

457 MAIN STREET – CONFEDERATION LIFE BUILDING
J. Wilson Gray, 1912



Situated in the heart of Winnipeg’s business district, the Confederation Life Building is one of the city’s finest skyscrapers. Constructed in 1912 during a period of rapid urban expansion, the building was designed by architect J. Wilson Gray of Toronto. Ten storeys of steel and concrete, Confederation Life owes its unique appearance to the curved façade that follows a bend in Main Street. Following the example of the “Chicago School” of architecture, the building does not mask its skeletal form but rather proclaims it.

Sheathed in white terra cotta and a base of polished granite, the structure is divided into three sections of a base containing the ground and mezzanine floor, the mid-section of offices set behind piers and large windows, and the attic cornice. Together, the effect mimics a classical column with a base, shaft and ornamented capitol. The other walls were simply finished in a veneer of buff-coloured brick.

Although alterations have been made over the years, the principal interior features of the Confederation Life Building remain, namely marble wainscoting and three elegant copper-plated cage elevators. Most of the office space was finished in a utilitarian manner.

The Toronto-based company began its operations in Winnipeg in 1879, growing to occupy its own building by 1890. This first Confederation Life Block was on the same site, but by 1912 it was inadequate for such a large and prestigious enterprise. The new skyscraper also offered office space for lawyers, loan companies and manufacturers' agents. As the center of Winnipeg's commercial district shifted to Portage Avenue, the building became increasingly vacant. This was coupled with the fact that in 1960, Confederation Life Association constructed new quarters and sold the old building.

Together with the Royal Bank Building, the Confederation Life Building forms a northern gateway to Winnipeg's downtown area.