CN Station

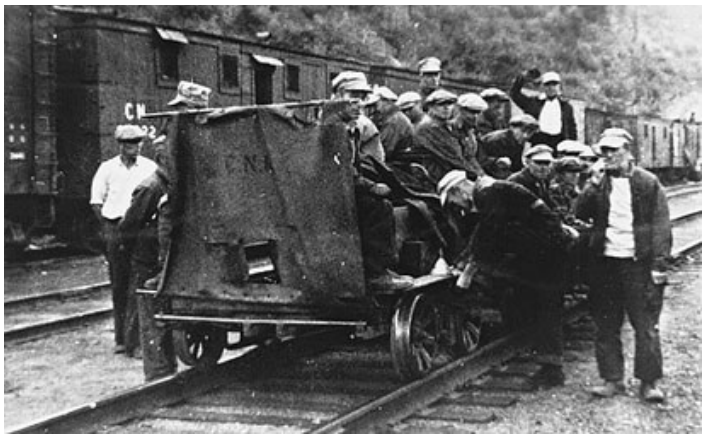
9 Water Street North



Year Built: 1905 - 06
Architect: Ralph B. Pratt
Style: Railway Gothic
Notable Features: Corbeled turrets, crenelated at the top
Loophole windows and steel roofs
Designation Date: August 28th, 1979
By-Law No.: 258 – 1979

Description:

The Canadian Northern Railway Station was the second property in Thunder Bay to be formally designated as a provincial Heritage Site. There are many reasons why this site was recognized as historically significant; not only is the building one of the oldest in the city, but its' function as a railway station also represents an important part of the city's development as a transportation hub. It is largely due to the success of the rail that Port Arthur was able to become a thriving port city in the early 20th century.



Canadian Northern Railway, around Dryden circa 1880s.
Photo from: The Canadian Encyclopedia
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0001318>

The story of railroad development at the Lakehead is wrought with tension between the twin towns of Port Arthur and Fort William. A rivalry for economic prosperity had long existed, but grew fierce as competition for industry heightened due to the installation of rail beds and the potential economic growth that cross national transportation offered. Fort William seemed to gain an early upper hand in the railroad boom, as Canadian Pacific Rail (which essentially held a railroad monopoly) chose Westfort as the centre for their trans-continental railway terminus in 1875. Port Arthur would not be so easily defeated for the city had an ace up its sleeve: much better access to the harbour. All the shipped goods therefore had to pass through Port Arthur en route to the rail line in Fort William.

The people of Port Arthur developed their very own Railway Company and laid a six mile track from South Water Street, Port Arthur to Gore Street, Fort William. This railroad, known as the *Prince Arthur's Landing and Kaministiquia Railroad Company*, was offered to the Canadian Pacific in exchange for the relocation of the trans-continental terminal to Port Arthur. The ploy was successful, and Port Arthur boomed as a rail town for a short period. Unfortunately, after a decade, the CP decided to relocate their operations once more, and the reasons why are shrouded in myth and mystery.

One story of why the terminus was returned to Fort William begins with a rumour; the Captain of a CP ship had apparently heard that authorities were planning on seizing his shipment upon arrival in Port Arthur, because of back taxes. He therefore decided to sail back south, without the Lakehead stop. "Leading citizens" of Port Arthur were angered by this action, and they in turn seized a westbound train and forced payment of taxes. At this point the president of CP Rail became involved, and, declaring that "grass will grow in the streets of Port Arthur," he ordered the terminus to be permanently moved to Fort William. This dramatic tale of locomotive seizures and fateful declarations is somewhat more intriguing then the other story of why the terminus was moved. Thunder Bay historian Tori Tronard explains that the most likely reason for the move was "fiscal responsibility."[1]

[1] Scott Anderson, Story of former CN Station one of myth, legend and fact. Chronicle-journal

This setback, however, would not be the end of Port Arthur's railroad success. A competitor for the Canadian Pacific Rail Company emerged from Manitoba in the 1880s and 1890s under the name of the Canadian Northern Railway company. The provincial government had felt that the monopoly held by the CP was unfair and offered grants to independent rail companies, the CNoR being one of the organizations that benefited from the initiative. In 1899, the CNoR built a rail line from the Prairie Provinces to Lake Superior via Port Arthur, which would allow for shipping of prairie grain to Europe as well as the movement of eastern Canadian goods to western Canada.

The last spike of the rail line was driven on December 31st, 1901. To commemorate the occasion the spike was made of silver and engraved on all four sides with this inscription: Canadian Northern Railway, Port Arthur – Winnipeg section, Driven on completion Dec. 30th, 1901. Prominent men from Port Arthur and from the railway rode the train for a short time before returning to the Northern Hotel to enjoy a long night of celebrations.

The first Canadian Northern train arrived in Port Arthur in early 1902 and marked the beginning of a railway boom based upon the movement of grain. The rail station was built a few years (in 1906) after the CNoR track was laid, and the building was viewed as "a credit to the company and to the town." It was equipped with general and ladies' waiting rooms, baggage rooms and a ticket office. Beautiful burlap wainscoting embellished the interior of the site.



Port Arthur Harbour, Grain fleets in 1912

Port Arthur flourished as a transportation hub. Grain elevators were established in the area as early as 1884, and by the 1920's the Lakehead ports had the greatest grain capacity in all of North America. The First World War would eventually encumber the railway boom in Port Arthur, despite the fact that grain elevators continued to be built in the area. The CNoR also encountered financial difficulties throughout the years of the war; their fast expansion had been financed largely by the Canadian Federal Government, which amassed an ever-increasing share in the company over the course of twenty years and 16,093 kilometers of rail track. Eventually, the Canadian government nationalized the company in 1918 and changed its' name to Canadian National Railways. The CN downgraded much of the rail activity in Port Arthur, closing numerous facilities in favour

of operating out of Neebing township. The CNR station, however, remained open and functional until 1977, when the City of Thunder Bay acquired the property.

The City of Thunder Bay recognized the historical importance of the train station and decided to designate the site as a Heritage Building in 1979. There was much community interest in the use of the CN Station, and numerous local businesses and organizations began vying for the opportunity to rent the building. At a city meeting in 1978, council heard no less than eight proposals from a variety of groups; the Lakehead Visual Arts Society wanted some of the CN Station space, as well as the Thunder Bay Yacht Club and bidders interested in establishing dining rooms, restaurants and lounges.

Passenger train travel to Thunder Bay was discontinued in 1989, as part of the major cutbacks suffered by Via Rail. The company was created by the federal government in 1977, once the Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Railway companies deemed passenger service too costly. It was believed that one unified passenger train corporation could improve service and reduce costs. In 1989 however, the government announced that Via Rail would undergo major personnel cuts and have to function on a severely restricted budget. As a result, the company opted to close nearly half of the routes they operated, and this included the Toronto-Thunder Bay line.

Currently, the CN Station is part of the beautiful Marina Park at the Port Arthur harbour. It houses a variety of restaurants, as well as the Thunder Bay Yacht Club.



Marina Park and CN Station

Architecture:

The solid symmetrical arrangement of the masses and windows, combined with the Scottish Baronial style (the most noticeable characteristic of which is the bartizan), qualify this building as being a prime example of the “Railroad style.” This style was developed by the railway companies at the beginning of the 20th century and is uniquely Canadian.

The plan of this brick building with pitch-faced limestone trim consists of a long, low, gabled central section whose ridge line runs north and south; and large square end towers with centrally hipped roofs. At the roof line, the towers have each a central gable that contains three square-headed windows under one lintel course, with a string course, supported by stone corbels, at their still level. Above the windows there is a triangular tablet bearing a wheat sheaf, the letters CNR and the date, in relief. The second storey contains a triplet of round-headed windows with stone imposts and keystones; at their sill level there is a string course supported by a brick corbel table.

The tower corners have bartizans with loophole windows, and stone bottoms and battlements. On the ground floor the north tower has a door and three windows, and the south has a central double door and small flanking windows. The second storey of the central section consists of a parapeted gable with a bull's eye window below it. The windows have a string course at their sill level supported by stone corbels. The parapet has a stone coping and a finial type projection at the peak. On the ground floor of the central section there is a bay window containing a door at the north end, and a door with two windows at the south. There is a frame canopy over the first storey across the full length of the east wall; it is supported on frame brackets that rest on stone corbels. All the corners of the building have quoining.

The north end wall is identical to the west wall of the tower, and the entire east wall of the building is almost identical to the west wall; on the second storey of the south tower there are four round-headed windows instead of three and most of the frame canopy has been removed. The first storey is irregularly fenestrated and has no bay window section.

There is a tall brick chimney on the east slope of the roof over the central section. At the south end of the building there is a modern two storey brick addition with a straight canopy over the ground floor.



The CNR Station on the cover of the 1985 Telephone Directory.

Architect: Ralph Benjamin Pratt (1872-1950)

(from Online Architecture Resources)

Ralph Benjamin Pratt was born in London, England, on August 8, 1878, and trained as an architect at the South Kensington School of Art. After completing his education, he emigrated to Canada and by 1892 was working in Winnipeg. Within the year he became an architect for the CPR and in 1901 became a top architect for the fledgling Canadian Northern Railway. In this capacity, Pratt designed many stations and shops for the new transcontinental line. In 1906, while still a CNR architect, he formed a partnership with Winnipegger Donald A. Ross. Together they were responsible for numerous buildings as Pratt & Ross. Pratt was also President of the Manitoba Association of Architects from 1917-1919. He died March 14th, 1950.[2]

Architect: Ralph Benjamin Pratt (1872-1950)

(from Manitoba Historical Society)

Born at London, England on 9 August 1872, son of Joseph and Jane Pratt, he was educated at London before coming to Canada in 1891 and to Manitoba the next year. He worked as an architectural and engineering draftsman for the Canadian Pacific Railway at Winnipeg from 1895 to 1901, and a railway architect for the Canadian Northern Railway from 1901 to 1906. He formed an architectural partnership with Donald Aynsley Ross in 1906, specializing in structural and civil engineering projects. He served as President of the Manitoba Association of Architects from 1917 to 1919. [3]

On 23 October 1900, he married Euphemia Maude Monnington (1874-1977) at Winnipeg. They had three children: George Ralph Monnington Pratt (1901-1983), Olive Maude Grace Pratt (1904-2004, wife of Herbert Carey), and Camden James Charles Pratt (1915-1984). In 1911, the family lived at 261 Carlton Street, Winnipeg. His recreations included canoeing and skating. He was a member of the Anglican church.

He died at St. Boniface on 14 March 1950 and was buried in the St. John's Cemetery.

http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/pratt_rb.shtml

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[2] Archiseek; *Ralph Benjamin Pratt*, Online Architecture Resources http://www.archiseek.com/search/search.php?site=0&path=&result_page=search.php&query_string=Pratt+%26+Ross&search=Go&limite=10&option=exact , 2006

[3] Archiseek; *Ralph Benjamin Pratt*, Online Architecture Resources http://www.archiseek.com/search/search.php?site=0&path=&result_page=search.php&query_string=Pratt+%26+Ross&search=Go&limite=10&option=exact , 2006