

**315 PORTAGE AVENUE**

**FORMER MITCHELL-COPP BUILDING  
AND  
FORMER CANADIAN BANK OF COMMERCE  
BUILDING**

City of Winnipeg  
Historical Buildings Committee

December 1990

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### **FORMER MITCHELL-COPP BUILDING AND FORMER CANADIAN BANK OF COMMERCE BUILDING**

Two early twentieth century decisions resulted in the relocation of Winnipeg's retail district from its historic Main and Portage locale. The erection of the new Post Office and Eaton's Department Store increased Portage Avenue pedestrian traffic and forced retailers to acquire new premises. By 1906, Portage had emerged the city's shopping district and by 1914, many large edifices had been erected.

The [1904] announcement of a Portage and Garry Post Office site sparked the movement of retail outlets to this thoroughfare. At first, the decision was greeted with skepticism and anger. One newspaper [The Winnipeg Morning Telegram, March 29, 1904] labelled the decision "a political land deal and without doubt cut and dried long ago." Merchants and wholesalers objected to the building's distance from Winnipeg's recognized business core. Nevertheless, the government's decision had far-reaching consequences.

Soon thereafter, Eaton's purchased its construction site, and the press prophetically predicted that Portage would be lined with stores. Timothy Eaton's retail outlet was an instant success. In 1906, one year after opening, Eaton's announced an addition. In 1907, the structure was extended again. By 1910, the department store boasted eight storeys and attracted huge crowds of Winnipeggers to its confines.

Adjacent land values soared as entrepreneurs erected nearby business blocks to lure Portage Avenue pedestrians. In 1906, excavations for the six storey Somerset Building commenced. By 1910, Henry Birks had begun operations at Portage and Smith, while west of Eaton's, the Enderton Block profited from corporate lease-holders. Portage Avenue had come of age.

At first, Canada's chartered banks paid scant attention to shoppers. The tiny Molson's Bank operated

rented premises while the Bank of Commerce possessed equally unpretentious offices. The Sterling Bank opened sizeable quarters in 1914, but their attractiveness to shoppers remains unknown. In 1920 the Bank of Commerce finally opened monumental facilities and met an acute consumer demand.<sup>1</sup>

## **STYLE**

The bank's new premises were established through structural and architectural changes that transformed a once simplistic, mixed-use block into a monumental, Neo-classical or Classical Revival building. This style rose to prominence during the early 1900s as the favoured option for large public buildings in North America. As a subdued version of France's Beaux-Arts movement, the style emphasized the study and use of Greek and Roman designs, symmetrical composition and the creation of grandiose structures. While containing many of the same ornamental features as Beaux-Arts buildings, Classical Revival structures were usually smaller and more modestly ornamented.<sup>2</sup> Common exterior features included massive stone foundations supporting smooth or polished stone columns, pedimented porticoes and colossal pilasters. Complete entablatures often graced the upper levels of these buildings. Because the style relied primarily on Greek examples, use of the arch and enriched mouldings was rare.<sup>3</sup>

## **CONSTRUCTION**

This structure originally was built in 1906 as the Kennedy Block (after owner C.W.N. Kennedy), a three-storey brick retail and office building with four shops at grade (the block was also called the Affleck Building after its conversion to a bank). The structure was built to hold the weight of extra storeys that the owner felt would become necessary in the future.<sup>4</sup> Resting on a 66 cm. (26') stone foundation, the building required 85 cords of stone, 340,000 bricks, 3,700 superficial square yards of plaster, and 81.3 cubic meters (320 cubic yards) of concrete.<sup>5</sup>

Constructed by the William Grace Company at a cost of \$65,000, the building provided over 15,000

cubic meters (534,528 cubic feet) of interior space, measuring 26.5 x 39.0 x 14.6 m. (87x128x48').<sup>6</sup>

With conversion of a portion of the block to a bank in 1919, a new Tyndall stone façade was added as well as other structural and ornamental features. To provide increased light, a steel-trussed, double-pitched roof allowed for skylights. The refurbished interior included accents of burlap, marble and oak.<sup>7</sup> These alterations cost \$55,000 and were carried out by the local firm of Carter, Halls, Aldinger Company.<sup>8</sup>

This solid brick building stands on the north side of Portage Avenue between Donald and Hargrave streets: 1 St. John, Plan 129, Block 3, east part of lot 423.<sup>9</sup>

## DESIGN

As originally designed, the Kennedy Block housed four retail ventures on the ground floor and office space on the upper two levels. Shop ceilings rose to a height of nearly 5 m. (16'3"), while the second and third floors had ceiling heights of 4.0 m. (13.3') and 3.4 m. (11'3"), respectively.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, some drastic changes occurred in 1919 to create the newest branch of the Canadian Bank of Commerce. The bank itself measured 10.5 x 39.0 x 17.1 (34.5x128x56'),<sup>11</sup> thus occupying only a small portion of the original 1906 structure (see Plate 1). To connect the new side wall to the remainder of the Kennedy Block, the architect placed brick corbel and wood beams to carry the joists of the existing building.<sup>12</sup> Exterior changes were the most dramatic, transforming this section of the block from a sombre, refined office building into a monumental structure with massive columns and an impressive roof line.

Bearing a close resemblance to the bank's Main Street headquarters, the new Portage Avenue branch displayed a rusticated Tyndall stone base leading to two massive fluted Doric columns rising almost 9 m. (29'3")<sup>13</sup> and capped by a complete entablature and highly ornamented pediment. The columns enclosed a recessed area that included the main entrance and a round-headed window. The entrance

was flanked by two small, steel-framed windows, two unfluted Doric columns and a complete entablature.

## **INTERIOR**

Little is known about the interior finish of the Kennedy or Affleck Building, but upon conversion it became well-known as yet another richly furnished, comfortable and luxurious banking hall in Winnipeg. As with many other buildings in the city, the side walls did not run perpendicularly from the front façade, but, rather, at the angle of the lot on which the block sat. This was obviously of some concern to the architect and his clients at the bank, as an ingenious entrance and interior were designed to mask this fact. The centrally located entrance opened into a small corridor that led customers to their right and into a circular, oak-panelled vestibule. Being circular, the vestibule was used, in concert with the side walls, to give the illusion of perpendicularity. These side walls were actually separate elements, the inner wall being almost a meter from the outer wall at one end of the hall and touching at the other.<sup>14</sup> At the rear, a 43.2 cm. (17") brick fire wall separated the bank from storage space in the original Kennedy Building.<sup>15</sup>

The front section of the first floor was opened to create the high ceilings that had become the norm for banks, in this case rising to a maximum height of 12.2 m. (40'). Elsewhere, ceilings remained at their original heights.<sup>16</sup> To light the new banking hall, the architect employed the large Portage Avenue window and a semi-circular, barrel-coffered ceiling. Ornamental features included marble floors, oak counters, burlapped walls, and ornamental ceiling beams.<sup>17</sup>

In 1969, the new owners of the building, Mitchell-Copp Jewellers, converted the structure back into retail space. The banking hall floor was covered with indoor-outdoor carpeting, the revolving door was replaced by a plate-glass opening and, most significantly, a new 3.7 m. (12') acoustic tile ceiling was hung.<sup>18</sup>

## **INTEGRITY**

The building is in good structural condition and occupies its original site. The exterior has remained relatively unscathed since conversion to a bank in 1919, even with changes in ownership and use of the structure. The only other major Building Permit issued against the bank was for \$40,000 and entailed a rear addition for administrative offices and the removal of some interior partitioning.<sup>19</sup>

## **STREETSCAPE**

The old Bank of Commerce branch is not out of place on Portage Avenue, surrounded as it is by large department stores and office buildings. It is a contributor to the historical make-up of the area.

## **ARCHITECT**

The 1906 architect was Winnipeg's John D. Atchison. Toronto architect Victor Daniel Horsburgh (1866-1947), the supervisor of the architectural division of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, was responsible for the present exterior organization of the building. This is the first Horsburgh design brought before the Historical Buildings Committee (see Appendix I for complete biography).

## **INSTITUTION**

The original Kennedy Block (its name was changed to the Affleck Block ca.1937) was numbered 315-321 Portage Avenue. Its upper floors became the business address for a variety of small real estate, broker and financial development firms. The first floor contained shoe stores, tailors and a confectionery in its nearly 70 years of existence.<sup>20</sup> The building's original owner was Charles William Nassau Kennedy (1865-1920), son of Colonel W.N. Kennedy (twice mayor) and a major organizer of real estate and finance companies.<sup>21</sup>

The bank purchased the eastern section of the Kennedy Block in 1919 prior to its conversion to the bank, and became the sole occupants of the altered area for 40 years.<sup>22</sup>

Several fires damaged the block; the last fire on August 29, 1973 caused an estimated \$500,000 damage to the structure. The top two floors were totally destroyed, leaving a single-storey retail building that is presently numbered #319-321 Portage Avenue.<sup>23</sup>

The Canadian Bank of Commerce was initially incorporated as a chartered bank in Toronto in 1858. It was known as The Bank of Canada until 1867 when it became the Bank of Commerce. In 1961, it was renamed the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce following a merger with the Imperial Bank of Canada.<sup>24</sup> The institution came to Winnipeg in 1893. Building its reputation and assets in western Canada mainly through the financing of the grain economy, the bank grew to manage nine Winnipeg branches, 73 outlets west of Manitoba, 151 throughout Canada, and additional branches in England, Alaska and the continental United States by 1906.<sup>25</sup> The bank had deposits of \$79,524,000, loans of \$81,015,000 and paid-up capital of \$10,000,000 by June 30, 1906.<sup>26</sup>

The Bank of Commerce remained as the sole tenant of this Portage Avenue address until 1959 when the building became vacant. Ten years later, the jewellery company Mitchell-Copp Limited took over the building, converting it back into retail space. This lasted until ca.1981 when the company moved to space in the Eaton Place shopping centre. Vacant until ca.1985, the building became home to Comic World for two years. It has been empty since ca.1988.<sup>27</sup>

## **EVENT**

There is no known significant event connected with this building.

## **CONTEXT**

As originally built, the Kennedy Block is illustrative of the development of Portage Avenue into a retail and office centre in Winnipeg. This block would have been one of the earlier examples of a small-scale venture attempting to cash-in on the forecasted prosperity of the area.

The 1919 alterations into a banking hall can be placed in the context of the growing importance of consumer banking. No longer could Canada's banks rely solely on commercial accounts; therefore suburban branches and, as in this case, branches in retail districts, became the norm. For the Canadian Bank of Commerce, altering an existing building succeeded in saving the money on building a new structure, while still placing the branch in one of the city's prime business locations.

## **LANDMARK**

This building occupies an extremely busy location and due to the massiveness of its architecture, it tends to be even more conspicuous than its neighbouring buildings. Although many would not know it as a Bank of Commerce branch, all are familiar with the names Mitchell-Copp and Comic World, which have since been connected with it.



**FOOTNOTES-**

1. The entire introduction was taken from D. Spector, "Suburban and Downtown Bank Architecture and Banking in Winnipeg" (Winnipeg-1980), pp. 151-152.
2. J.C. Poppeliers, et. al., What Style Is It? (Washington, D.C.-1983), pp. 67-71.
3. J.J-G. Blumenson, Identifying American Architecture (Nashville-1981), p. 69.
4. Manitoba Free Press, December 6, 1906, p. 38.
5. City of Winnipeg Building Permit #1984/1906. Below as BP.
6. Ibid.
7. City of Winnipeg Assessment Record #523200 (old number 9403), Ward 2, PC 43 (below as AR) and D. Spector, op. cit., pp. 151-152.
8. B.P. #1127/1919.
9. AR.
10. BP #1984/1906.
11. AR.
12. City of Winnipeg, Architectural Plans #1127/1919 (below as Plans).
13. Plans #1841/1927.
14. Construction, Volume XIV, No. 1 (Jan. 1921), p. 21.
15. Plans #1127/1919.
16. AR.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. BP #1841/1927.
20. Henderson's Directory, 1907-1975.

21. The Manitoba Free Press, May 7, 1920, p. 3.
22. City of Winnipeg, Assessment Roll, 1 St. John, Plan 129, Block 3, East part of Lot 423.
23. The Winnipeg Free Press, August 30, 1973, pp. 1, 4.
24. The Canadian Encyclopedia, J.H. March, editor-in-chief (Edmonton-1985), p. 274.
25. The Winnipeg Telegram, Sept. 18, 1906, p. 40.
26. Ibid.
27. Henderson's Directory, 1969-present.

## APPENDIX I

### Victor Daniel Horsburgh-

V.D. Horsburg was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1866, the son of a well-known Edinburgh artist. After receiving his professional training in that city, he went on to practice his trade with many of the most prominent architectural firms in both Edinburgh and London, including Sir Rowand Anderson.

In 1907 he won the Silver Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects and three years later, while engaged in a private practice back in Edinburgh, was appointed the Supervisory Architect for the Dominion Realty Company Limited. This company was the property-holding subsidiary of the Canadian Bank of Commerce and Horsburgh immediately moved to Toronto to begin what would be 23 continuous years in the position.

During his time with the bank, Horsburgh designed many bank structures across the country. After his retirement from the Bank of Commerce, he served on a Committee organized to revise Toronto Building By-laws prior to World War II. He died in Victoria, B.C. in 1947.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Vol. 24, No. 12 (December 1947), p. 447.

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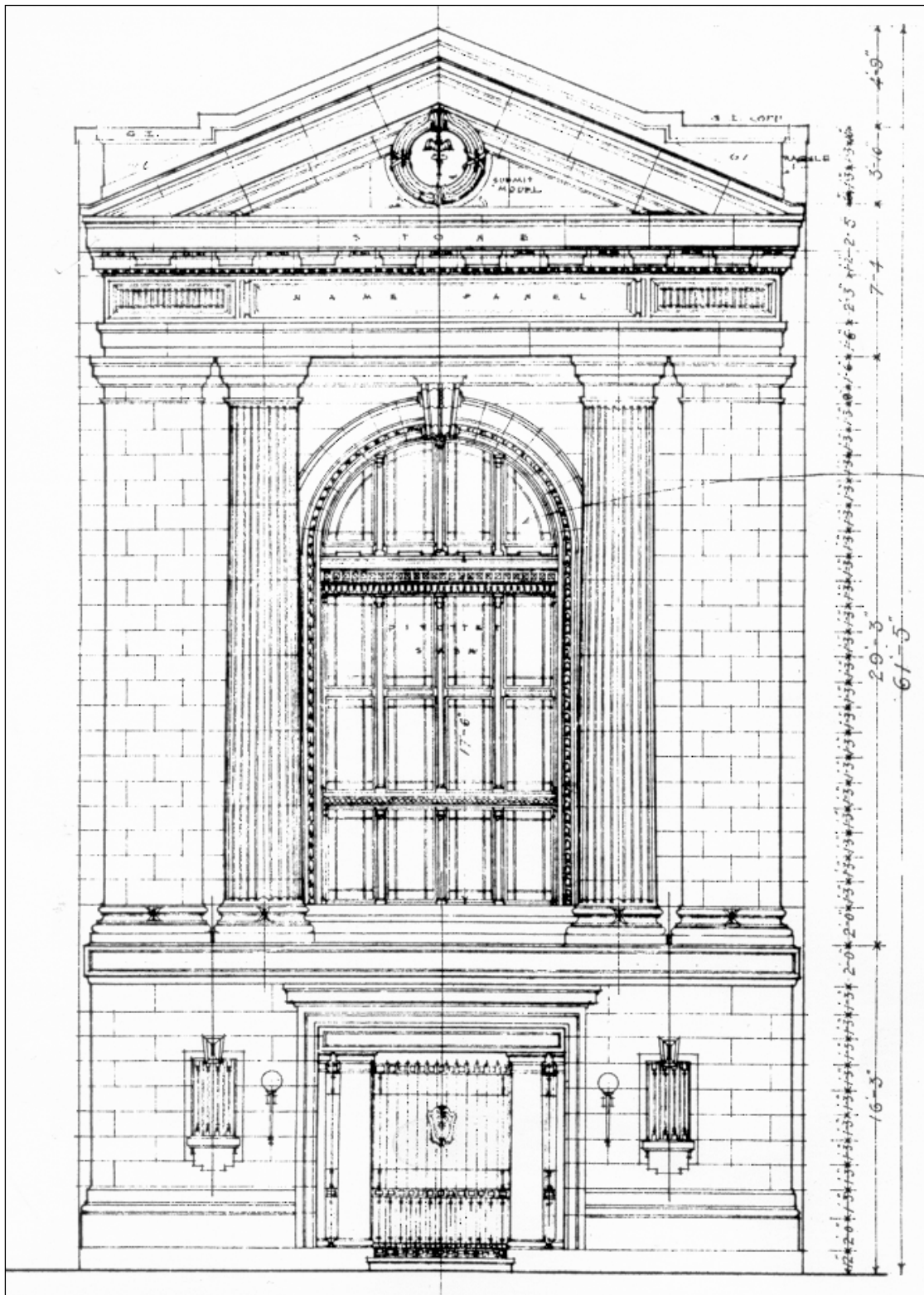


Plate 1 – Architect’s plans, Portage Avenue façade. (City of Winnipeg Archives.)

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Plate 2 – Portage Avenue looking east, ca.1928, Canadian Bank of Commerce Building at arrow.  
(Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)