



**384 PORTAGE AVENUE**

**BOYD BUILDING**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

March 18, 1981

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This nine-storey steel frame office tower was erected in 1912 by William J. Boyd. Boyd was a prominent figure in Winnipeg life for nearly 60 years, having come to the city from Ontario in 1885. He was a businessman, labouring for many years in a small confectionery shop on Main Street. With the purchase first of W.H. Paulin Company (later Paulin-Chambers) and Bateman Bread, Boyd became one of Winnipeg's biggest supplier of break and baked goods. This large business was bought out in 1912 by the Canada Bread Company, giving Boyd the capital needed to build his office tower and to re-establish him in the confectionery business, this time as a manufacturer.<sup>1</sup> This new wholesale trade was established at the corner of Portage and Spence Streets.

Growing up in the yeasty atmosphere of Ottawa in the 1860s, Boyd became an ardent supporter of Sir John A. Macdonald and of the Conservative party. He worked for the party in every campaign and even ran for Parliament on the Tory ticket in one election. He was president of both the Conservative association of Winnipeg and of South Winnipeg. Boyd was one of the founders of the beautiful downtown parish of Holy Trinity, and was also one of the earliest members of the city's exclusive clubs.<sup>2</sup> Both he and his wife's name appeared in connection with several important movements in the city; for example, in 1911, Boyd attended a public meeting to address the issue of long-term planning for the city. At this meeting, J.S. Woodsworth described the issue as "one of the most important social movements ever started in the city."<sup>3</sup> Clearly, Boyd had an impact on several aspects of the city's early development and felt a commitment to its future.

When he planned the Boyd Building in 1911, it was a gamble because Edmonton Street was past the periphery of the business district, although by that time the pattern of development had clearly been established. Until the construction of the Hudson's Bay Company on Portage in 1925, the Boyd Building was the western gateway to the downtown. To viewers west of Edmonton Street, it showed a plain brick elevation while the north and east facades were clothed in handsome white terra cotta.

Boyd first took out a permit to build the office tower in 1911. It was planned to be seven storeys and

to cost \$230,000.<sup>4</sup> For reasons unknown, Boyd held the permit and did not begin construction until 1912, although this may have something to do with the sale of his company in that year. A second permit for an additional two storeys was issued in July 1912, which added another \$20,000 to the cost.<sup>5</sup> The architect for both the original seven and the subsequent nine floors was J.D. Atchison. The 1911 permit lists Kelly-Simpson Construction Co. as the contractors but the 1912 permit was to National Construction Company. This change may have occurred because the Kelly brothers were then immersed in the tendering (and doctoring) of services for the construction of the Legislative Buildings, which of course resulted in the infamous scandal of 1915.<sup>6</sup> Or the Kellys may have sub-contracted to National.

John D. Atchison was then one of the city's top architects. He was American-born, taking his training with the firm of Jenny and Mundie, a Chicago firm that had specialized in steel skyscrapers at a time when Chicago led the world in that form. The young Atchison had learned the modern methods of construction and was particularly concerned with the concept of 'fireproof' construction.<sup>7</sup> After working here on several projects, Atchison moved to Winnipeg in 1905 where he opened his own architectural firm. A versatile architect, Atchison designed many prominent Winnipeg buildings: the Great-West Life Building at 177 Lombard, the Devon Court, the Wardlaw Apartments, Manitoba School for the Deaf in Tuxedo, the Medical Arts Building, the first pavilion in City Park, the Winnipeg General Hospital, the Alexandra Block and many private homes.<sup>8</sup>

In the traditional mode established by Louis Sullivan, Atchison divided the Boyd Building into a base, the main body and a cornice that included the entire top floor. The entire facade is covered in terra cotta, a darker colour used in the base and between the windows, with a creamy white colour used on the piers and the cornice. The storefronts on the ground floor have undergone some serious alterations. The steel frame of the main building is treated in a restrained upward sweep, the only real detail being in the brown terra cotta that acts as a mullion between the vertical rows of windows. The cornice was given a rusticated style with horizontal layering of various details in a compressed Beaux Arts expression. The sum total of the components is a striking building of durable design.

The interior of the Boyd Building was finished with an eye to the budget, functional, practical and

rather plain. There is some marble wainscotting on the main floor and up the stairway, but the glamour ends there. Terrazzo floors were used throughout. What may have been elegant elevators are now enclosed and modernized. Many of the offices have been altered over the years because the building has always had a high percentage of public offices, whose tenants felt the need to modernize to the public's expectations.

There has been a definite pattern to the Boyd Building occupants that still holds true in 1981. By far, the greater portion of offices were and are held by dentists and physicians, many of whom were specialists. There have also been support services for the medical profession: labs, x-ray clinics, medical libraries and such offices as the Manitoba Medical Association. Generally, from 1913 to the present, the third to the ninth floors have predominantly contained doctors' offices, with occasional interruptions such as the Winnipeg Supply and Fuel Offices occupying the entire eighth floor from 1942 to 1960. The first floor with the store front space was rented to Hollinsworth Ladies' Wear from 1917 to 1972, but this company has now branched into four suburban stores, and Willson's Business Services have taken up the space. The second floor housed both Monarch and Metropolitan Life companies in the first three decades, and the Canada Department of Agriculture kept seventh floor offices in the 1930s. The offices of manufacturers' agents, dancing teachers, architects and real estate agents have come and gone as well as many organizations such as the Professional and Business Women's Club. Doctors and dentists still prevail.<sup>9</sup>

The Boyd Building has long been a prominent feature of the western portion of Winnipeg's business district. Its graceful sweeping lines remain a tribute to W.J. Boyd, the pioneer businessman and John D. Atchison, one of the city's most important architects.

Footnotes--

1. "William J. Boyd, Early Business Leader, Dies", Tribune, 12 May 1943.
2. Loc. cit.
3. "Movement for a Greater Winnipeg", Dominion, May, 1911, p. 83. Mrs. Boyd, as president of the Service League, was active in several charitable endeavours in the city was best known for her role in establishing a milk depot on Logan Avenue that supplied free milk to the children and infants of poor families. "Mrs. W.J. Boyd, Charity Worker, Pioneer Dies", Free Press, 18 December 1925.
4. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 2173, 24 August 1911. Frontage 88'4", depth 130', height 101'.
5. Ibid., No. 2565, 9 July 1912.
6. W.L. Morton, Manitoba: A History, University of Toronto Press, 1957, p. 341.
7. Winnipeg Telegram, 18 September 1906, p. 51.
8. Jill Wade, Manitoba Architecture to 1840, University of Manitoba Press, 1976, p. 81.
9. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg, 1912-1980.

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Plate 1 – Boyd Building, 384 Portage Avenue, 1970. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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Plate 2 – Portage Avenue, ca.1912. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 3 – Portage Avenue, ca.1915. For many years, the Boyd Building was the western border of the commercial district. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 4 – When the foundations of the Hudson's Bay Company store were dug in 1925, the Boyd Building was very prominent for traffic coming eastward into the city centre. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Thomas Burns Collection #152.)



Plate 5 – An Eaton's delivery wagon and horse were struck by a streetcar, 1916. The Boyd Building is on the right in the background. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2563.)



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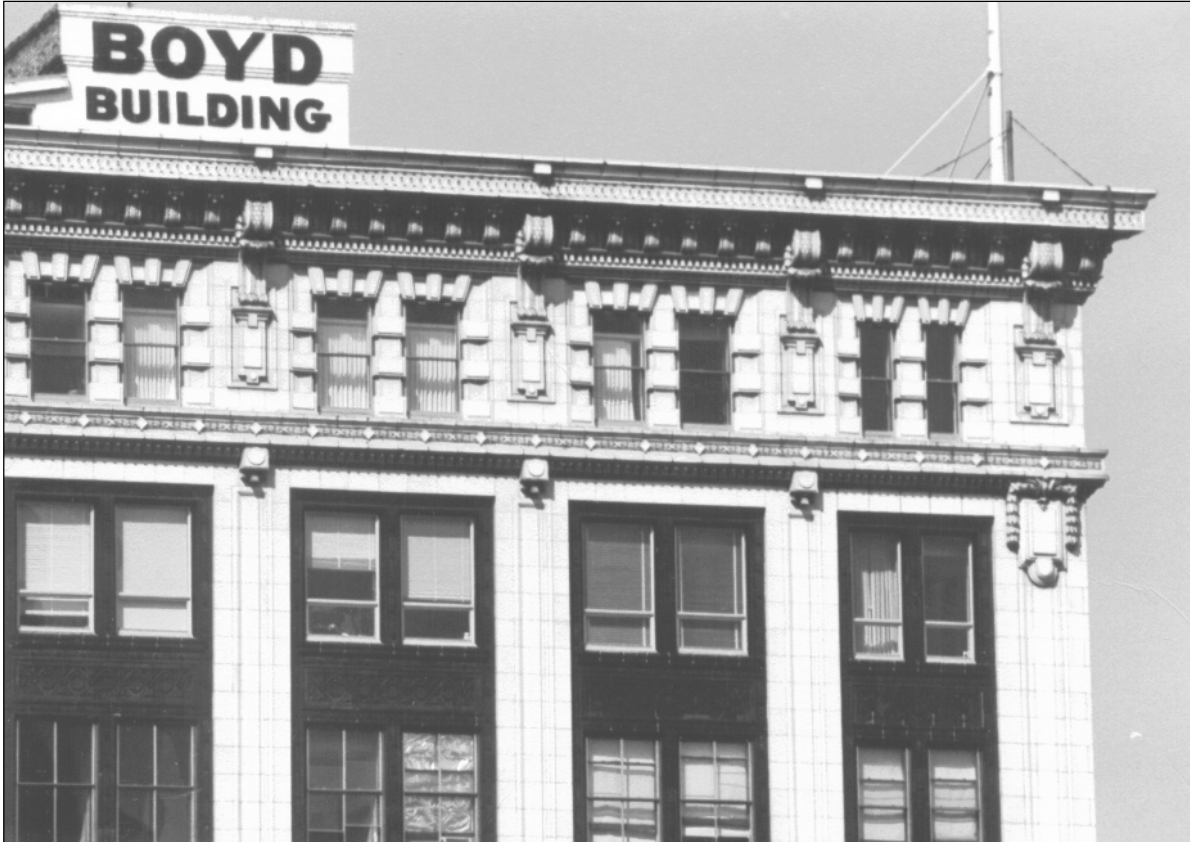


Plate 6 – Details of the cornice, no date. (City of Winnipeg Planning Department.)