

191 LOMBARD AVENUE – UNION TOWER BUILDING
J.D. Atchison, 1912-13



The corner lot on Main Street and Lombard Avenue has a history that starts in the early days of the village that became Winnipeg. The long and narrow shape of the property had been determined by the early settlers who laid out their lots in narrow strips extending from the Red River. This was the site of A.G.B. Bannatyne's store and it was around his stove that in 1864 the first Masonic Lodge, was founded in the Red River settlement. By 1882, the brick Nares Block was built but collapsed in 1911 during the construction of the Bank of Commerce next door.

The property was acquired by the Union Trust Company, one of the many trust and loan companies operating in Winnipeg. With its head office in Toronto and a second branch in London, England, the company wanted a Winnipeg office to handle all of its western investments.

Plans for the new building were drawn up by architect John D. Atchison, who had a major influence on the face of the city during the boom in the early part of the twentieth century. He

had trained in Chicago with the firm of Jenney and Mundie, architects who became famous for pioneering the construction of steel-framed skyscrapers.

Built upon twenty-six great concrete piles driven down sixty-five feet to bedrock, the structure of the building was steel frame construction. Atchison based his design on the work of Louis Sullivan, another leading Chicago architect who was also trained by Jenney. Using Sullivan's Guaranty Building in Buffalo (1894-5) and Bayard Building in New York (1898) as sources, Atchison produced a work that accented the essential verticality of the skyscraper instead of denying this feature or trying to place it into a specific historical style. He followed Sullivan's example of acknowledging the repetition of identical office floors using a deliberate uniformity throughout the height and breadth of the building. The first two floors feature rusticated giant order pilasters of Kootenay marble. Pilasters, containing paired windows, rise up to a cartouche and give a deliberate vertical emphasis to the structure. The top two storeys feature double-arched Italianate windows with an elaborate cornice recalling the Palazzo Vendramini from Renaissance Venice. The building meets the Aristotelian requirements that a work of art should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, like the classical column with its base, shaft and capital.

Union Trust occupied the main floor of the new building in 1913 with the other tenants being investment and mortgage houses. By 1941, the Union Trust Company had faltered because of the near standstill of the prairie economy. The Great-West Life Assurance Company, which had been renting office space in the building, purchased it and changed its name to the Union Tower.

Although the building is now vacant, it is of major significance not only because of its location which contributes to the streetscape both along Lombard Avenue and Main Street, but also because it recalls the major role that Winnipeg played in the business development of the West. Based on a Sullivan-esque style, the exterior is well preserved in spite of the missing cornice. In 1953, a part of the cornice had fallen because the metal reinforcing rods had been eaten away the cinder concrete. The parapet wall was then rebuilt, lined with stucco on the inside and covered with plaster on the outside. The main floor, finished in carved marble and brass with ornamental plasterwork and rich detailing, has survived in near perfect condition.