

233 PORTAGE AVENUE – CURRY BUILDING
J.D. Atchison, 1915



The ornate Curry Building was among several substantial structures erected during the first two decades of the twentieth century to transform Portage Avenue into Winnipeg's second major commercial thoroughfare.

Prior to then, most businesses had located along Main Street, especially between present-day Graham and Market avenues. In 1880, Charles J. Brydges, a land commissioner with the Hudson's Bay Company, predicted that Portage Avenue also would become a principal business street. His forecast was somewhat premature. While a few notable projects were undertaken in the 1880s, it was the turn of the century before the avenue's full promise began to be realized.

The Toronto-based T. Eaton Company's decision to build a large department store (1904-05) on South Portage between Donald and Hargrave streets provided a key spark. It drew investment

west from the Portage and Main intersection and it ensured Portage would replace Main as the city's premier retail district.

Several local figures also were influential in the avenue's transition, including City Comptroller Duncan Steele Curry (1852-1925). He had come to Winnipeg from his native Nova Scotia in 1874 with the second detachment of the North-West Mounted Police. He later was a surveyor, then in 1884 became the city's auditor. Over time, he also amassed a substantial real estate portfolio which appreciated greatly in value after 1900.

His holdings included the Spencer Block built in 1880-81 on North Portage between Notre Dame Avenue and Garry Street. By 1915, this complex had deteriorated. But so too had the city's economic prospects. Recession and world war forced some developers to cancel projects. Curry, in contrast, proceeded with replacement of the Spencer Block, but on a scaled-down basis. He had only two storeys built even though the facility's reinforced concrete foundation could carry eight.

The Curry Building has a steel frame, hollow tile interior partitions, brick exterior walls, and flat roof broken by a section intended to accommodate a future light well. Terracotta covers the Portage, Notre Dame and Garry façades. Its beige tint is accented by flecks of black and grey to convey a granite-like appearance. Ornamentation is in the Modern Gothic style of architecture (also known as Late Gothic Revival) and includes extensive use of tracery and floral patterns, an elaborate parapet with finials and trefoil openings, and an arched main entrance.

The three finished facings are divided into wide bays that hold large retail show windows at ground level and paired office openings along the second floor. The bays are separated by delicate columns that extend up to carved capitals and second-storey arches outlined by relief terracotta vines. The columns themselves are adorned with double-twisted ribbons and alternating plain and floral patterns. Unifoil tracery highlights the spandrels between the first- and second-storey windows. Floral details mark the main entrance. Above is a panel inscribed with the building's name and date.

Curry's project was designed by John Delaney Atchison (1870-1959) and built by the John Sutherland Construction Co. Atchison was one of Winnipeg's most active commercial architects in the 1905-20 period. A native of Illinois, he was a practitioner of the Chicago School of steel skyscraper construction. He also was noted for his fine terracotta finishes. In addition to his work for Curry, Atchison planned the Boyd Building and at least four other major projects on Portage. He also was responsible for the Canada Permanent and North-West Commercial Travellers' Association buildings on Garry — and for several banks and office blocks on Main. He left Winnipeg in 1923 to practice in Pasadena, California.

Curry also went to California (San Diego) after retiring from municipal service in 1907. His family continued to own the Curry Building until 1969. Title then passed to various corporate interests. Substantial renovations were undertaken in the mid-1970s. The exterior was sandblasted, inset store entrances were converted to flush fronts with modern glass and metal fittings, double-hung second-storey windows were replaced by sealed units, the interior was redone, and wiring, plumbing and other systems were updated.