

291 GARRY STREET – INGLIS (NWCTA) BUILDING

A.F. Thomas, 1908; J.D. Atchison, 1908, 1916; Ross and Macdonald (Montréal), 1914



Winnipeg's development boom of the early 1900s transformed downtown Portage Avenue into a bustling commercial centre. Few properties on or near the thoroughfare remained unaffected by the demand for new business premises.

Such was the case at 291 Garry Street where a two-storey house had stood since the 1870s. By 1908, the site was adjacent to a hotbed of redevelopment. Nearby on the south side of Portage between Garry and Fort streets were the new Free Press (1904) and Post Office (1905-06) buildings. The Bank of Nova Scotia (1908-10) was under construction at the southwest corner of Portage and Garry, soon to be joined by the Canada Permanent Mortgage Co. (1909) at 298 Garry.

To capitalize on this context, owner A.F. Thomas began in late summer 1908 to erect a one-storey café at 291 Garry. By December, he was adding 16 feet (4.9 metres) to the rear of his structure, plus an upper storey. The completed building, which measured 25.5 x 81 feet (7.8 x 24.7 metres), cost \$10,000. It was of solid brick construction with concrete footings and a stone foundation. Its design was a modest example of Neo-classical architecture.

Contractor J. McLeod directed construction. Plans for the first phase were attributed to Thomas, a tailor by trade. The addition and extra storey were designed by John Danley Atchison (1870-1959), an American architect who practised locally from 1905 until the early 1920s. His projects included the Canada Permanent, Maltese Cross, Great-West Life, Boyd, Union Trust, Carlton, Curry, Bank of Hamilton, and Medical Arts buildings in downtown Winnipeg, and the Manitoba School for the Deaf and Red Cross Lodge in Tuxedo.

D. Hislop's Angelus Café was the original tenant at 291 Garry. The Macey Office Equipment Co. followed in 1911. Three years later, the R.J. Inglis Co., civil and military tailors, took over the property, converting it through \$10,000 in renovations into a higher-class holding.

The most striking change involved the installation of a Chicago School front (west) façade executed in white terra cotta with large windows and a metal marquee over the centre entrance. Intricately moulded terra cotta flowers, fruits, and vegetables extended up the end pilasters and across the top of the second-floor windows. Terra cotta details also framed the building's nameplate. Six lion heads highlighted the cornice, while an elaborate shield and urns adorned the parapet. The recessed entrance was flanked by two-storey fluted columns with ornate capitals. Decorative panels divided the first and second storeys. The main-floor interior accommodated a showroom (complete with wood panelling and large fireplace), fitting rooms, offices, and workroom. The open second storey also contained workspace.

The 1914 renovations were done by day labour supervised by architect Herbert B. Rugh, the local representative of Ross and Macdonald of Montréal.

George Allen Ross (1879-1946) and Robert Henry Macdonald (1875-1942) formed their partnership in 1913 to carry on a practice begun by Ross and D.H. MacFarlane in 1905. The original firm gained prominence through its work in Montréal, as well as projects such as the Château Laurier (1908-12) in Ottawa and Fort Garry Hotel (1911-13) in Winnipeg. Ross and Macdonald similarly maintained a national profile through commissions such as department stores for the T. Eaton Co., the Hotel Saskatchewan (1926-27) in Regina, and Maple Leaf Gardens (1931) in Toronto. They also contributed with other designers to Halifax's Hydrostone housing development (1918-20) and Toronto's Union Station (1919-27) and Royal York Hotel (1927-29).

Ross was a native of Montréal who studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, and École des Beaux Arts, Paris. He worked in Boston and New York City before returning to Montréal. Macdonald, an Australian, came to Canada in the mid-1890s and spent a period with architect Robert Findlay of Montréal. He later joined Ross and MacFarlane after travelling and working in Europe, New Zealand, and the United States from 1900 to 1907.

In 1916, the Inglis Co. built a 40-foot (12.2-metre) brick rear addition (two storeys plus mezzanine floors) at 291 Garry. Atchison designed the \$6,000 project. The contractors were Hazelton and Walin.

After the Inglis Co. left the site in 1924, the building was vacant for several years before the Army and Navy Veterans in Canada rented the space. In 1945, the North West Commercial Travellers' Association (NWCTA), a national organization formed in Winnipeg in 1882 to represent travelling salesmen, purchased the property. The interior was converted into offices and a meeting hall. Subsequent main-floor tenants included the Monarch Life Assurance Co., Fidelity Trust, and A & M Furniture Rental & Sales Ltd.

Over the years, the building's interior, along with its windows and entrance, have been remodelled. As well, some terra cotta details have been displaced by the addition of an inscription below the nameplate that commemorates the NWCTA. Nonetheless, surviving elements of the 1914 façade retain their elegance.