



191 LOMBARD AVENUE (387 MAIN STREET)

UNION TOWER BUILDING

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

9 July 1983

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A bronze plaque on the side of the Union Tower Building bears the following inscription:

Near this spot on the 8th of November 1864 was instituted "Northern
Light Lodge", the first Masonic Lodge in the Red River Settlement.¹

John Christian Schultz, A.G.B. Bannatyne and William Inkster were inducted as officers, the actual site being around the stove in Bannatyne's store at Lombard and Main.

During the boom of 1882, the old store was sold, demolished and replaced by a large four-storey brick building later known as the Nares Block.² By this time, the shape of the site had been fixed by the building on the adjacent lot on Main, which was soon to be replaced by the Bank of Commerce.

During the construction of the large new bank in 1911, the superstructure of the Nares Block was properly supported but the foundations collapsed with the excavation next door. Incriminating fingers were immediately pointed at the Bank of Commerce contractors, the Lyall-Mitchell Company. Compensation was in order.³

With the swiftness of action that typified the pre-war boom, plans were soon drawn up for a new office tower on the site of the collapsed structure. In September 1911, the Lyall-Mitchell Company commenced the excavation and foundations of the new Union Trust Building, probably in retribution for the damage to the Nares Block.

Twenty-six great concrete piles were driven sixty-five feet to bedrock. The foundation walls and caissons alone cost \$10,000.⁴ In the spring of 1912, contractor George Fuller took over from Lyall-Mitchell in construction of the rest of the new office tower. Working from plans drawn up by Winnipeg architect John D. Atchison, Fuller constructed the twelve-storey steel-framed tower for \$380,000.⁵ The trapezoid-shaped lot gave the structure a frontage on Main of 27 feet, extending 101 feet down Lombard. The rear of the building is 63 feet and the party wall with the Bank of Commerce is 117 feet.⁶

The frame construction, said to be `fireproof' at the time, was clad in Kootenay marble on the lower two storeys. The upper floors' façade was clad in a light-coloured terra cotta. With the windows facing mainly south, the ground and mezzanine floors were lit by long, large windows that lighten the effect of the stone in the base. The upper windows form vertical bands between the piers to create a visual upward sweep. There is a considerable amount of detailing around the windows in the terra cotta. The piers are plain enough but bevelled slightly, (making the corner less obvious) and each terminates on a cartouche. The uppermost two storeys feature paired arched windows superseded by a larger arch in a crowning burst of decoration. A handsome bracketed cornice above this feature had decayed to a dangerous extent and was removed in 1953.⁷

In design and scale, the Union Trust Building was similar to two other Winnipeg structures, the Electric Railway Chambers (Pratt and Ross 1913) and the Paris Building (Woodman and Carey 1915-1917). It predated these structures by a matter of months, but similarities in design and decoration make them attractive early skyscrapers.

As well as its impact through proximity to the Portage and Main intersection, the Union Trust Building had a great impact on Lombard Avenue. Now screened by the Richardson Building and the Westin Hotel, Lombard formerly had greater visibility to pedestrians and traffic moving east-bound on Portage and north-bound on Main. With the Great West Life Building and the Grain Exchange, the Union Trust Building formed a prominent triumvirate on this major artery.

The Union Trust Company moved into its new offices on the main floor of the new building early in 1913. Trust companies hold a fairly unique position in the Canadian economy. They do a particular type of business that the laws do not permit banks to do. They act as trustees for estates and bondholders (hence the name), handle transfers, and act as registrars and executors. In addition, they maintain large vaults filled with safety deposit boxes,⁸ which were located on the first and mezzanine floors in this case. Trust companies encouraged savings and home ownership because patrons had their deposits channelled into long-term investments. As it worked out, government and corporate

bonds, as well as mortgages, were the principal domain of the trust companies.⁹ Therefore, financial institutions such as the Union Trust Company were partners in the development of the west through the granting of mortgages and bond issues that permitted cities and towns to finance improvements.

Union Trust was one of many trust and loan companies operating in Winnipeg.¹⁰ It had its head office in Toronto and a second branch in London, England. The Winnipeg office handled all the western investments.

In the early years, many other financial institutions leased space in the Union Trust Building. Such companies as the Empire Investment Co., the Canadian Bond and Mortgage Corp., and the Anglo American Trust Co. made the skyscraper a hive of business activity. The main floor always held a tobacconist and a barber shop. Real estate agents, brokers, securities agents, lawyers and accountants also held offices in the building.

Great West Life Assurance Company, a dynamic Winnipeg operation, had its own head office building at 177 Lombard (now the Chamber of Commerce Building). It expanded so rapidly that it rented offices in the Union Trust Building, eventually taking over most of the space by the 1940s. In 1959, Great West Life relocated to Osborne Street, leaving both its own building and the Union Tower substantially vacant.

The Union Trust Company itself had faltered in 1941. It was completely dependent on growth and development, which had come to a near standstill in the prairie economy of the 1930s. After this time, Great West Life purchased the building, changed its name to Union Tower, and undertook fairly extensive alterations to adapt the interior to its own use. Still, a good deal of the original interior remains.¹¹

The main floor public space was taken over first by the Bank of Canada and later by the Bank of Nova Scotia, who have recently vacated the building. With the loss of its principal tenant in 1959, Union Tower never regained full occupancy and today is approximately 30% full.

The significance of this building lies in its site, its distinctive visual impact along Main and along Lombard, combined with its role in the business development of Winnipeg. Both Union Trust and Great West Life have close corporate associations with the historic building.

FOOTNOTES--

1. Plaque erected by the Grand Lodge of Manitoba AF & AM in 1925.
2. R.R. Rostecki "387 Main Street Union Tower Building" in Early Building in Winnipeg Volume II C.I.H.B. 1977 p. 121.
3. "Many Persons in Peril When Walls of Nares Building Fall" Winnipeg Telegram 16 February 1911 p. 15.
4. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 2838 6 September 1911.
5. Ibid., No. 142 20 February 1912.
6. Atchison's incomplete plans and detailed specs exist for the Union Trust Building but the elevation drawings are missing.
7. Permits, op. cit., No. 5330 1953.
8. J.J. Harpell Canadian Industry, Commerce and Finance The Industrial and Educational Press Ltd. Montreal 1916 p. 82.
9. J.F. Graham et al The Role of the Trust and Loan Companies in the Canadian Economy University of Western Ontario 1965 p. II-32.
10. The other big trust companies included Canada Permanent, Fidelity Trust, Montreal Trust, National Trust, Northern Trust and Royal Trust.
11. Rostecki, op. cit., p. 125.

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Plate 1 – 191 Lombard Avenue, Union Trust Building, ca.1915. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – Lombard and Main, ca.1905. The arrow indicates the Nares Building and the future site of the Union Tower. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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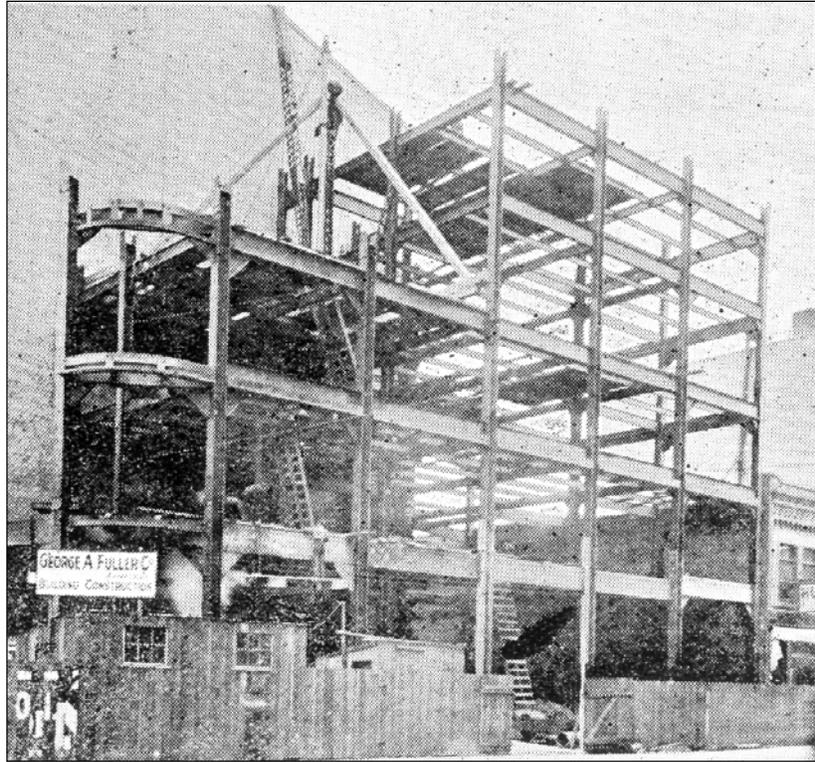


Plate 3 – Construction of the Union Trust Building, 1912. ([Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N898.](#))

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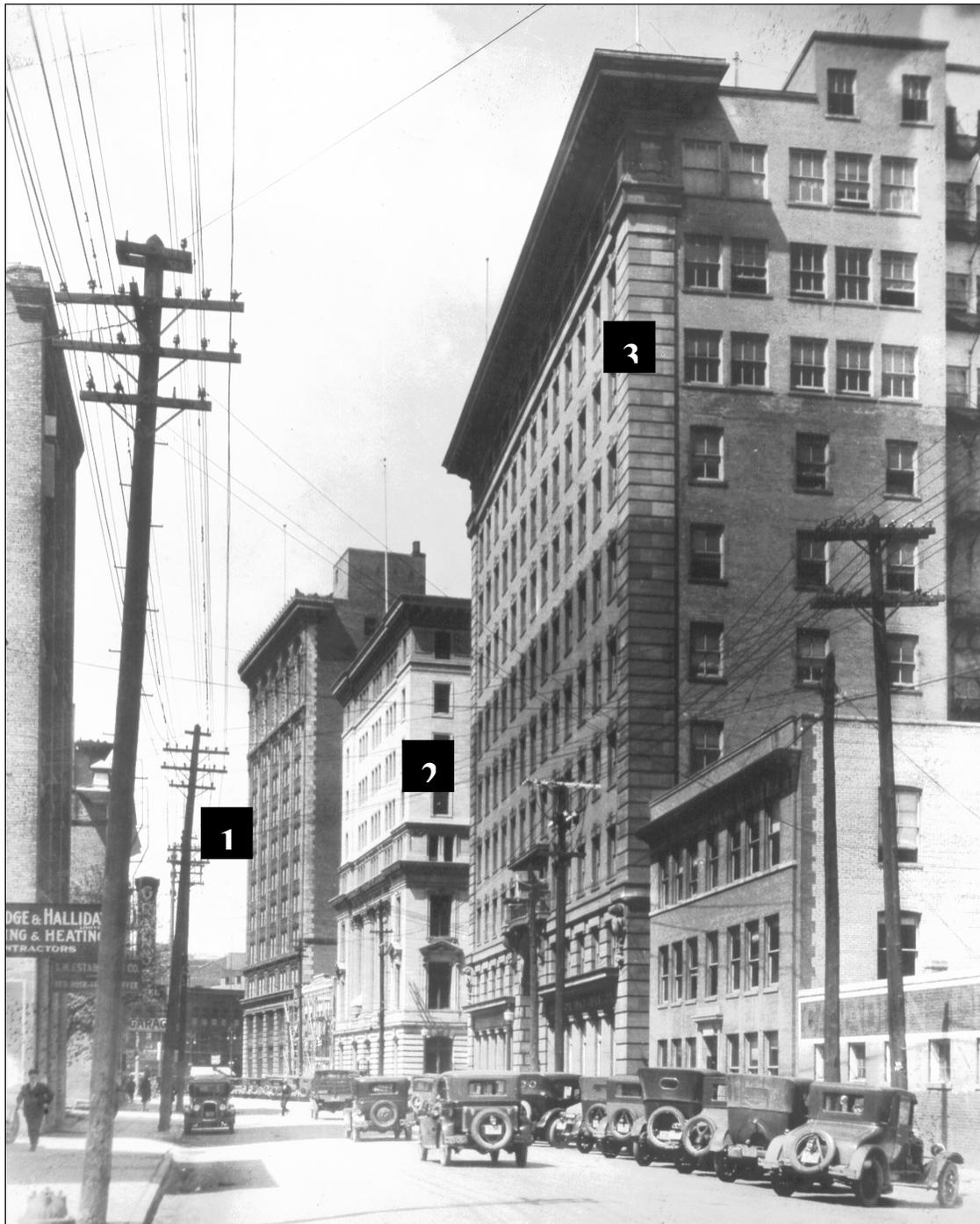


Plate 4 – Lombard Avenue, ca.1915. On the north side is the Union Trust Building (#1), the Great West Life Building (#2) and the Grain Exchange Building (#3). (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N1434.)

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Plate 5 – Union Trust Building, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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Plate 6 – Detail of exterior, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

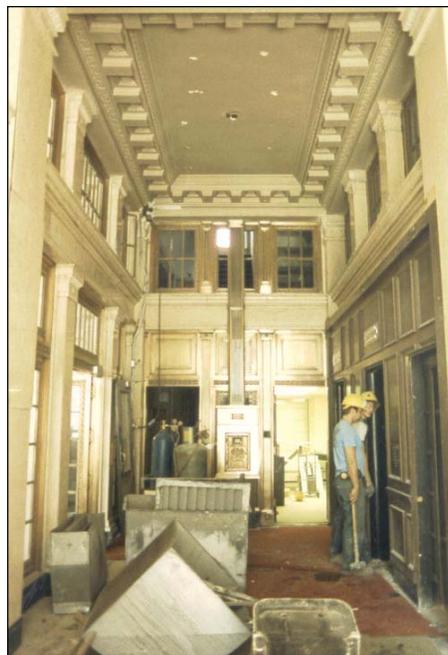


Plate 7 – Interior, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)