

**354 PORTAGE AVENUE – CARLTON BUILDING  
(HOLT RENFREW BUILDING)**  
*John D. Atchison, 1912*



Winnipeg's development boom of 1881-82 brought about the quick rise and demise of many real estate agents. But it also provided a base upon which others, such as British immigrant John Henry Oldfield, were able to establish long-standing careers.

Oldfield (1857-1924) began working as a local realtor in 1881. He subsequently (1899) formed a partnership with William Hicks Gardner (1873-1951), another British transplant. Insurance agent Walter T. Kirby (1858-c.1950) joined the firm in 1906. Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Ltd. went on to function for many decades across the Canadian Northwest as a real estate broker, property manager, insurance agent, mortgage lender, and investment dealer.

Among its local activities, the company helped shape Portage Avenue as a major commercial district in the early 1900s. It built its own head office at 234 Portage in 1909, followed by a mixed-use revenue property, the Carlton Building at the southeast corner of Portage and Carlton Street, in 1912.

Both were designed by architect John D. Atchison (1870-1959), an Illinois native who trained and worked in Chicago before opening his Winnipeg office. From 1905 until he moved to California in 1923, Atchison produced an extensive portfolio of commercial, residential and institutional structures. Among his surviving projects are the Hample, Kennedy, Boyd and Curry buildings on Portage Avenue, and the Canada Permanent, Maltese Cross, Great-West Life, Cadomin, Union Tower and Bank of Hamilton buildings elsewhere in the downtown.

The three-storey Carlton Building is a low-profile version of the Chicago Style of architecture, with detailing that reflects an Italianate influence. The block was built by the Sutherland Construction Co. for approximately \$110,000. It has a concrete foundation and superstructure of steel beams, wood joists and brick walls. Its finished (north or front and west or Carlton Street) façades are clad with terra cotta and cut stone, while the south and east walls consist of common clay brick.

The building originally contained four stores and 26 offices, all organized around a centrally located main staircase and elevator shaft. The shops had recessed entrances and large display windows with transom openings of “polished plate prism glass.” The surrounding terra cotta displayed a floral motif. Each store had access to basement storage via additional stairways and side entrances.

A terra cotta belt course distinguished the ground floor from the upper storeys. The symmetrical design of the latter level incorporated paired rectangular windows, arched third-storey window heads, modestly ornate panels between the second and third floors, a terra cotta finish cast to resemble stone blocks, and a full entablature along the roof-line, including an embellished frieze and bracketed cornice.

Early occupants included tailors Story and Story, Dr. Jaeger’s Sanitary Woolen System Co., The Clothes Shop, Canada Department of Agriculture, and various professional and business tenants. However, it was the arrival of Holt Renfrew and Co. that was to have the greatest influence. Over some 70 years, this high-fashion retailer gradually expanded

from its main-floor shop to occupy much of the building and eventually to own the property.

Holt Renfrew originated in 1837 as a Quebec City hat shop. After proprietor William S. Henderson began handling furs, the business became international in scope and secured the long-term patronage of the British royal family. Clothing, jewellery, perfume, footwear and accessories eventually were added to the product line, supported by exclusive contracts with prominent designers and manufacturers.

During Holt Renfrew's tenure, the ground-floor exterior of the Carlton Building was greatly altered, notably in 1942 when entrances were closed or relocated, display windows were replaced by smaller openings, and Tyndall stone cladding was installed. Many interior renovations also occurred over the years.

Additional changes were made in 1988-89 to integrate the Carlton Building into the downtown skywalk system. After Holt Renfrew relocated to the Portage Place shopping complex, a skywalk was attached near the northwest corner of the Carlton Building and the block's second storey was converted into a large public corridor flanked by individual retail outlets. The ground floor was remodelled for a Salisbury House restaurant and branch of the Toronto Dominion Bank.

Oldfield Kirby and Gardner owned the Carlton Building until 1954. In the 1960s, the firm underwent major organizational changes. Its securities division merged with an American firm, while its real estate department was sold to one of its partners (and later taken over by a Toronto company). The insurance business, which also experienced restructuring and ownership changes, is now known as Oldfield Kirby Esau Inc.