingwall Limited, were joined in the market by branches of large eastern companies at the turn of the century. Ultimately, most local retailers (or like many wholesalers and bankers) were bought out by the eastern interests. Jobs often were not disrupted, but local ownership was drastically reduced overall.

LANDMARK

Ask 100 people where Winnipeg's first YMCA building was and most would not know. Ask the same people where the old Birks Building is and many more could tell you. Ask them where the building with the 'Egyptian-looking' upper storey is and almost all could find it. Located near the busiest corner in Winnipeg, the Birks Building is one of the city's more conspicuous structures.

APPENDIX I

George Creeford Browne

George Browne was born in Montreal in 1852, the son of architect George Browne, a prominent designer and major real estate holder. After finishing high school, he immediately went to work in his father's office. At the age of 18, he went to New York and worked for Russell Sturgis, one of that city's leading architects. After three years, Browne resigned and left for Europe to study design history.¹

He spent over three years in England, Ireland, France, Italy and Switzerland, and won an international design competition in England. He returned to Montreal in 1877² and in 1879 he inexplicably gave up architecture to homestead on 129.5 ha (320 acres) of land in the Tiger Hills district south of Holland, Manitoba.³

Browne moved to Winnipeg in 1882⁴ and set up a private architectural practice. He continued to design buildings throughout Manitoba and Western Canada into the new century, although by 1904 City of Winnipeg Building Permits show little work attributed to his office. In 1907, he had his name officially changed from George Browne to George Creeford Browne.⁵ His work ranged from small houses and cottages to major office structures and warehouses. He moved to New York City ca. 1910.⁶ Perhaps his two most famous designs were the Public Market Building behind City Hall, built in 1889-90 (demolished in 1964), and Wesley College (University of Winnipeg), Portage

¹ G. Bryce, A History of Manitoba (Toronto: The Canada History Company, 1906), pp. 483-84.

² W.P. Thompson, "Browne, George, Jr.," The Canadian Encyclopedia (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), Volume 1, p. 289.

³ Winnipeg Daily Tribune, August 1, 1891, p. 13.

⁴ Men of Canada, p. 222 (unidentified article in the Department of Culture and Heritage, Historic Resources Branch files).

⁵ Statutes of Manitoba, 1907, Chapter 51, p. 11 (Historic Resources Branch files).

Avenue, built in 1895, designed in partnership with S.F. Peters. He died in South Nyack, New York on March 12, 1919.⁷

A list of his varied work includes:⁸

Massey Building, 294 William Avenue, 1885 – Grade II
Miller, Morse and Co. Warehouse, 86 Princess Street, 1887 – Grade III
City of Winnipeg, Public Market Building, City Hall, 1889-90 – demolished
Mackenzie and Powis Warehouse, 78 Princess Street, 1891 – Grade III
Euclid (or North Central) School, Euclid Avenue, 1892 – demolished
Manitoba College, major addition, Broadway, 1892 – demolished
Mulvey School, Broadway, 1893 (and 1895 replacement) – both demolished
Aberdeen School, Salter Street, 1893 – demolished
Court House and Jail, PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE, 1894-95
Masonic Temple (Mother Tucker's Restaurant), 335 Donald Street, 1895
Presbyterian Indian Mission residence, PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE, 1895
Hudson's Bay Co. Store, CALGARY, 1895
Hudson's Bay Co. Store, PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE, 1895
Hudson's Bay Co. Warehouse, York Avenue at Fort Street, 1895
Wesley College (University of Winnipeg), with S.F. Peters, 1895
Trust and Loan Co. Building, Portage Avenue, 1898
Victoria Jubilee Wing, Winnipeg General Hospital, 1898
Union Bank, NEEPAWA, ca. 1899
Young Men's Christian Association Building (Birk's Building), 276 Portage Ave., 1900
Gault Building, 92-104 Arthur Street, 1900 – Grade II
Gurney Foundry Co. warehouse, Owen (McDermot) Avenue, 1902
Strathcona Block, Main corner Broadway, 1902-03 – demolished
American Able Machinery Co., Dufferin Ave. – Warehouse, 1902; Factory & Offices, 1902-03

⁶ W.P. Thompson, op. cit., p. 289.

⁷ Ibid., p. 289.

⁸ This list is compiled from: personal files of the author; various local newspapers' building issues, 1879-1911; Canadian Architect and Builder, 1896-99; City of Winnipeg Building Permits, 1899-1904; Giles Bugailiskis, "Quiet Dignity," unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, 1990, p. 156; and files of the City of Winnipeg, Heritage Planner.

G.C. Browne designs (continued):

Hudson's Bay Co. Stables, York Avenue, 1903

Forman Block, Fort Street, 1903

Toronto Type Foundry warehouse, major addition, 175 McDermot Avenue, 1904 – Grade III

APPENDIX I-B

Percy Erskine Nobbs

Born in Haddington, Scotland on August 11, 1875, Percy Nobbs became one of Canada's most influential architects, designing buildings of all descriptions and uses from coast to coast. Much of his childhood was spent in St. Petersburg, Russia – a member of the third generation of a highly respected English family. In 1887 he enrolled at Edinburgh Collegiate School and in 1893 entered Edinburgh University where he completed his three-year Master of Arts program.¹

Nobbs subsequently became the pupil of a talented Scottish architect, Robert Lorimer (1864-1929), who was a leading advocate of the Arts and Crafts movement and heralded as "one of the most notable Scottish architects of the first three decades of the [twentieth] century."² By 1900 Nobbs had passed the Royal Institute of British Architects' examinations; that year he won the Tite Prize for his design of an isolated clock. With the money, Nobbs travelled to Italy to study, sketch and measure some of the country's best architectural designs.³

In 1901, Nobbs took a job in the Fire Brigade Branch of the London County Council, but his ability to draw garnered several awards and regular publication, leading to his employ with a number of London architectural firms that were intent on winning prizes. Several of Nobbs's friends felt this was a waste of talent and convinced the 28-year-old to go to Montreal to be the director of the School of Architecture at McGill University.⁴

Soon after his arrival at McGill, Nobbs asked for and received permission to practise privately in conjunction with his teaching. Nobbs felt that to teach architecture properly, it had to be

¹ I. Murray (ed.), Percy Erskine Nobbs (Montreal-1986), p. 17.

² A. Service, Edwardian Architecture (London-1977), p. 204.

³ Ibid., p. 204.

⁴ Ibid., p. 204.

demonstrated, not only through words and pictures but also by actual work. What followed was a string of successful designs on campus and throughout Montreal, plus assistance with the final revisions for the Parliament Buildings in Edmonton and Regina. He also judged numerous design competitions and even won the silver medal in foils at the 1908 London Olympics.⁵

In 1909 Nobbs tendered his resignation as director of the School of Architecture in order to form a partnership with George Taylor Hyde. Until 1939 Nobbs worked as a Professor of Design at McGill while designing privately. His partnership with Hyde lasted until the latter's death in 1944.

Their firm was responsible for a staggering amount of work of almost every size, description and use, including extensive work for the Henry Birks and Sons Company and individual members of the Birks family. They designed the new Birks Building in Montreal in 1911, alterations to the Ottawa building in 1929, new facilities in Saskatoon and Edmonton in 1929, and 1930 alterations to the Halifax Birks Building.⁶ Family work included alterations to William Massey Birk's Montreal house in 1917, a 1925 gravestone for the family, and new houses for William M. and John Henry Birks in Montreal in 1926 and 1927, respectively.⁷

The Nobbs and Hyde partnership was well-known for its work on residential structures, but as the years went on, larger, more demanding projects were undertaken. A master plan for the new University of Alberta was created, then interrupted by the outbreak of World War I. After the war a revised plan was carried out. Restoration, remodelling and design of religious buildings and plans for several schools in the Montreal area also were undertaken.

Undoubtedly, McGill University is where the partnership did the majority of its work. McGill Stadium, additions to the Redpath Library and the Strathcona Medical Building, the Pathology Building, the Pulp and Paper Institute Building, and an extension to the Royal Victoria College were

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

the major contributions made by the firm.⁸

Apart from his work as a private architect and professor, Nobbs maintained a busy schedule of appointments and chairs. He was elected an academician of the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts in 1920, became president of the Province of Quebec Association of Architects in 1924, and in 1928 was President of the Town Planning Institute of Canada. He also became president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. His views on city planning found expression at the political level when he served as McGill's delegate on Montreal City Council in 1941.⁹

He also found time to write, publishing three books, one each on his favourite topics: architecture, salmon fishing and fencing. Nobbs retired from teaching in 1939 but continued to practise privately for a number of years. He died at the age of 89 on November 5, 1964.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

APPENDIX II

BUILDING PERMITS - 276 PORTAGE AVENUE¹

YEAR	NO.	AMOUNT	DESCRIPTION
1900	72	\$ 68,500	Original (G. Browne, architect; J. Girvin & P. Burnett, contractors)
1910	659	20,000	Interior/exterior alterations (J.D. Atchison, architect; Peter Lyall & Sons, contractor)
1910	2794	9,000	Exterior alterations (J.D. Atchison, architect; Lyall-Mitchell, contractor)
1913	4119	6,000	Interior alterations (Frank W. Walker, contractor)
1914	280	30,000	Rear mezzanine added (Frank W. Walker, contractor)
1914	2349	25,000	Terra cotta front (P.E. Nobbs, architect; Carter, Halls, Aldinger, contractor)
1928	422	20,000	Portage Avenue entrance (Fraser & MacDonald, contractor)
1928	1499	4,000	Alteration to store (Fraser & MacDonald, contractor)
1941	1216	5,000	Repairs
1951	3861	50,000	Front and showroom alterations
1952	9375	100,000	Supplementary permit to #3861/1951
1953	10088	15,000	Store alterations
1955	450	25,000	Alterations
1958	3060	3,000	Store/office alterations
1968	3458	23,000	Alterations
1969	445	30,000	Alterations
1969	2636	18,000	Alterations
1973	499	8,000	Alterations
1973	7797	8,000	Alterations
1974	4584	5,000	Alterations to 2 nd floor interior
1976	7077	10,000	Alterations to 2 nd floor interior
1979	7604	2,500	Alterations to Smith Street entrance

¹ City of Winnipeg Assessment Records, #932241 (old no. 16942), W 1, PC 40.

276 PORTAGE AVENUE – BIRKS BUILDING

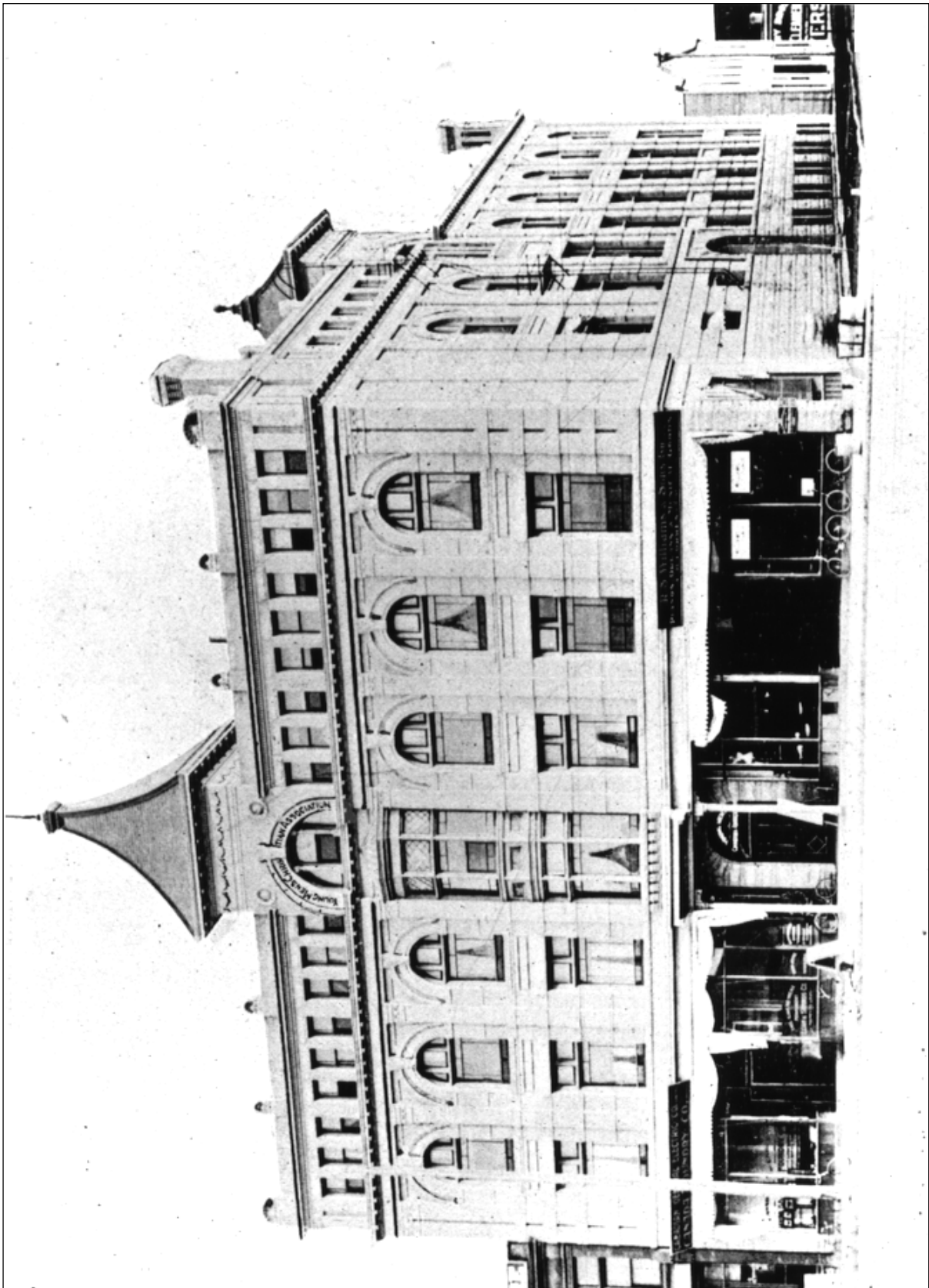


Plate 1 – The YMCA Building, 276 Portage Avenue, shortly after construction, ca.1903. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

276 PORTAGE AVENUE – BIRKS BUILDING

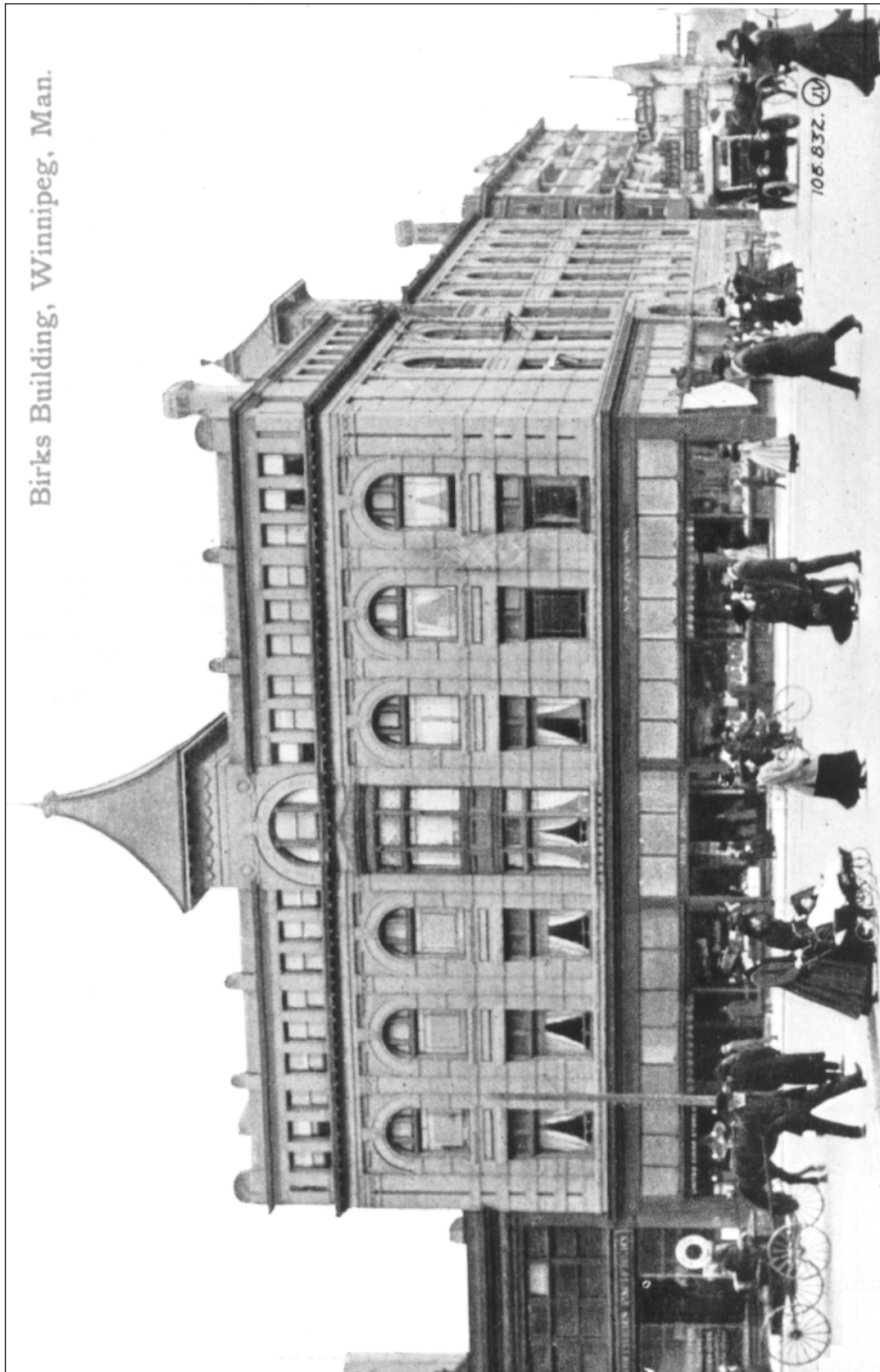


Plate 2 – The YMCA Building with its new ground floor exterior and the Birks retail store on the ground floor, ca.1911. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

276 PORTAGE AVENUE – BIRKS BUILDING

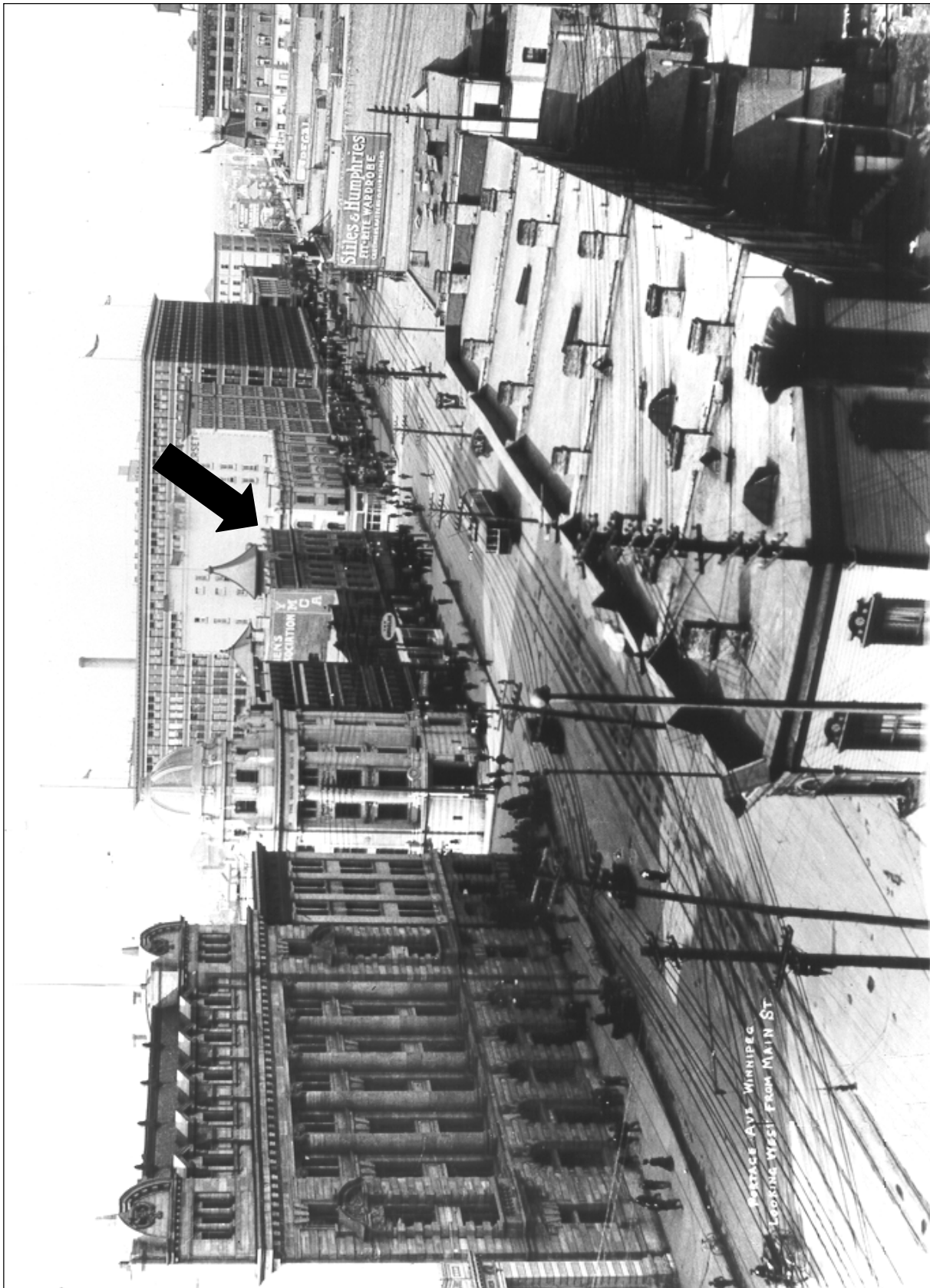


Plate 3 – A view of Portage Avenue looking west from Main Street; the YMCA is at the arrow, ca.1912. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

276 PORTAGE AVENUE – BIRKS BUILDING

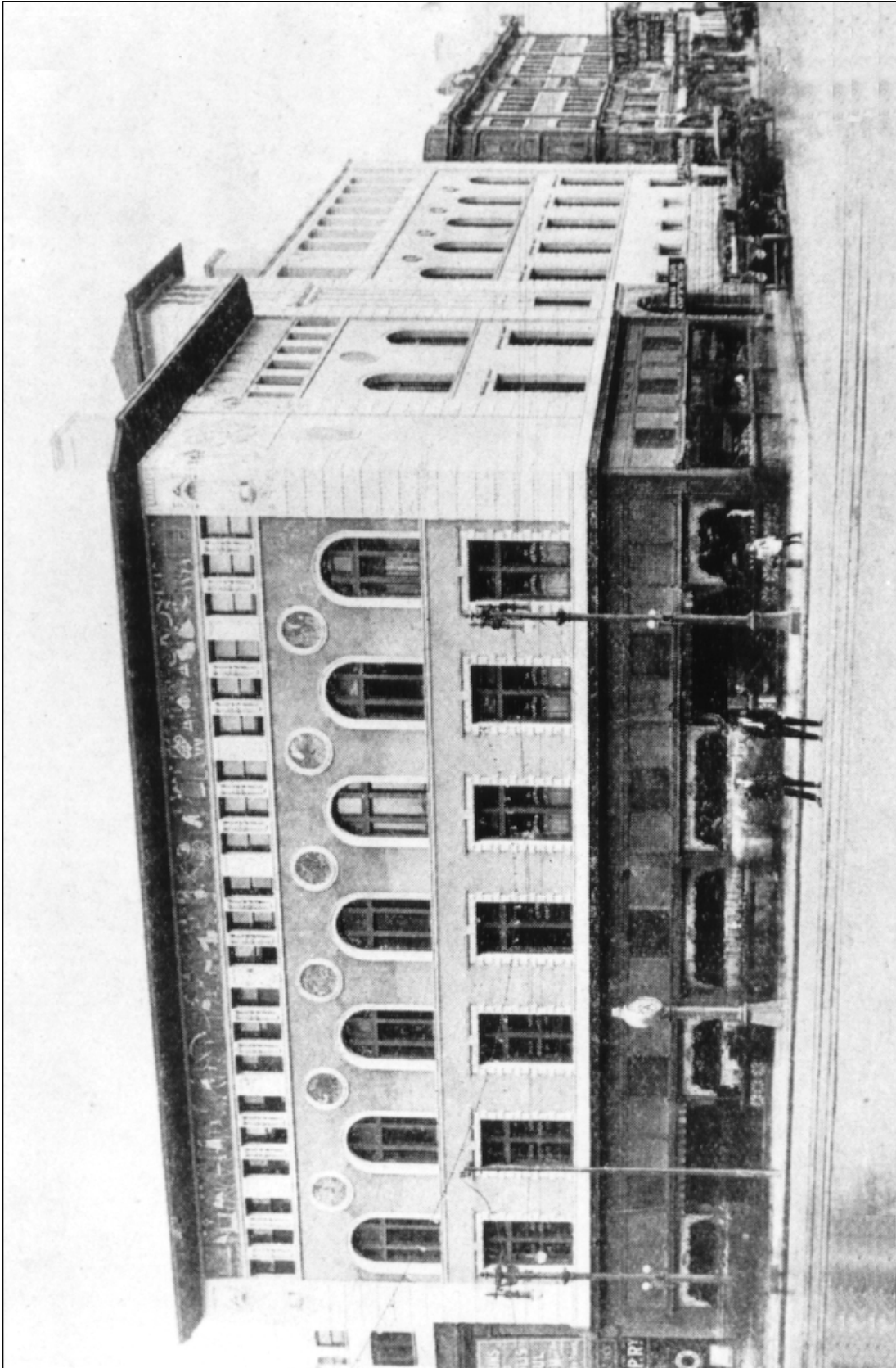


Plate 4 – Birks Building, ca.1920. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)