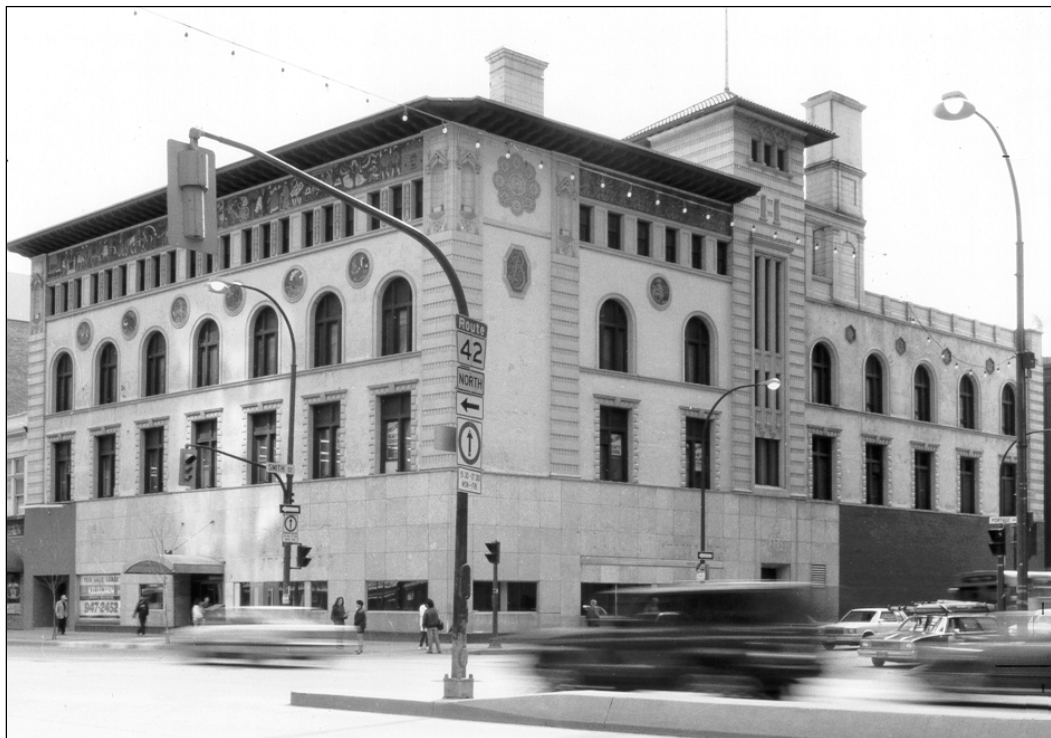


**276 PORTAGE AVENUE – YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION BUILDING  
(BIRKS BUILDING)**

*George Brown, 1900; J.D. Atchison, 1910; Percy E. Nobbs, Montreal, 1914*



Such was the pace of change at the turn of the century that in less than a decade after its construction this four-storey, solid brick building out-lived its usefulness as Winnipeg's first 'permanent' facility for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA).

However, the best was yet to come. Henry Birks and Sons, a jeweller, was anxious to relocate from Main Street to larger premises in the growing Portage Avenue retail district. The YMCA Building at the southeast corner of Portage and Smith Street offered that opportunity. Birks moved into the premises in 1909 and soon had the structure transformed architecturally and functionally into one of the city's most exclusive shops.

The YMCA, organized in England in 1844 as an educational, recreational and social agency with evangelical roots, set up a Winnipeg branch in 1879 in rented space on Main. It obtained the

Portage property in 1890, but devoted several years to planning and fund-raising before opening one of the best outfitted YMCAs in Canada in early 1901. The building was designed by George Browne and constructed by J.A. Girvin and P. Burnett at a cost of \$68,500 with another \$20,000 for land and furnishings.

Browne was borne in Montreal and worked briefly with his architect-father and namesake before joining Russell Sturgis, one of New York City's leading designers. Browne subsequently spent more than three years in Europe, including a stint at the South Kensington School of Art. By 1879, he was homesteading in Manitoba's Tiger Hills area, but later moved to Winnipeg where he resumed his architectural career.

His symmetrically designed YMCA Building featured elements of the Romanesque style, particularly its round-headed entrance and window arches and rusticated stone accents. The Portage facade was dominated by a central tower containing the main doorway, a two-storey bay window, and a Palladian-style opening on the fourth floor. The entire elevation was divided horizontally into three parts — rental space with large display windows at ground level; single rectangular and round-headed openings with rusticated keystones set between two-storey pilasters on the second and third floors, respectively; followed by a dentilled cornice, continuous trios of small rectangular openings along the fourth storey, and a second plain cornice and parapet. The Smith facade, including a rear, three-storey portion of the building, was similarly designed and had a second, smaller tower.

The interior held YMCA offices, a public reading room, a 150-seat lecture hall and 600-seat auditorium, a library, meeting and classrooms, boys' quarters (with reading room and parlour), a number of furnished bedrooms throughout the upper levels, and 29 dormitories on the fourth floor. The gymnasium with padded running track and various equipment was in the lower rear section, along with Winnipeg's first indoor pool (or 'plunge bath') and two bowling alleys.

The new YMCA was so popular that there soon was pressure to secure larger premises. Operating expenses for the building also encouraged the association to consider another downtown location. In 1903, an artesian well was dug and a basement lighting plant installed to alleviate some costs, but

the YMCA could do little about escalating property taxes on Portage frontage. After more planning and fund-raising, a site was purchased in 1909 on Vaughan Street, just north of Portage. Construction followed in 1911-12.

Part of the capital for the new project came from the sale of the Portage building to Birks for \$290,000 in 1912. Henry Birks established this firm in Montreal in 1879, following a long family tradition in silver work. Three sons also became involved and eventually spearheaded the company's expansion to Ottawa (1901), Winnipeg (1903) and other Canadian cities.

After Birks became an occupant of the YMCA Building, it hired architects J.D. Atchison in 1910 and Percy Erskine Nobbs of Nobbs and Hyde of Montreal in 1914 to convert the facility into a delicate, yet ornately rich show-piece with Italian Renaissance elements.

Some \$90,000 worth of alterations were undertaken, including installation of a rear mezzanine; various other interior changes; and the addition of solid bronze and terra-cotta fronts on Portage and Smith highlighted by elaborately designed medallions and a detailed frieze depicting a meeting between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

On the Portage facade, the pilasters, cornices and tower with its bay windows were removed. Openings were made uniform with continuous terra-cotta sills. There are seven rectangular windows set in frames of raised quoins and projecting heads along the second storey, while several round-headed, third-floor openings are enclosed by drip moulding. Above are six coloured terra-cotta medallions depicting the sources of materials used by jewellers (e.g., an elephant for ivory and a man diving for pearls). The fourth floor is lit by seven groups of small rectangular openings arranged in triplets; each trio is outlined by moulded columns. Overhead is the striking frieze mosaic and heavy wooden eaves with decorative brackets.

The coloured frieze was designed in half-size by Nobbs and Professor Ramsay Traquair of McGill University, then photographed and enlarged to scale. It portrays King Solomon in the company of three wise men and guards presenting a pearl necklace to the Queen of Sheba upon her arrival at

Jerusalem. Their entourages are shown in various stages of ceremony and celebration. A ship rests in the Harbour of Tyre, while the King of Tyre and his customs officials take toll.

The frieze wraps around to the Smith Street facade where it contains simple fruit and floral designs. This facing's northern end features a seventh medallion, along with the Birks symbol, date (1914) and a terracotta design at the fourth-floor level. The tower was retained on this elevation; it holds a side entrance and mix of narrow vertical, rectangular and round-headed windows.

The inspiration for the changes, Percy Nobbs (1875-1964), was born in Scotland, but spent much of his childhood in St. Petersburg, Russia. After studies at Edinburgh University, he became a pupil of the Scottish architect Robert Lorimer, a leading advocate of the arts and crafts movement. Nobbs subsequently travelled in Italy, then worked for various architectural firms in London before emigrating to Montreal at age 28 to teach at McGill University. He coupled this with private practice, forming a partnership in 1909 with George Taylor Hyde which lasted until the latter's death in 1944. Their firm was well-known for its residential designs, work for McGill University and Birks, various schools and religious buildings in Montreal, and a master plan for the University of Alberta. Nobbs also was an Olympic medallist (foils, 1908) active in professional associations, and an author.

Major changes again were made to the Birks Building in 1928, 1951-52, the late 1960s and mid-1970s. The 1951 work included installation of a granite base and Tyndall stone facings around solid bronze show windows on the ground floor. Corner columns and vestibule walls were lined with Travertine marble. Over the years, various interior changes were made to provide storage space, opulent showrooms, offices and work areas for the jeweller. However, the fourth-floor dormitories remain largely intact from the YMCA era. Birks continued in this building until the latter 1980s when it became a key tenant in Portage Place.