234 PORTAGE AVENUE

FORMER OLDFIELD, KIRBY AND GARDNER BUILDING

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

June 2004
234 PORTAGE AVENUE – FORMER OLDFIELD, KIRBY
AND GARDNER BUILDING

The evolution of Portage Avenue into Winnipeg’s primary commercial thoroughfare was a gradual process. Originally, commerce was concentrated at Upper Fort Garry, all trading taking place within its walls. Main Street was simply a trail, connecting this fort with the Hudson’s Bay Company’s other major post, Lower Fort Garry, before heading northward to the bay and ultimately to England. The real estate boom of the early 1880s led to an expansion of much of Winnipeg’s society, including its retail sector. Logically, many business owners chose Main Street to sell their wares. Business blocks of all sizes and descriptions lined both sides of the street north of the old fort, and by the beginning of the 20th century, there were few empty lots between the fort and Portage Avenue.

But the new century brought dramatic change to the city. And this was keenly felt on Portage Avenue. The Clarendon Hotel, built in 1884 on the northwest corner of Donald Street, “stood out almost alone as a landmark on the north side of the avenue,”¹ as one reporter described the area. Nearly 20 years later, the hotel was still one of the only major buildings on the street. But the rumour and then the 1905 completion of the T. Eaton Company Store at 320 Portage Avenue changed everything. The avenue witnessed a dramatic increase in the amount of pedestrian and vehicular traffic and businessmen were quick to take advantage. Offices, retail stores and banks began to line the street and Portage Avenue slowly began to usurp Main Street as the commercial centre of the burgeoning capital city. By 1915, the Somerset Building (1906), Bank of Nova Scotia (1908), McArthur (Childs) Building (1909), Boyd Building (1912) and Paris Building (1915) had all been added to the growing stock of magnificent Portage Avenue buildings. When the Hudson’s Bay Company completed its massive store at Vaughan Street in 1926, it marked both a symbolic and a tangible move away from Main Street for Winnipeg’s retailers.

In 1909, in the midst of this growth era, one of the city’s best known finance, real estate and insurance firms commissioned one of the city’s finest architects to design a magnificent new headquarters on the south side of Portage Avenue at #234 – one that would impress customers

¹ Manitoba Free Press, September 4, 1909, p. 5.
and pedestrians alike, reflect the wealth and optimism of the company and be an impressive addition to Winnipeg’s downtown building stock.

**STYLE**

This small, symmetrical structure is designed in the Neo-Classical style that had grown in popularity in Canada at the beginning of the 20th century, in part as a reaction to the picturesque styles prevalent in the latter part of the 19th century. Described as the simplest form of the varied Classical Revival building types, Neo-Classical structures usually included Greek orders (columns with entablature) and pediments. They also featured smooth surfaces and could include pedimented porticos, flat, unadorned roof lines and squared as opposed to arched openings.

The architect’s Chicago education shows in his choice of ornamentation – the floral designs and other low-relief terra cotta sculptural elements were popularized by Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) and utilized in the design of skyscrapers throughout North America during this period.

**CONSTRUCTION**

This steel frame building includes cast iron columns in the basement, steel I-beams for ground- and second-floor support and reinforced concrete slab floors throughout. Built at a cost of $41,000, the clay brick walls of the building are clad on the main (north) façade with granite and cream and green terra cotta manufactured by Chicago’s American Terra Cotta Company (see Table 1 for detailed construction information).

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3. Ibid., p. 22.
4. City of Winnipeg Assessment Record, Roll No. 931170-12-1 (below as AR); and Architect’s Plans, #1625/1909, courtesy of City Archives (below as Plans).
5. City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #1625/1909.
### TABLE 1

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<td>Front</td>
<td>33.0-cm (13-inch) stone</td>
<td>33.0-cm (13-inch) brick</td>
<td>33.0-cm (13-inch) brick</td>
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<td>Rear</td>
<td>50.8-cm (20-inch) stone</td>
<td>43.2-cm (17-inch) brick</td>
<td>33.0-cm (13-inch) brick</td>
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<td>East</td>
<td>50.8-cm (20-inch) stone</td>
<td>43.2-cm (17-inch) brick</td>
<td>33.0-cm (13-inch) brick</td>
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<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>50.8-cm (20-inch) stone</td>
<td>43.2-cm (17-inch) brick</td>
<td>33.0-cm (13-inch) brick</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ceiling heights</td>
<td>2.7 metres (9 feet)</td>
<td>5.5 metres (18 feet)</td>
<td>3.8 metres (12½ feet)</td>
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The building originally included a second staircase and mezzanine at the rear and a centrally located skylight and measures approximately 12.2 x 30.5 x 13.4 metres high (40 x 100 x 44 feet).

### DESIGN

One of Portage Avenue’s most distinctive façades begins at grade with a 30.5-centimetre (12-inch) granite base, the balance finished in cream-coloured terra cotta (Plate 1). Layered bands of terra cotta create the two outside pilasters, while the centre portion of the elevation is divided by means of two, three-quarter Corinthian Order attached columns, each with an embellished base, fluted column and richly detailed capital featuring acanthus leaves, caulicoli, molded abacus and stylized acanthus flowers (Plate 2). Wide, ornate terra cotta spandrels divide the large, recessed square-headed windows of the ground and second floors. The openings are framed in cream and green terra cotta floral designs (Plate 3).

Originally, the pilasters and columns were topped by a section with the words “Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner” (Plate 4), now covered by modern signage. Above this area is the ornate modillioned pediment with its rich terra cotta embellishments, including winged cherubs holding a medallion engraved with “Established 1881,” sheaths of grain and garlands of fruit, vegetables and flowers (Plate 5).

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7 AR.
8 Plans.
9 AR.
The east and west walls are blank and butt up against the neighbouring structures. The elevation to the back lane features a single door and unmatched windows on all levels (Plate 6).

INTERIOR
As originally designed, the basement of the building held the boiler and fuel room, a large vault at the south end and separate men’s and women’s washrooms and lockers in the central and north portions of the space (Plate 7). Access stairs were located at either end of the floor. The basement was used for many years by the company’s real estate department.10

On the ground floor, visitors entered a lobby through a large revolving door. To the left was the marble and metal clad staircase leading to the second floor and in front were ornate brass doors leading to the offices. While the revolving door was removed (replaced by aluminum doors in 1980),11 the latter elements are still present (Plates 8 and 9). The main office included long, curved oak counters and several small offices along the east side of the space (Plate 10). The plaster walls were finished with ornate pilasters. Two private offices and a large, walk-in vault were located at the rear; the office in the southeast corner included a fireplace (Plate 11). Above were 5.5-metre (18-foot) beamed ceilings, opened to the roof in the middle to let in the natural light streaming through the large glass skylight (Plate 12).

Up the rear stairs was a mezzanine level with an office and large vault used by the company’s mortgage department.12 The original second floor had several small offices along the front wall and a vault in the rear of the building.

At present, the building is a mixture of old and new. Much of the basement is now empty (Plate 13); the ground-floor counters have been removed and partitioning and fluorescent lighting added (Plate 14); the second floor now includes a reception area (Plate 15), created when the

12 K. Young, op. cit., n.p.
skylight was filled in in 1935;\textsuperscript{13} and a second-floor mezzanine level was created in 1968 (Plate 16),\textsuperscript{14} although some of the original elements of the skylight and ceiling are still intact (Plate 17).

**INTEGRITY**
The building stands on its original location, has suffered little exterior alteration and appears to be in good structural condition. A serious fire occurred in the neighbouring structure on Boxing Day, 1955, completely destroying the Huron and Erie Building. The Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Building suffered smoke and water damage and after several months of work, the offices were reopened (Plate 18).\textsuperscript{15}

**STREETSCAPE**
This is the last pre-World War I building on this block of Portage Avenue that at one time included the Main Post Office and the home of the *Winnipeg Free Press* (Plates 19-21). It stands now as one of a handful of fine, terra cotta office buildings constructed on Portage Avenue prior to 1920.

**ARCHITECT/CONTRACTOR**
J.D. Atchison (1870-1959), one of the city’s most accomplished architects (Plate 22), designed the Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Building. Educated and trained in Chicago, Illinois, Atchison came north to Winnipeg with work in the early 1900s and decided to stay and open an office in 1905 (see Appendix II for biographical information). He has received 20 points from the Historical Buildings Committee.

Atchison was particularly adept at the use of terra cotta and the design of Chicago Style buildings, of which he created many of the city’s finest examples (Plate 23).

\textsuperscript{13} BP #3500/1935.
\textsuperscript{14} BP #1111/1968.
\textsuperscript{15} K. Young, op. cit., n.p.
Carter-Halls-Aldinger Company, one of Western Canada’s leading contracting firms, is listed as one of the contractors of this building. The company was founded in 1907 in Winnipeg to take advantage of the railway construction boom in Western Canada. Among its substantial local work is University of Manitoba Administration Building, 66 Chancellors Circle, 1911-13, Confederation Life Building, 457 Main Street, 1912 (Grade II), Winnipeg Electric Railway Company Building, 213 Notre Dame Avenue, 1912-13 (Grade II), Winnipeg Free Press Building, 300 Carlton Street, 1913 (Grade II), Paris Building, 259 Portage Avenue, 1915 (Grade II), and Hudson’s Bay Company Store, Portage Avenue (1926). The company was succeeded by Commonwealth Construction in 1944 and with several major acquisitions became a full-service, industrial contractor.\textsuperscript{16}

Local contracting firm Davidson Brothers was also listed on the Building Permit. The firm began in 1884, founded by Alexander (1852-1920), Albert T. and Frederick Harvey Davidson. Alexander, the eldest of the three, came to the city in 1882 from the family home in Leeds County, Ontario. A.T. Davidson was a city alderman; F.H. was also an alderman and served two terms (1917 and 1918) as Winnipeg’s mayor.\textsuperscript{17} Although never a major firm, they did construct some large apartment blocks, stores and homes, including the J.A.M. Aikins House, 630 Westminster Avenue, 1901 (Grade III), the Wardlaw (Wardlow) Apartments, 544 Wardlaw Avenue, 1905 (Grade II), and J.H. Ashdown House, 529 Wellington Crescent, 1912 (Grade II). Between 1900 and 1906, their construction work in Winnipeg totalled nearly $900,000.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{INSTITUTION}

This block became the long-time headquarters for Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner, a prominent Winnipeg real estate, finance and insurance company founded by British immigrant John Henry Oldfield (1857-1924) in 1881. Although many such firms came and went during the real estate boom of the period, Oldfield was able to survive and in 1899 was joined by another British-born

\textsuperscript{17} M. Peterson, “A.T. Davidson House, 470 McDermot Avenue,” report for the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, n.d., n.p.
\textsuperscript{18} City of Winnipeg Building Permit Ledger Books, 1900-1906.
real estate man, William Hicks Gardner (1873-1951), who had worked for much of the 1890s as part of the real estate firm Nares and Gardner (ultimately becoming Nares, Robinson and Black). The newly formed Oldfield and Gardner took up office space in the Bird Block, 433 Main Street. The company grew and in 1906 took on Walter T. Kirby (1858-ca.1950) as a partner. Kirby had been an insurance agent in the city for many years, both as an independent agent and in partnership with W.R. Colgate as Kirby and Colgate. The company was active in three areas – investment, general insurance (closely allied with the British firm Norwich Union Insurance) and real estate. It concentrated on attracting British investment, a task it successfully undertook for over half a century, and which garnered its most prestigious client, Lord Viscount Gort.

During the pre-World War I expansion phase, the company “played a key role in rentals, mortgages and the buying and selling of properties” as far away as Victoria, B.C. and the Northwest Territories. The investment branch dealt in bonds and loans and the insurance division handled a wide range of policies. The company’s rise in stature can be seen in the relative opulence of its business headquarters. After renting space as individuals, the three men moved into their own space, a modest building at 391 Main Street (between McDermot and Lombard avenues) on the east side between the Commerce and Hamilton bank buildings (Plate 24), ca.1906-1909. They moved into their new Portage Avenue offices in 1909.

The company continued to prosper, even with the demise of its three founders. In the early 1960s, the investment section split off and subsequently dissolved. The insurance and real estate departments continued on until 1967 when they merged with other companies (although the

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22 K. Young, op. cit., n.p.
23 Ibid., n.p.
name Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner continued to be used for real estate transactions until 1980 and was listed at the Portage Avenue address until its move to 55 Donald Street ca.1962).\textsuperscript{24}

During the company’s ownership, the second floor was rented out to a number of tenants, including British and Canada Underwriters, Canada Security Assurance and the Eagle Fire Company of New York.\textsuperscript{25} The next occupant of the building was North West Trust Company, which occupied the ground floor until the mid-1990s. It was taken over by Canadian Western Bank, founded in 1984 with its head office in Edmonton, Alberta, and the “largest publicly traded Schedule 1 chartered bank headquartered in and regionally focused on western [sic] Canada.”\textsuperscript{26} This company moved to 230 Portage Avenue in December 2003 and the former Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Building is now completely vacant.

**EVENT**

There is no known significant event connected with this building.

**CONTEXT**

This structure was completed during the height of the growth phase for Winnipeg. The building’s exterior/interior grandeur is a reflection of the company’s success and the increased popularity of Portage Avenue for retail/office development. It is also illustrative of the type of growth many locally organized businesses enjoyed in the pre-World War I era – from humble beginnings to leaders in their fields.

**LANDMARK**

This structure’s location, design and colouring heighten its conspicuous on Portage Avenue, in spite of its scale.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., n.p.; and Henderson’s Directory. 1954-64.

\textsuperscript{25} Henderson’s Directory, 1945.

\textsuperscript{26} Canadian Western Bank, Investor Fact Sheet – First Quarter 2004.
APPENDIX I

CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report

Assessment Record

Prepared By: M. Peterson

Building Address: 234 Portage Avenue  
Building Name: Former Oldfield, Kirby & Gardner Bldg.

Original Use: offices  
Current Use: offices

Roll No.: 931170  
RSN: 141741

Municipality: 12  
Ward: 1

Legal Description: 1 St. John, Plan 24135, Lot 40

Location: south side between Fort and Garry streets

Date of Construction: 1909  
Storeys: 2

Heritage Status: ON INVENTORY

Construction Type: brick, terra cotta and stone foundation

Building Permits: SEE NEXT PAGE

Information:

- 40 x 100 x 44 + = 182,364 cu. ft.

ARCHITECT: J.D. ATCHISON

CONTRACTOR: CARTER-HALLS-ALDINGER CO. & DAVIDSON BROTHERS
234 Portage Avenue – Building Permits:


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APPENDIX II

John Danley Atchison (1870-1959)

Unquestionably one of the city's most talented architects, J.D. Atchison was born in Monmouth, Illinois in 1870. Educated in Chicago, he studied architecture at the Chicago Art Institute and the Chicago Manual Training School. After graduation he worked in the offices of W.G. Barfield, as well as for the firm Jenney and Mundie. William Le Baron Jenney was considered by many to be one of America’s leading architects and Atchison participated in the planning of buildings utilizing the latest technology in steel skyscraper construction.

In 1895, he opened his own practice that continued until the early 1900s. He worked on the staff of the World's Columbian Exposition and for the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad. His commissions brought him to Winnipeg and by 1905 the prosperity and future prospects prompted him to relocate his business here.

A list of some of the more prominent local buildings designed by J.D. Atchison over his career includes:

- Alexandria Block, 389-93 Graham Ave. (1901) – demolished
- Wardlow Apartments, 544 Wardlaw Ave. (1905) – Grade II
- Kennedy Building (Mitchell-Copp), 315 Portage Ave. (1906) – Grade II
- Hample Building, 273½ Portage Ave. (1906)
- Concordia (Bon Accord) Block, northeast corner Main St. and Logan Ave. (1906) – partially demolished
- Stone Block, 650 Main St. (1907) – demolished
- Nanton Stables, 61 Roslyn Cres. (1908) – converted to residence
- Dennistoun House, 166 Roslyn Rd. (1908) – Grade III

3 Compiled from City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Files; J. Wade, Manitoba Architecture to 1940 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1976); Winnipeg Telegram, September 18, 1906, p. 55; Winnipeg Tribune, December 21, 1907; and F.H. Schofield, op. cit., pp. 374-75.
J.D. Atchison designs, continued:

A. Matheson House, Kildonan (1908)
Devon Court, 376 Broadway (1908) - demolished
Men’s Own of the City of Winnipeg Shelter Mission, 181 Logan Ave. (1908) - demolished
Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Building, 234 Portage Avenue (1909)
N.W.C.T.A. Building, 291 Garry St. (1908) – Grade III
Canada Permanent Building, 296-98 Garry St. (1909) – Grade II
Edmonton Block, 383-89 Portage Ave. (1909) - demolished
Maltese Cross Building, 66 King St. (286 McDermot Ave.) (1909) – Grade III
Grosvenor Court, 161-65 Stafford St. (1910)
Eastern Townships Bank, 367-69 Main St. (1910) - demolished
Orpheum Theatre, Fort St. (1910) - demolished
Chamber of Commerce Building (Great-West Life Building), 177 Lombard Ave. (1911) – Grade II
Allan, Killam and McKay Block, 364 Main St. (1911) - demolished
Winnipeg Development and Industrial Bureau Exposition Building, southeast corner of Main St. and Water Ave. (1911-12) - demolished
Cadomin Building, 280 Main St. (1912)
Mac’s Building, 585 Ellice Ave. (1912)
Mac’s Building, 585 Ellice Ave. (1912)
Boyd Building, 388 Portage Ave. (1912) – Grade III
Union Tower, 191 Lombard Ave. (1912-13) – Grade II
Merchants’ Bank Branch, 1386 Main St. (1913) – Grade III
All Souls' Unitarian Church, Furby St. (1913)
Curry Building, 233 Portage Ave. (1915) – Grade II
Willys Overland Building, 686 Portage Ave. (1916)
Bank of Hamilton Building, 395 Main St. (1916-18) – Grade I
Red Cross Lodge, Fort Osborne Barracks, Tuxedo (1919) - demolished
Manitoba School for the Deaf, Tuxedo (1922)
Medical Arts Building, southeast corner Graham Ave. and Kennedy St. (1922-23) - demolished

Atchison also designed structures in other western provinces. He won the design competition for the Moose Jaw City Hall, c.1912-13 (not built) and planned the Moose Jaw Collegiate (1908-10), Saskatchewan Presbyterian Boys’ College and Principal's Residence (1911-12), and Hammond Building, Main St., Moose Jaw (1912).

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Atchison was also intimately involved in promoting the concept of The Mall or Capitol Approach from Portage Avenue to the Legislative Building along Memorial Boulevard. He prepared proposals for the City Planning Commission (1911) and later the Winnipeg Town Planning Commission (1913). He also made proposals to the Greater Winnipeg Plan Commission (1917; 1919) which he became chairman of in 1919.5

In 1923, Atchison left Winnipeg for Pasadena, California, and continued to practice there, adopting the Spanish Colonial style for his residential work. He died in 1959.6


6 The Emerson Court House and Town Hall Building (Winnipeg: Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Historic Resources Branch, 1985), pp. 8-11.
Plate 1 – Former Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Building, 234 Portage Avenue, front (north) façade, 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)
Plate 2 – Detail of front (north) façade, 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)
Plate 4 – Architect’s plans, #1625/1909, “Front Elevation.” (Courtesy of City Archives.)
Plate 5 – Detail of pediment, no date (top) and 2004. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba and M. Peterson, 2004.)
Plate 6 – Rear (south) elevation, 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)
Plate 7 – Architect’s plans, #1625/1909, “Basement Plan.” (Courtesy of City Archives.)
Plate 8 – Marble and metal staircase to the second floor, 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)

Plate 10 – Architect’s plans, #1625/1909, “First Floor Plan.” (Courtesy of City Archives.)
234 PORTAGE AVENUE – FORMER OLDFIELD, KIRBY
AND GARDNER BUILDING

Plate 12 – Architect’s plans, #1625/1909, “Long Plan.” (Courtesy of City Archives.)
234 PORTAGE AVENUE – FORMER OLDFIELD, KIRBY AND GARDNER BUILDING


Plate 18 – North West Trust Building with the Canada Trust Building to the east (built 1957-58) and the Parkade Building and Wilaco Autopark (built 1962-63), no date. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 19 – South side of Portage Avenue with Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Building (left), Main Post Office (middle) and the National Trust Building (former Free Press Building, right), ca.1950. (University of Manitoba Archives, Winnipeg Tribune Collection, PC18/5410/18-4596-035.)
Plate 20 – Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Building, 234 Portage Avenue, 1937. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 21 – Portage Avenue looking east from Garry Street, 2004. (M. Peterson, 2004.)

Plate 22 – J.D. Atchison (1870-1959), 1913. (Archives of Manitoba, N5240.)
Plate 23 – Some of the more prominent designs of architect J.D. Atchison: #1- N.W.C.T.A. Building, 291 Garry Street (1908); #2- Chamber of Commerce Building (Great-West Life Building), 177 Lombard Avenue (1911); #3- Boyd Building, 388 Portage Avenue (1912); #4- Union Tower, 191 Lombard Avenue (1912-13); and #5- Curry Building, 233 Portage Avenue (1915). (M. Peterson Collection.)
Plate 24 – Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Block, Main Street, 1909. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba.)