



**181 HIGGINS AVENUE**  
**CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY STATION**

Historical Buildings Committee

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Churning through the multitude of histories of the CPR leaves the reader with one overwhelming impression: the CPR was the single most important institution in the development of the Canadian west. It isn't necessary to repeat the story except as it applies to Winnipeg. When the railway came through Manitoba in 1882, it signified partial fulfilment of the Macdonald government's National Policy. This was a comprehensive plan for the development of Canada that targeted three main areas, namely a tariff wall to protect Canadian industry, a national railway to link all parts of the country and people to settle the great open west.<sup>1</sup> Despite a chronic lack of funds and an administration rocked by scandal, the CPR was finished, and the tariff has, for better or for worse, been a factor in Canadian history until the present. It remained for the Laurier government, through the instrument of Clifford Sifton, to fulfil the nation's need for people.

The CPR and Sifton's immigration policy went hand in glove, and the two needed each other in true symbiotic fashion. To meet the demand of ever-increasing traffic, rail facilities in Winnipeg had grown in a haphazard fashion with no real planning.<sup>2</sup> Colonists came by ship to the ports in the east, coming west on "colonist cars" that were little better than cattle cars.<sup>3</sup> All the rail traffic funnelled through Winnipeg and it was here that the immigrants were 'processed'. The original CPR station lasted only until 1886 when it burned down; the replacement station was, by 1900, an eyesore -- small, dingy and quite inadequate as a gateway to the west.

In 1900, Canadian Pacific Railway announced a complete restructuring and renovation of the Winnipeg yards and shops, and a large new station complex with a luxury hotel attached. North Main Street in the vicinity of the new station was cluttered with innumerable shacks and shanties, the demolition of which gladdened the heart of at least one local architect.<sup>4</sup> The shops and roundhouses were relocated west of the downtown to Weston, while 120 miles of track were laid in the centre of the city in what was heralded as "the longest railway yards in the world." An overpass, the latest in reinforced concrete technology, bridged Main Street thereby penetrating the worst

schism in Winnipeg traffic flow and permitting free and safe passage between the north and south ends of the city.

On 13 June, 1904, construction commenced on the new depot while the old one continued in use. Although there were many delays, the new station and office wing opened officially in May 1905. The old station was demolished in April, apparently to the great relief of many citizens.<sup>5</sup>

Concurrent with the construction of the station, plans were announced by the federal government for a new Immigration Hall, to be located immediately west of the old hall. Both of these were located north of Higgins across the tracks. The new hall was to be 60 feet by 200 feet and four storeys high. Built of 'fire proof' materials at a cost of \$200,000, the hall was intended to house "officers and the better class of immigrants, British and European. The older buildings will be turned over to the poorer class of foreigners."<sup>6</sup> The new hall could accommodate 1,500 people and was designed under the chief architect of Public Works.<sup>7</sup>

The new CPR station and the Royal Alexandra Hotel were designed by the Maxwell Brothers of Montreal, where the head offices of the railway were found. The Maxwells, who were trained in the Beaux-Arts style, had also tendered, and come second, in design for the Manitoba Legislative Buildings. They were prominent in eastern Canada. The contractors too were from Montreal, the firm of Peter Lyall and Sons. The steel work was sub-contracted to Dominion Bridge of Winnipeg, the plumbing and heating to James Ballantyne of Montreal and the stone was supplied by William Garson of the Tyndall quarries.<sup>8</sup>

The station and the office wing were the first to be erected, with the Royal Alex constructed the following year. After nearly four years of extensive yards work, CP was most anxious to complete the station and hotel complex. Work continued night and day in an orderly fashion, with each particular trade working in rapid sequence, from the concrete foundation, through the steel gangs and bricklayers, to the plumbers, electricians and plasterers. Meanwhile the stonecutters had been working with the cut stone for the exterior. When the Royal Alex was opened in 1906, it had more

beds than Chateau Frontenac and was as beautiful and luxurious as any in an era of posh railway hotels. Both station and hotel were added onto in 1913 and in 1916, a glass roof was installed over the track area of the station.<sup>9</sup> Plans for an adjoining 6-storey office tower never took shape.<sup>10</sup>

The exterior of the station shows few changes over the years although the grounds have been altered more than once. Formal gardens with a central fountain were located to the west of the station in front of the office wing, but this space has now been turned over to parking. A soldiers' memorial statue, placed in the formal gardens in 1922, is now located immediately in front of the station entrance.<sup>11</sup> The CPR station and the Royal Alexandra Hotel were connected by the office wing, but they were visually connected by design, colours and materials. Bill Thompson described the design of the station as classical revival, in a style that is "formal and ponderous."<sup>12</sup> The idea was to create a solid impression, thereby establishing a sense of occasion for those who arrived there. The entire building was intended as a monument, and both the CPR and the people of Winnipeg were acutely aware of their role in the development of the west.<sup>13</sup>

No less impressive was the interior of the new station. Through an entranceway of carved Tyndall limestone and Wisconsin red brick, passengers had the choice of three sets of doors set in a hexagon with a dead air space in the centre (to prevent drafts). A duplicate set of doors ushered passengers through to the train platform. The floors were made of white marble terrazzo, with marble wainscoting and marble walls in the lavatories. Marble also covered the bases of the heavy interior columns. The walls were a soft green with bronze-coloured capitals on the pillars and bronze ornamental plasterwork. On the barrel vault ceiling of the rotunda, there was a back-lit arch of amber glass, softened by a second layer of ribbed glass on the outside. The ceiling was divided into 15 or 20 large sections each containing 20 lights. The benches were specially designed in a low, roomy fashion and painted a soft green.

A waiting room for the ladies and a gentleman's smoking room were found several steps down from the rotunda. Immediately off the rotunda were the telegraph office, a news stand, the enquiry wicket, a travellers' aid room, a telephone booth, the parcel office and baggage room and the cafe

and dining room. Immigrants and second class passengers were confined to a waiting room in the basement with an adjoining lunch room.<sup>13</sup>

The local jewellery firm of D.R. Dingwall supplied the electric clocks in the station. There was a large clock in the Royal Alexandra in the centre of the parapet over the station. The station clock was manufactured by the E. Howard Clock Company and was connected to a set of 32 clocks in the building and controlled by a master clock in the dispatcher's office. The Royal Alex clock, supplied by Seth Thomas, was one of the largest clocks in the country. It was fitted with steel arbors and pinions with hammered bronze wheels.<sup>14</sup> Accurate time is everything to a railroad and CPR was very proud of its clocks.

With seventeen trains daily, CPR station was an extremely busy place. Literally hundreds of thousands of immigrants passed through the station to catch their first glimpse of their new home. Most were herded over to the Immigration Halls to be assigned to their homestead or simply to be checked. Adding to this surging chaos were the confidence men, the hucksters, the church groups and other philanthropic workers and the colporteurs hawking bibles. As trains were the only real form of transportation, most travellers came through the two railway stations. During the war years, CPR station was the scene of many official departures and tearful reunions. The royal visit of 1939 came through this station and assembled in the pouring rain for a parade south down Main Street. In the fall, the harvest trains brought in hundreds of itinerant workers from the east. Vince Leah recalled meeting the Blue Bombers on a victorious return from the Grey Cup there. The CPR and CNR carved up the beach traffic and CP took the east side of Lake Winnipeg. Six "moonlight" trains went several nights a week to Winnipeg Beach and the 5:20 "Daddy Special" was a daily tradition. Ski trains ran on winter weekends to various locations. Great nostalgia accompanied the last passenger train from the CPR station on 28 October 1978.

The impact of the CPR cannot be disputed but the impact of the physical structure of the CPR in Winnipeg is disputed to this day. The short-term effects of the massive railway program from 1900 to 1905 was a boom for the construction industry here. The long-term effects were more significant.

The "longest railway yards in the world" divided the city geographically, thereby isolating the two main communities. Until 1904, there was no safe passage over the tracks because the Salter and Arlington bridges followed later. Land values were forced down in the north end because of the inconvenience of the busy level crossing and became the poor side of town where the immigrants lived. The south end held the Northenders with contempt and intolerance which led to a fear of the 'foreign peril'. Two solitudes resulted, which slowed down the assimilation process. Alan Artibise notes that "if one characteristic stands out in such events as the Winnipeg general strike of 1919, it is this lack of any willingness to understand the point of view of others."<sup>16</sup> Even at present, civic politics reflect this division in the city.

The railway yards were also the dominant feature of the north end. Besides a barrier to the rest of the city, the yards were an intrusion of tracks, building, noise, dirt and smell. CPR was the biggest employer in the west and most of its employees lived in the north end or in Weston to be near their work.

Rail passenger traffic diminished with the 1950s to the point where the Royal Alexandra was mainly vacant and the station most often empty. The great hotel was torn down in 1971 and CP discontinued passenger traffic in 1978. About 500 employees still work in the office wing. Ted Allen of the Free Press spoke for many people when he wrote about the station's closing:

The CP station, probably more than any other physical structure remaining in Western Canada, is symbolic of the development and vitality of the Prairies as a region, a cultural entity, a state of mind.<sup>17</sup>

## FOOTNOTES--

1. H.H. Herstein, L.J. Hughes and R.C. Kirbyson Challenge and Survival: The History of Canada Prentice-Hall of Canada Ltd. Scarborough 1970 p. 263 & 287.
2. "Progress of a Year's Work" Manitoba Free Press 24 November 1904.
3. For a vivid account of the colonist cars' horrors, see Barry Broadfoot's The Pioneer Years 1895 - 1914. Doubleday Canada Ltd. Toronto 1976 p. 224-226.
4. Chas. H. Wheeler "Comments" The Canadian Architect and Builder July 1900.
5. See Manitoba Free Press 4 January 1905 p. 6 and 27 April 1905. When the old depot was coming down, the remains of a man caught in an accident the week before were found in the debris.
6. "Contract for Depot and Hotel" Manitoba Free Press 1 June 1904.
7. "\$200,000 for Immigration Building for Winnipeg" Manitoba Free Press 2 June 1904.
8. "To Begin Work on C.P.R. Terminals" Manitoba Free Press 10 June 1904.
9. City of Winnipeg Building Permits No. 2831 14 August 1913, extension to hotel and station \$800,000, H.A. Brukenhoff, Chief Engineer No. 995 30 October 1916, roof over depot tracks, \$30,000.
10. "Detailed Plans" Construction August 1913 p. 314.
11. See Appendix I.
12. Ted Allen "Old Railway Stations Never Die" Winnipeg Free Press 28 October 1978.
13. "New C.P.R. Depot Will Be Opened Today" Manitoba Free Press 22 May 1905.
14. "Electric Clock System for C.P.R." Manitoba Free Press 13 February 1905.
15. Vince Leah "Station Holds Million Tales" Winnipeg Tribune 24 October 1978.
16. Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914 McGill-Queen's University Press Montreal 1975 p. 173.
17. Allen, op. cit.

## APPENDIX I

### Soldiers' Memorial Monument

This handsome monument in front of the CPR station was dedicated on 29 April 1922 by Lieutenant-Governor Sir James Aikins. The CPR lost 1,100 employees during the war so that they were honoured across the country. Identical statues were unveiled in Montreal and Vancouver, as well as dozens of tablets in smaller stations across Canada. At the Winnipeg ceremony, many prominent citizens attended who had lost sons in the fighting.

The figures in the statue are an angel and a soldier. It was designed by Coeur de Lion MacCarthy of Montreal from the foundry of the Henry Bonnard Company of Mt. Vernon, New York. The statue is seven feet high, weighs 3,000 pounds, and rests on a marble and stone pedestal.

(From the Manitoba Free Press, 29 April 1922.)

## APPENDIX II

"Main Entrance to C.P.R. Station, Winnipeg. Mr. E. Maxwell, Architect, Montreal."

The Canadian Architect and Builder September 1905 p. 133.

"The materials of this design are red brick, imported from Wisconsin, and gray limestone from the Garson quarries, near Winnipeg.

The treatment of the order deserves study. It is due to the design of the rest of the front to say that the photograph does not do justice to it. If this part is examined through a magnifying glass, (a most useful instrument in an architect's office), the confused appearance, presented in a more distant inspection of the plate, disappears, and it can be seen that the two-storey window opening is framed by an architrave band of projecting brick. When this is grasped the springing stones cease to look spotty--an illustration of the added force which a visible function gives to decorative detail. The corbel or drop, under the shield form in cornice, is the root of the trouble, because it spreads like a capital and produces the illusion of a pilaster between the windows. If this had less width than the shield projection above it, or were omitted altogether, it would be better.

The dignity of the order which composes the entrance is due, in great measure, to the unusual size and broad proportion of the dentils and to the fact that the corona carries through. The dentils are modified by the insertion of a roll between them. The swagged capitals are a good enrichment and give the necessary emphasis to counterbalance the force of the dentils."

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Plate 1 – Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) Station, ca. 1909. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – Front of Station with formal gardens, 1915. ((Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N12530.)

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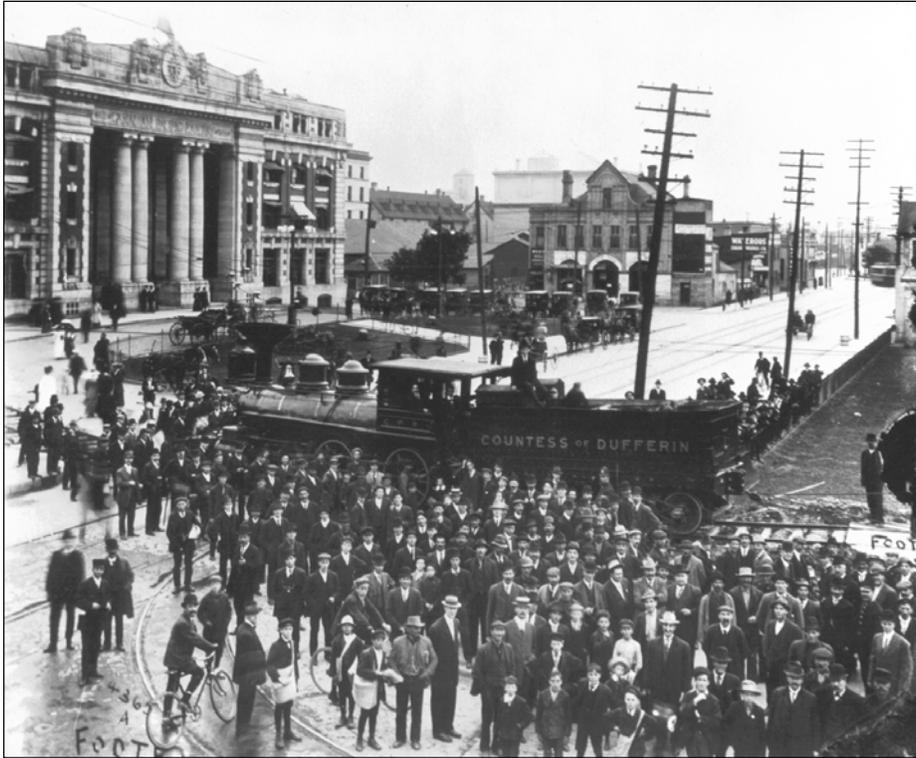


Plate 3 – Countess of Dufferin being moved to the Sir William Whyte Park across Higgins Avenue from the Station, 1910. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2623.)

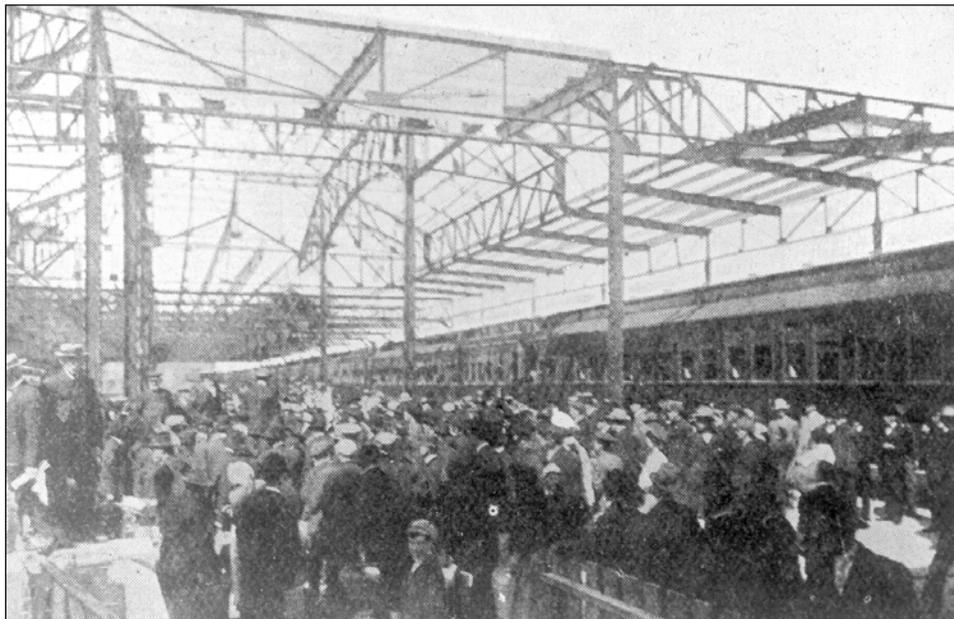


Plate 4 – Immigrants arriving at the station, ca.1916. Note the glass roof over the tracks which was erected in 1916. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 5 – Funeral cortege of Archbishop L.P.A. Langevin of St. Boniface, 12 June 1915. This also shows the detail of the Royal Alexandra Hotel in the centre of the picture with the Station on the far right. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N1792.)



Plate 6 – CPR Station, 1923. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N3055.)

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Plate 7 – The station decorated for the Royal Visit, 1939. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2662.)



Plate 8 – Honour guard at the unveiling of the soldiers' memorial statue, CPR grounds, 28 April 1922. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2597-2.)

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Plate 10 – CPR monuments to employees who died in World War I. The statue was designed by Coeur de Lion MacCarthy of Montreal. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N2597-1.)



Plate 11 – Immigrant family sitting on sidewalk outside the CPR Station, ca.1907. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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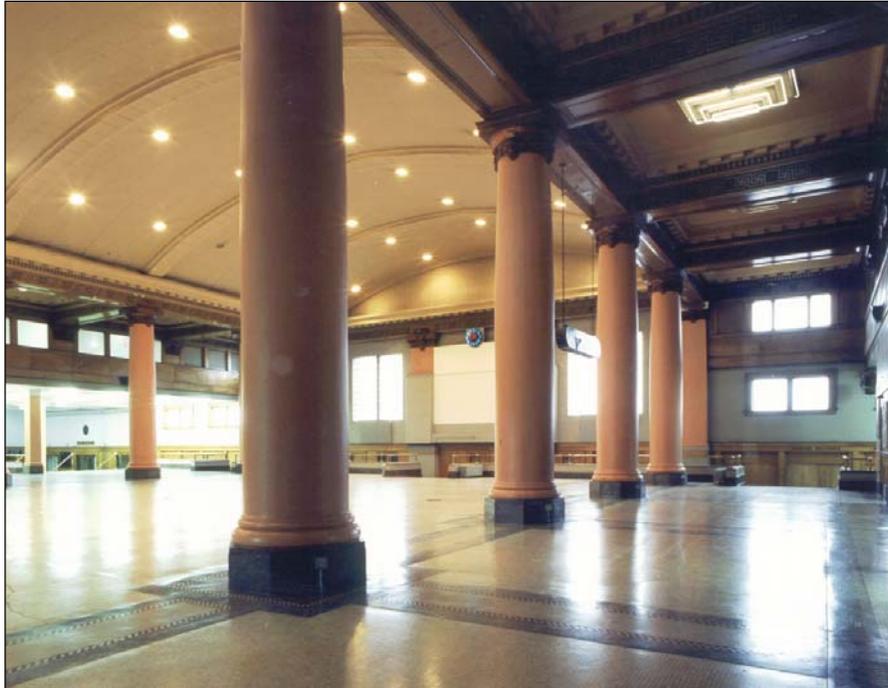


Plate 12 – Interior of the CPR Station, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)



Plate 13 – Interior of the CPR Station, no date. (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)