



395 MAIN STREET

BANK OF HAMILTON BUILDING

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

24 September 1982

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Established in Hamilton, Ontario in 1872,¹ the Bank of Hamilton opened its first Winnipeg branch in 1896.² A brisk business enabled the bank to move from rented quarters to its present site within two years. In 1897, the building and lot on the south-east corner of Main and McDermot was purchased for \$30,000.³ Extensive alterations and an addition were undertaken before the Bank moved into new premises in 1898.

This renovated building served well until 1915, when it was discovered that construction of the new Bank of Commerce next door had caused serious settlement problems to the older structure.⁴ Bank officials decided to demolish rather than repair the structure, and plans were undertaken for a new Bank of Hamilton on the site.

Architect John D. Atchison was commissioned to work in association with H.C. Ingalls and F.B. Hoffman Jr. Atchison had trained in Chicago at the close of the nineteenth century, when that city was the scene of an innovative and dynamic development of "Skyscraper Construction" in architecture. He brought these skills to Winnipeg in 1905. Atchison worked mainly in private buildings, including the Alexandra Block on Edmonton as well as the Lee Court and the Wardlaw Apartments. His design of the Bank of Hamilton, while much praised, was one of his few public undertakings.

Work commenced on Atchison's plans in July 1916, but due to material shortages caused by the war, it was not completed until 1918.⁵ The cost was \$400,000.

The building's steel skeleton rests on concrete foundations sunk sixty feet to bedrock. The outer walls are brick, faced with limestone, with hollow tile used for interior portions. In a lengthy article about the handsome new bank, Construction magazine praised the simplicity and elegance of the façade, noting the decorative cornice and the few sculptural accents.⁶ Arched windows form an arcade on the north elevation which brings in natural light, while arcading also defines the interior spaces of the banking hall and the alcoves of the mezzanine floor. A massive archway over the

main entrance features a magnificent bronze grill with the Bank of Hamilton emblem in the centre.

Inside, the foyer is lined in Botticiano marble with a ceiling of antique gold. An elliptical stairway spirals upward, seemingly unsupported, carrying a light handrail of bronze. The richness of these shapes and colours are again enhanced by their simplicity.

The banking hall has a grand scale to it, accented by the liberal use of warmly-hued marble, dark woods and bronze screens, and a beamed ceiling with coffering of rich hues and bronze screens, and a beamed ceiling with coffering of rich hues accented with gold leaf. The former manager's office on the main floor and a boardroom on the second floor are finished in fine woods.

The upper seven storeys of the bank were finished as general office space. For its time, the new building contained technologically advanced internal systems. Communicating tubes and a full telephone system made messages instant. The vaults, equipped with time locks and a burglar system, were the latest in security. The main doors, also equipped with chronometer time locks, were precision-balanced despite their weight. Lighting, heating and ventilation systems also followed the most up-to-date technology.⁷

The Bank of Hamilton is the only "skyscraper" on Main Street's famous Bankers' Row. Atchison designed it not to be overshadowed by the massive columned Bank of Commerce next door, and to hold its own on the prominent corner site. Furthermore, the powerful design and elegant materials of the bank were intended as a statement of security and the nature of wealth in Canadian society.

By the end of the war, there were the beginnings of fundamental changes in the country's distribution of wealth, as well as an economic recession. In 1921, the Bank of Hamilton noted a marked shrinkage in customers' balances, and some of its Manitoba branches were closed. Despite reassurances in the annual report of the Bank of Hamilton c.1922, negotiations were soon underway for the 1923 amalgamation with the Canadian Bank of Commerce.⁸ The merger was effected on 31 December 1923, where after the Bank of Hamilton ceased to exist as a separate corporate entity. A reduced volume of business, shrinking profits and insupportable overhead were cited as the reasons

for the demise of the bank.⁹

For some years, the building functioned as the Main and McDermot branch of the Bank of Commerce, with a passageway connecting with the Commerce's Main bank at 389 Main. In 1969, the Bank of Commerce moved its operations to Lombard Place, leaving the Bank of Commerce banking hall and the bottom storeys of the former Bank of Hamilton vacant.

The principal tenant of the upper floors of the Bank of Hamilton was the United Grain Growers, who continuously rented large amounts of space until 1979. Formed in 1906 as the Grain Growers' Grain Company, the U.G.G. was "the first grain marketing organization of Canadian farmers to be erected on a wider base than a local co-operative elevator company."¹⁰ In 1908, the famed Grain Growers' Guide commenced publication, with that publishing firm established as a subsidiary of the parent company in 1911. In 1912, the Grain Growers' Grain Company entered into the elevator business,¹¹ the growth of which was spurred by the huge amounts of grain shipped during the first World War. In 1917, the company merged with the Alberta Farmers' Co-operative Elevator Company to form the United Grain Growers' Company, a principal voice in the marketing of wheat in western Canada. In 1979, the U.G.G. moved to their own building at Main and Bannatyne, leaving the Bank of Hamilton completely vacant. One of the city's foremost legal firms, Pitblado, Hoskins et al, had occupied the ninth floor of the bank tower from its completion until the late 1960s. Issac Pitblado was the leading legal figure in the 1947-48 tussle between the railways and the federal government over freight rates,¹² which had considerable impact on the interests of the United Grain Growers' and other grain companies.

In 1981-1982, architect Robert Gregoire of the Prairie Partnership supervised the restoration of the banking hall of the Hamilton Building. The marble and gold leaf were cleaned, original spaces restored and woodwork returned to its original finish in the restorative work. The upper storey offices were renovated to modern standards. In the summer of 1982, the Department of Environmental Planning of the City of Winnipeg moved into the historic Hamilton Building and occupies the entire structure.

FOOTNOTES--

1. A. St. L. Trigge, A History of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, Volume III, Toronto, Canadian Bank of Commerce, 1934, p. 57.
2. The Colonial Magazine, January 1898, p. 3.
3. Manitoba Free Press, 1 November 1897.
4. Trigge, op. cit., p. 124.
5. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 457 6 June 1916.
6. Prof. A.A. Stoughton, "Bank of Hamilton Building, Winnipeg" Construction, December 1919, p. 369.
7. This is description based on ibid., pp. 369-377.
8. Trigge, op. cit., pp. 147-148.
9. Ibid., p. 149.
10. R.D. Colquette, The First Fifty Years Winnipeg The Public Press 1957 pp. 30-31.
11. Ibid., pp. 97-98.
12. Anna Tillenius, Learned Friends Reminiscences - Pitblado & Hoskins 1882-1974. Winnipeg 1974, pp. 27-32.

APPENDIX I

HAMILTON BUILDING – 395 MAIN STREET

By R.R. Rostecki

HISTORY: Bank of Montreal
395 Main Street
1916-1918
Architects: John D. Atchison and Company
H.C. Ingalls and F.B. Hoffman, Associate Architects
Builder: Unknown
Legal Description: 6&7E: 63: 24/25.
Roll Number: 607200(40)
1975 Owner: National Trust Company Limited
c/o Dominion Realty Company Limited
Box 145
Commerce Court
Toronto, Ontario

The Bank of Hamilton was founded at Hamilton, Ontario in 1872,¹ with the Winnipeg branch being established in July, 1896.² The first premises were secured in the Bannatyne Block at 387 Main Street, and these were held until more permanent quarters were found. During 1897, the southeast corner of Main Street and McDermot Avenue was purchased by the Bank for \$33,000, which included the four-storey, mansard-roofed Richardson Block on the site. The following year, the existing building had a floor added and was heavily remodelled into "one of the most substantial and up-to-date bank and office structures in the city..."⁴ In 1901, further space was required and an addition was constructed on lot 25 which had been purchased in 1899.⁵

The enlarged building served adequately until November, 1915, when "it was discovered that dangerous settlement had occurred in the premises" partly because of the construction for the Bank of Commerce next door.⁶ An "expert report" placed the damages as "very high", and it was decided to demolish rather than repair the failing structure. The firm of John D. Atchison and Company was commissioned to design a nine-storey edifice. The old building was removed during May and early June 1916,⁷ and a permit was issued for the erection of the new structure on June 6, 1916.⁸

The new building was to cost \$400,000 and was to be 52' x 120', the steel frame-work being commenced on July 6, 1916.⁹ The building was not fully completed until May, 1918,¹⁰ and the great length of time for the construction can probably be attributed to materials shortages brought on by the First World War.

The new structure rested on concrete caissons, "from four to six feet in diameter, extending to bed rock, a depth of sixty to sixty-five feet."¹¹ A steel frame supported the building, the work being protected by concrete floors and fire-proofing. The outer walls were built of brick and tile and faced with native limestone, with hollow tile being used for interior partitions.¹² The artistic design of the exterior walls was simple, giving the structure of the building "the fullest effect."¹³ Very little ornamentation occurred on the façades, except for the Bank's emblem at various locations, and also in "a delicately detailed" bronze grill located in the massive arch which formed the main entrance to the business building.

Once inside the edifice, one came upon a Botticino-marble lined hall, with a ceiling of antique gold. An elliptical stair was situated to the extreme right of the entrance, and this was composed of bronze executed in a light handrail with delicately turned spindles. Again, the theme of simplicity was extended to the interior of the building. The arcade on the main level of the McDermot Avenue façade was well-expressed in the banking hall. Restrained use of ornament here was again noticeable. Gray marble formed the walls, while coloured marble placed in geometrical patterns formed the floors. Black Belgian marble counter-tops were in evidence, and these were crowned with bronze-grilled tellers' cages at various points. A rich ceiling, bright in colour, with dark beams and ornamental patterns hovered above the banking hall. A mezzanine was located in this hall, and this was where the clerks transacted their duties. Also on this mezzanine was the Boardroom, "a well-proportioned Jacobean room", finished in dark oak and richly finished and panelled to the beamed ceiling. A grey stone fire-place complimented these features.¹⁴

The bank had very modern mechanical features, such as communicating tubes and a telephone system, plus vaults with the latest features in scientific protection and workmanship. Time locks

and a burglar system prevented robbery, while a private elevator at the rear of the building served the floors above. The entrance to the vault was heavily armoured, having four combination locks and a triple chronometer time lock. The "entrance vestibule and doors weigh nine tons, the outer door alone weighing approximately three tons."¹⁵ This arrangement was on a crane hinge and swung easily on the ball bearing movement. "The building as a whole, in all its adjustments to special conveniences and needs has been worked out most intelligently and artistically, science and art going hand in hand in devising the arrangements, constructing soundly, and treating nobly all its parts and features."¹⁶

Unfortunately, the times were not right for such fine Canadian bank buildings. The war soon ended, and with the Armistice came an economic recession. By the autumn of 1921, the Bank of Hamilton noted a marked shrinkage of customers' balances. Accordingly, that institution began to close some of its Manitoba branches. The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Bank of Hamilton took place in 1922, but it was found that "the bank had weathered the storm in good shape..."¹⁸ However, negotiations were begun in the summer of 1923 for an amalgamation with the Canadian Bank of Commerce.¹⁹ The merger was effected on December 31, 1923, and on January 2, 1924, the Bank of Hamilton ceased to exist as a separate corporate entity.²⁰ The merger had come about "because of lessened volume of business, profits have been shrinking, and it was found impossible to reduce overhead expenses below a certain point and maintain efficiency."²¹ Thus, the nine storey building at 395 Main Street passed into the ownership of the Bank of Commerce.

For some years, the building functioned as the Main and McDermot branch of the Bank of Commerce, and later as a Savings Bank. At some unknown date, a passageway was opened between the two neighbouring buildings for more convenient access to the two sections. The problems of maintaining two large buildings of this sort are apparent, and during 1967 the Bank of Commerce began preparations to abandon the use of the edifice at 389 Main Street. With the construction of Lombard Place and the subsequent completion of that project, the Bank of Commerce removed its Winnipeg headquarters from the colonnaded 'temple' into the Richardson Building. This took place during 1969, and the building has remained vacant since that time, while

the Hamilton Building enjoys a high degree of occupancy.

The City Directory of 1918 indicates that the first tenant of the Hamilton Bank Building was the United Grain Growers (UGG) group.²² The occupancy of the UGG has been unusual, for that organization has been the principal tenant of the edifice since its opening, having initially occupied the fourth to eighth floors, but in more recent years, extending their use of the premises to most of the building. The UGG was formed in 1906 as the Grain Growers' Grain Company Limited, arising "out of grievances concerning the transportation and market of the [wheat] crop."²³ It was "the first grain marketing organization of Canadian farmers to be erected on a wider base than a local co-operative elevator company."²⁴ In 1908, a magazine called The Grain Growers' Guide was established, with the Public Press being formed a year later to print that journal. The firm was established as a subsidiary company in 1911, and during 1912, the Grain Growers' Grain Company entered into the elevator business, building sixty elevators in six years.²⁵ During 1917, the Grain Growers' Grain Company Limited and the Alberta Farmers' Co-operative Elevator Company Limited amalgamated to form the above-mentioned United Grain Growers Limited.²⁶ Since that time the UGG has been the principal voice in wheat marketing in Western Canada.

Another long-term tenant of the Hamilton Building was the legal firm of Pitblado, Hoskins, et al, which commenced their use of the ninth floor during 1919, vacating the premises when they moved to the Richardson Building in the late 1960s. Issac Pitblado was the founder of this group. He was born in Nova Scotia in 1867, coming to Winnipeg with his family during 1882. His father, Charles Bruce Pitblado, became a well-known Presbyterian minister in the Manitoba capital. Young Pitblado was called to the Bar in 1890. During the year 1903, he helped to organize the legal firm of Aikins, Pitblado, Robson and Loftus, which was a fore-runner of the firm which came to occupy the ninth floor of the Hamilton Bank. Offered a Dominion cabinet position in 1917, he turned down the venture and instead, served as one of the commissioners for uniform laws in 1918. At the age of ninety in 1957, Pitblado was still actively practising law.²⁷ He died in 1964.²⁸

From exterior appearances, the Hamilton Building is in excellent condition for its age, being well

maintained throughout the years of its existence. The assessment on the edifice was done during 1967, and it was found that the building was in good condition, with modernization being noted on some of the upper floors. At that time, the exterior required a good cleaning and the stone cornices had been repaired the previous year.²⁹ During 1974, the revolving door at the entrance was replaced with a vestibule, and the lower half of the bronze entrance grill was removed. One may gain further insights from this information which has been gathered from the civic assessments records:

Basement	12' ceiling	First storey	16' ceiling
Mezzanine	11' "	Mezzanine ceiling	6' "
Second to ninth	12' " x eight storeys		
Roof light	7' ³⁰		

Historically, this building draws its significance largely from its tenants, namely the United Grain Growers, which came to occupy the building in 1918, and also from the legal firm with which Issac Pitblado was associated. The United Grain Growers made a very significant contribution to the fields of the co-operative movement and to the handling of farmers' grains. In the seventy years of its existence, this group has become the foremost of the Canadian agricultural groups. Issac Pitblado made numerous contributions to the history of Canadian jurisprudence, having set "for his fellow Canadians a fine example of citizenship."³¹ Of course, the Hamilton Building draws great significance from the beauty of its architectural presentation. Professor John Graham has called this "the best local example of the Renaissance Italian palace stretched vertically to clothe the tall office building."³² Lastly, the Hamilton Building is significant because it was the last major edifice to be erected in the downtown as a result of the building boom of the early decades of Winnipeg's existence.

ENDNOTES--

1. A. St. L. Trigge, A History of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, Vol. III, (Toronto, ON: Canadian Bank of Commerce, 1934) p. 57.
2. The Colonist Magazine, January, 1898, p. 3.
3. Manitoba Free Press, November 1, 1897.
4. Free Press, May 20, 1898.
5. Free Press, November 28, 1901. See also City Tax Records, 1899-1900.
6. Trigge, op. cit., p. 124.
7. Foote Photograph Collection, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, #1345. This shows the Bank of Hamilton on May 6, 1916, with a surrounding wrecker's hoarding.
8. Building Permit (BP), 457/1916, issued June 6, 1916.
9. Ibid. At the time of the permit, the contract had not been let.
10. Ibid. Final inspection took place May 20, 1918.
11. Arthur A. Stoughton, "The Bank of Hamilton Building, Winnipeg", in Construction, December, 1919, pp. 368-373.
12. Ibid., p. 372.
13. Ibid., p. 369.
14. Ibid., pp. 369-371.
15. Ibid., pp. 371-372.
16. Ibid., p. 372.
17. Trigge, op. cit., p. 140.
18. Ibid., p. 141.
19. Ibid., p. 147.

20. Ibid., p. 148.
21. Ibid., p. 149.
22. Henderson's City Directory, 1918.
23. R.D. Colquette, The First Fifty Years (Winnipeg, MB: The Public Press, 1947), p. 9.
24. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
25. Ibid., pp. 97-98.
26. Ibid., p. 117.
27. Winnipeg Free Press, March 22, 1957, p. 6. Material for this sketch is largely taken from this account.
28. Winnipeg Free Press, December 1, 1973. "It Happened Here".
29. Civic Assessment Records (CAR), dated November 29, 1967 and January 4, 1966 respectively.
30. CAR.
31. William Lyon Mackenzie King, quoted in Winnipeg Free Press, March 22, 1957, p. 6.
32. John W. Graham, A Guide to the Architecture of Greater Winnipeg. (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 1960), p. 24.

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Plate 1 – 395 Main Street, Bank of Hamilton Building, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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Plate 2 – Caricature of architect John D. Atchison, 1909. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N5242.)



Plate 3 – Original Bank of Hamilton Building, Main Street, 1916. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection #1345 [N2320].)

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Plate 4 – Detail of main entrance 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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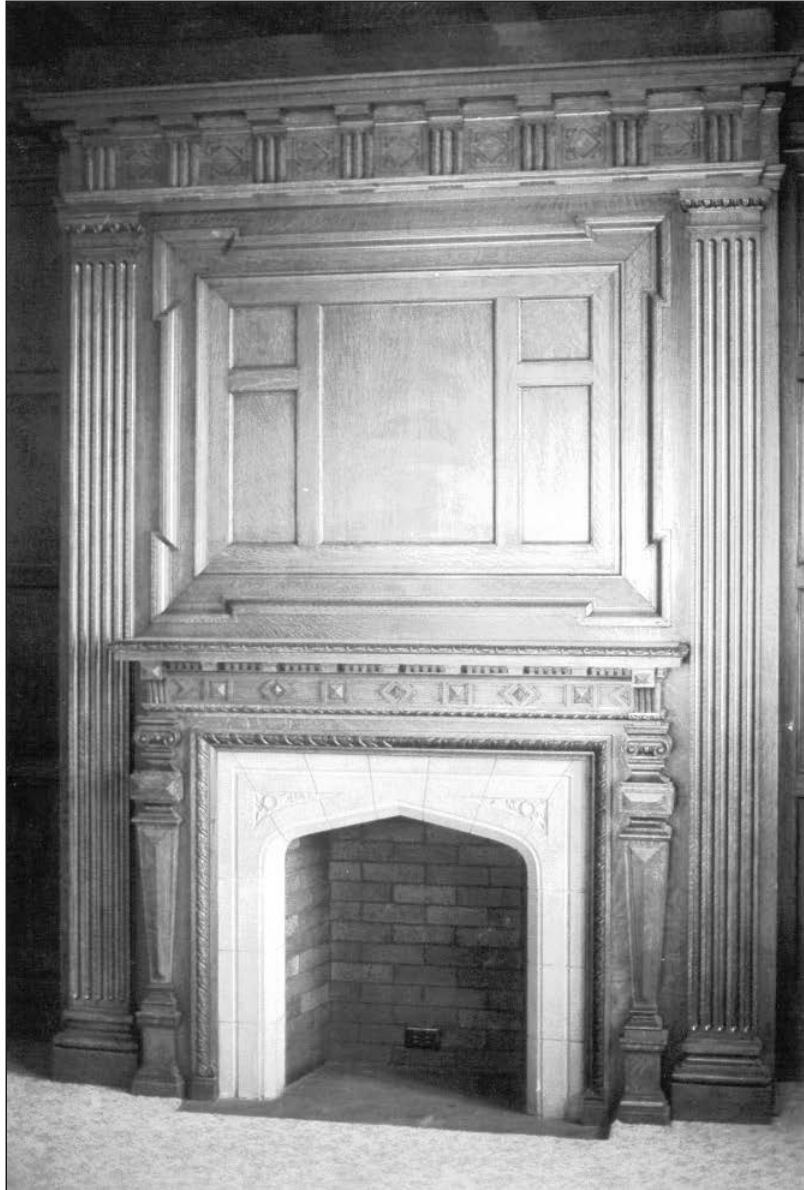


Plate 5 – Second floor boardroom fireplace, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 6 – Magnificent curved staircase, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)