

**177 LOMBARD AVENUE – CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BUILDING
(FORMER GREAT-WEST LIFE BUILDING)
*J.D. Atchison, 1909-11***



Winnipeg businessman, J.H. Brock, realizing that the majority of life insurance companies operating in the city in the 1880s were foreign owned, and that none were based in Western Canada, gathered fifteen prominent local individuals to form the provisional Board of Directors of the Great-West Life Assurance Company. Incorporated in August of 1891, among this group were J.H. Ashdown, G.F. Galt, J. Aikens and D.H. McMillan. The latter two subsequently became Lieutenant-Governors of Manitoba. At their first board meeting in 1892, Alexander Macdonald, the Mayor of Winnipeg, was appointed President.

From a modest office on Main Street, the first year of business brought in policies worth over two million dollars. An expansion of regional offices started with the first branch being located in Toronto. As the business grew, larger accommodations had to be found in various locations on Main Street, then Portage Avenue. In 1909, the company purchased land on Lombard Avenue for the construction of a new head office. This location was just a few steps away from

the Grain Exchange Building and was centred in the heart of the financial and grain marketing district of Western Canada.

The commission for the new building was awarded to local architect John D. Atchison. An American by birth, he had studied architecture at the Chicago Art Institute and had then worked for William LeBaron Jenny and William B. Mundie, a well-known and prestigious team of Chicago architects. In 1883, Jenny had introduced to Chicago, skeleton framework construction, which utilized external masonry cladding on metal shelves bolted to an internal framework. This innovation combined steel with “fire-proof” construction.

The style of the Great-West Life Building, completed in 1911, was based on Beaux-Arts Classicism, which has paired columns as its most common feature. It is a style that features Roman and Greek sources and was a reaction to the Richardsonian Romanesque approach seen in many of Winnipeg’s warehouse buildings. Built at a cost of \$400,000, the new building was four storeys high. Employing exclusively Canadian building materials, the steel skeleton was sheathed in white Kootenay marble from British Columbia. The heavily rusticated lower level leads to giant order columns with Corinthian capitals. The second-floor perimeter windows have pedimental heads supported on brackets. A full entablature follows with the original top storey divided by windows grouped in threes separated by paired columns. The interior was equally handsome, with the floors and walls of the corridors finished in white marble. Wood trim was of quarter-cut oak, except for the boardroom and Brock’s rooms, which were finished in mahogany.

In 1922 four more floors were added, this time in a more restrained manner. The front windows were grouped in threes maintaining a continuous harmony.

In 1946 Great-West Life purchased and expanded into the Union Trust Building, located next door on Main Street and Lombard Avenue. New corporate offices were opened on Osborne Street in 1958. The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce moved into 177 Lombard Avenue in the 1960s and, at present, the building houses the Provincial Government’s office for Cultural Affairs and Historical Resources.