



**141 REGENT AVENUE**

**FORMER BANK OF TORONTO BUILDING**

**HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE**

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## 141 REGENT AVENUE – FORMER BANK OF TORONTO BUILDING

The building at 141 Regent in Transcona was built as a bank in 1924-25.<sup>1</sup> The town of Transcona found its origins when the Grand Trunk Pacific, one of the components of the Canadian National Railways since 1921, began construction on its western railway shops. Accordingly, land was purchased seven miles east of Winnipeg and in 1909, excavation for the new site was undertaken.<sup>2</sup>

This activity was accompanied by the erection of a small group of houses across from the yards (now Regent) to shelter the first few employees of the new shops. This impromptu settlement was more structured by 1910 and roads and lots were surveyed, in anticipation of the population reaching 1,600 souls.<sup>3</sup>

The Bank of Toronto, relative latecomers to the Prairies, were anxious to go ahead with their expansion to the west. The wheat boom and the huge influx of settlers were responsible for innumerable towns arising to service the new farming population. The banks raced each other to build in these towns, many of which turned out to be too small to support a bank.<sup>4</sup> The town of Transcona was a safer bet, with GTP shops guaranteeing a steady flow of cash. The Bank of Toronto seized the opportunity and built a wood frame bank on Bond St., one of the first nine branches they had in Manitoba (Plate 1).

The town around the bank grew and prospered to a considerable extent for the first few years. Service industries grew up to look after the population and the town began to look to the future. Electricity was run through in 1913-14, a sewage system was installed, a water system undertaken jointly with the City of Winnipeg, and roads cleared. Newspapers, schools, stores

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<sup>1</sup> M. Peterson, "Transcona Heritage Resources Inventory," (Winnipeg: Transcona Area Business Improvement Zone, 1999), pp. 57-60.

<sup>2</sup> Golden Jubilee Historical Booklet Editorial Committee 50 Years of Progress, Transcona Golden Jubilee 1911-1961, Winnipeg, c. 1961, p. 22. Below as 50 Years.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Schull, 100 Years of Banking in Canada, (the history of the Toronto-Dominion Bank), Copp Clark Publishing Company Ltd., Canada, 1958, pp 105 and 141.

and a post-office were opened; optimism ran high. Unfortunately, the town's exuberance was not equalled by the growth of its tax base and town council found itself badly overextended. Bonds were issued to pull Transcona from bankruptcy, and the town ran by an appointed administration.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the shops had increased production and began assembling train engines as well as repairing them. The town gradually fought its way back and after 1925, it was allowed once again to elect its own council. The Bank of Toronto built a new bank in 1924-25 at 141 Regent at Bond to replace its original building (Plate 2).

This was a fine brick structure, two storeys in height, in a rectangular block. The bank seems to be built from a standard plan for branch offices, and the plans were likely sent from Toronto for execution by local contractors. It has a limestone foundation, a heavy arched doorway of limestone, and a cornice for its flat roof. The window sills were painted a beige tone to coincide with the stone in contrast to the red bricks. The name "Bank of Toronto" was engraved along the top on the Bond and Regent façades.

The style is classical in form and detail, which was standard for bank buildings at the time.<sup>6</sup> Banks featured an architecture that was an identifiable symbol of trust: they were solid, massive in impression, somber and dignified. Patrons were assured by the form that their money would be safe.

Major George W. Northwood (1876-1959), a local architect, designed the building.<sup>7</sup> Northwood was born in 1876 and came to Winnipeg in 1905 as a graduate of McGill University in Montreal. Shortly after his arrival in the city, Northwood formed a short-lived partnership with William Blair,

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<sup>5</sup> 50 years, p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Gowans, Building Canada an Architectural History of Canadian Life, Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1966, p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> Western Canada Contractor and Builder, Vol. 21, No. 4 (April 1924), p. 23. Thanks to Barry Elmer for the reference.

an Irish-born designer 24 years his elder.<sup>8</sup> By 1907, the pair was working individually according to the City of Winnipeg Building Permit Ledgers.

Northwood continued working alone for over a decade, designing a number of large and small structures: Western Glove Works, 321 McDermot Avenue, 1912 (Grade III) and Ralph Connor House, 54 West Gate, 1913 (Grade II). In 1919, Northwood formed a four-year partnership with local architect Raymond Carey, their most important work was the design of the Union Tower Annex, 500 Main Street, in 1921 (Grade II).

Northwood worked alone after 1922 until ca.1928 when he joined with fellow World War I veteran, Brigadier Major Cyril W. U. Chivers (1879-1969). This pair designed many notable public buildings throughout Winnipeg including: St. Ignatius Catholic Church, Jessie Avenue (1928); the Canadian Wheat Board Building, 423 Main Street (1929); the Assiniboine Park Pavilion, Grade II (1929); the Canadian General Electric Building, 265 Notre Dame Avenue, Grade III (1930) and the Women's Tribute Memorial Lodge, 200 Woodlawn Street, Grade II (1931).<sup>9</sup>

Northwood's career also included a seat on the Board of the Manitoba Association of Architects, membership in the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, and the presidency of the Manitoba Club. He died in 1959.<sup>10</sup>

The second floor of the bank was an apartment for one of the employees. This was a usual procedure and was a measure of security to have someone on the premises at all times. These suites were often used by a bachelor accountant, or perhaps even the manager. The vault and offices were on the main floor. Records were stored in the basement.

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<sup>8</sup> City of Winnipeg Building Permit Ledger Book, 1906.

<sup>9</sup> M. Peterson, "Robert H. Smith School - 500 Kingsway," report for the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, July 1991, p. A-2; and personal files.

<sup>10</sup> Winnipeg Free Press, December 15, 1959, p. 38.

A town hall had been built nearby which also contained the firehall for the town. It was a plain and functional brick structure, with a tower extending up three storeys from the rear. In 1941, the Toronto-Dominion Bank vacated its premises and moved into a near-identical building across the street. This had been a Bank of Montreal built in the same era as 141 Regent. This bank building was demolished in 1962 and a new Toronto-Dominion Bank erected on the site.

The old bank was purchased by the town for use as a municipal office, which was opened in 1943 (Plate 3). The old city hall contained the mayor's office and council chambers until it was demolished in 1955. The following year, a new Public Building was opened on Pandora Avenue, and the mayor's office and chambers were located here, where they are to the present day.

As the town increases its services, it required more office space and the Health and Welfare offices, and later Parks and Recreation moved into the old bank. The apartment on the second floor was left for a while for the person who operated the health unit but was soon renovated into smaller offices. The bathroom and kitchen were left intact for the staff. In 1958, an addition was made to the rear of the building.<sup>11</sup>

For the past few years, the second storey has not been used and the basement needs some repairs. The former bank manager's office was left as it was and part of the heavy stone counter remains in the building.

With the formation of Unicity, Transcona had many of its services amalgamated with East Kildonan and eventually only the offices of the newer building on Pandora Street were used. The Regent Avenue structure is vacant at present. Now, both buildings face an uncertain future. A somewhat confused article in the Free Press noted that the Transcona School Board hopes to acquire the older municipal building but the city wants to lease both buildings at the same time.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Theresa Patterson, Curator of the Transcona Museum, August 20, 1979. Mrs. Patterson supplemented the information she had on the municipal offices by contacting a retired employee of the municipal offices.

A local museum, now housed in a community recreation building, could use the building in conjunction with the school board, which is approaching its centennial anniversary.<sup>12</sup>

There are several people who support this scheme, but Transcona has an unfortunate record of demolition of its old buildings in the past. There are virtually no old public buildings to call forth its first few struggling years, other than this structure of 1927.

On the other hand, there is a sense of community in the area which makes the people feel apart from Winnipeg. They view Unicity as an encroachment and rankle under the centralization of services. The building on Regent, its main street, still bears the sign “Municipal Offices”, which is a reminder of previous times. To preserve this building for whatever purpose would bolster their efforts to maintain some local control.

Furthermore, the old bank is the last building in its original form in the oldest part of Transcona’s commercial area. Regent Avenue has become a “strip”, dominated by car dealers, fast food restaurants and shopping centres. The block on either side of the former bank has somehow managed to retain the flavour of its former days when it was main street to a small town. It is a collection of low buildings, for the most part, and the structure in question is an essential part of the streetscape.

Although not old, and of little architectural significance, the former bank has served the growing community for over fifty years. As this is somewhat of a record in Transcona, this makes the building important to the local community.

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<sup>12</sup> “Site Recommended as Museum Location,” Winnipeg Free Press, August 9, 1979.

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Plate 1 – The old (left) and new (right) Bank of Toronto buildings, 1938. (Courtesy of the Transcona Historical Museum.)



Plate 2 – Bank of Toronto, 1935. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Frank Munton Collection, N19704.)

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Plate 3 – Transcona Municipal Office, no date. (M. Peterson Collection.)