

283 PORTAGE AVENUE – STERLING BANK BUILDING
James Chisholm & Son, 1911



The Sterling Bank of Canada was incorporated in Toronto in 1905 and moved west, opening several branches, prior to World War I. Through merger, it became the Standard Bank in 1924 and part of the Canadian Bank of Commerce in late 1928.

The bank's entry onto the Winnipeg banking scene was significant – building this spectacular 8-storey banking hall and office tower on one of the City's busiest intersections in the heart of its commercial district.

The company chose to design their new headquarters in the latest style - the Chicago School – named for the American city in which the style evolved starting in the late 1890s. Using the new structural system of skeletal steel and reinforced concrete and an ornamental palette that could

include elements of Classical, Gothic, Romanesque, Renaissance, Sullivanesque or Art Nouveau architecture, architects were able to design the skyscrapers of the 20th century. The buildings were commonly divided visually into three distinct sections: the highly decorative ground floor often clad in stone or terra cotta; the plainer middle floors with windows placed in grid-like patterns; and the top floor often featuring extensive ornamentation including a heavy cornice to highlight the flat roof.

Winnipeg, because of its building boom of the pre-World War I era, has a number of excellent examples of the style including Union Tower, 504 Main Street (built 1904), the Boyd Building, 384 Portage Avenue (1912) and the Paris Building, 259 Portage Avenue (1915-1917).

The structure's construction is unique; the original building was completed for \$225,000 in 1911 but almost as soon as it was completed, a large addition was begun on its south end, adding three bays to the exterior and over 160 square metres of floor space on each level (at a total cost of \$70,000).

The building's two main façades, south facing Portage Avenue and east facing Smith Street, are similar: ornate grey-coloured terra cotta cladding on the main and mezzanine levels; upper floors with light brown brick laid with deep grooves and banks of windows in rectilinear openings connected on each floor by continuous terra cotta sills; and the top floor beginning with a terra cotta entablature with decorative shields, brick clad walls and an ornate entablature with oversized brackets and heavy overhanging cornice. This layout and the finishes wrap around the southwest corner and run a short distance along the west façade. The remainder of this side elevation features windows in rectilinear openings, painted signage and a window well. The rear (north) façade includes a metal fire escape. The building includes a flag pole.

Most of the original windows in the building have been replaced and extensive alteration has occurred on the ground floor.

The building's designer was the local firm James Chisholm and Son. The father, (1840-1920) finally settled in Winnipeg in 1900 after working in Winnipeg in the 1870s and 1880s and the United States in the 1890s. His son and youngest child, Colin Campbell Chisholm, was born in

Winnipeg in 1883 and officially joined his father's architectural firm ca.1906, became its active manager in 1910 and eventually took over the practice. He died in Winnipeg on September 5, 1936. Among the more well-known local works are: Young Methodist (United) Church, 222 Furby Street (1907, 1910) – Grade II (only tower left after fire); I.O.O.F. (Odd Fellows') Temple, 293 Kennedy Street (1910) – Grade III (façade only remains); Sterling Bank Building, 283 Portage Avenue (1910-1911); Granite Curling Club, 22 Granite Way (1912) – Grade III; and the Marlborough Hotel, 331 Smith Street (1913) – Grade II.

Contractors of the building were the well-known firm Carter-Halls-Aldinger Company, which built many large structures in Winnipeg and throughout Western Canada.

On the interior, the original layout included a main floor banking hall with large mezzanine, upper floor offices with marble- and granite-clad hallways with terrazzo flooring, and a two-bedroom suite on the roof with kitchen, pantry, living room and bathroom to provide 24-hour security – a common design feature of the time. An ornately designed iron, wood and marble stairs is located in the middle of the structure. Over the years, many significant alterations/upgrades have been completed on the interior.

Tenancy in the building has been varied over its 100+ years, the offices filled with doctors, dentists, lawyers, chartered accountants and insurance companies.

Elements of the building that would require approval if alterations were planned are:

Exterior-

- Eight-storey brick and terra cotta building with flat roof located at the northwest corner of Portage Avenue and Smith Street, its main façades facing south onto Portage Avenue and east onto Smith Street, its west façade partially hidden by the neighbouring building, and its north facing the back lane;
- The front (south) façade with terra cotta cladding on the main and mezzanine levels, terra cotta entablature, upper storeys with brick cladding with deep grooves, rectilinear window openings with terra cotta sills, a terra cotta entablature with decorative carved shields below the eighth floor windows and a roofline with entablature with oversized brackets and heavy overhanging cornice;
- The east façade with its continuation of the design/cladding of the front (south) façade;

- The west façade with its southern-most portion a continuation of the design/cladding of the front (south) façade, painted signage and window well; and
- The rear (north) façade with windows in rectilinear openings and metal fire escape.

Interior-

- Marble accenting, terrazzo floors and original millwork in hallways;
- Staircase; and
- Basement safe.