

Coca-Cola Building

2104 Grand Avenue
completed 1915

by Ann McFerrin

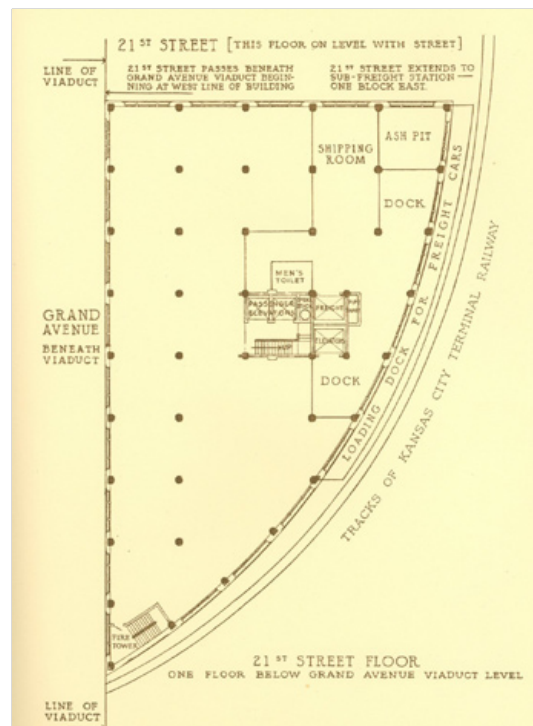
Most people in the Kansas City area know the tall and distinctive landmark building at 21st and Grand as the Western Auto Building. Earlier Kansas City residents knew it under two other names: the Candler Building, and its original moniker, the Coca-Cola Building.

By the early twentieth century, the future of Kansas City showed great promise. The population in the 1880s was 60,000; by 1909 it had grown to 248,000. With its central location, the city became a focus for commerce and industry, including livestock and agricultural-related businesses, banking, and the railroad industry, among others. Several national companies placed regional headquarters here, such as Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck and Company. Finally, there were plans in the works for the building of a new train station near 24th and Main streets.

It was this thriving city that attracted Asa G. and Charles H. Candler, president and vice-president respectively of the Coca-Cola Company of Atlanta. Asa Candler commented about their search for a place in the central west of America in which the company could build a new plant and distribution center:

We learned that twenty states of the union, embracing more than two million square miles with a population exceeding twenty-five million people, were more advantageously served by Kansas City than by any other city, and that the distributing facilities of Kansas City were superior to any other in this district . . . We found it to be equally advantageously located for passenger traffic . . . Capital and labor were apparently living together in more harmonious relations than in any other city of equal importance.

Kansas City was one of several cities in North America chosen as a regional headquarters for Coca-Cola, a product with an intriguing history. Dr. John Stith Pemberton of Atlanta created the drink Coca-Cola in 1886. He sold it at a soda fountain for five cents a glass, serving an average of nine drinks a day during the first year.



In 1891, Atlanta entrepreneur Asa G. Candler acquired complete ownership of the business for \$2,300. His flair for merchandising expanded the market and, by 1895--less than ten years after the drink was invented--the company boasted that Coca-Cola "was drunk in every state and territory of the United States."

In order to keep up with the demand for the product, the company's chief of construction, Arthur Tufts of Baltimore, had designed Coca-Cola buildings throughout North America: New York City, Dallas, Winnipeg, Chicago, Baltimore, and Atlanta. None of the designs used by Mr. Tufts for the Coca-Cola Company buildings was the same, and he was responsible for the design of the Kansas City structure.

Coca-Cola purchased property at 21st and Grand in 1913, close to the location of the new Union Station. The land was pie-shaped, thus Mr. Tufts efficiently designed a three-sided pie-shaped building. Swenson Construction Company was the contractor, and construction took place in 1914-1915.

Covering three acres of land bounded by Grand on the west, 21st on the north, and the railroad tracks on the south and east (along the curved side), the 12-story building is made of reinforced concrete and steel. The building's design, called "Commercial-style," was popular in the early twentieth century and contains some classical elements. Commercial-style buildings were built to provide utilitarian business space that was not costly. They were 5 to 16 stories high and featured large window areas. Decorative elements were added to the building's design by utilizing terra cotta ornamentation and brick veneer. The building features commercial-style windows, those in three parts: a larger pane in the center with narrower, rectangular windows on either side.

The main entrance to the building is on Grand and leads into the third story. Built of brick and considered fireproof, the original construction included a sprinkler system throughout the building and a fireproof stairway. There are two passenger elevators and two freight elevators. Docks for truck shipments were built on the 21st Street side. The final cost of the building totaled close to \$425,000. Realtor for space in the building not occupied by Coca-Cola was the H. R. Ennis Real Estate and Investment Company. A large Coca-Cola sign was placed on top of the building. It remained there until 1928.

In 1919 the Candlers sold the Coca-Cola Company to Ernest Woodruff, an Atlanta banker. The company's local administrative

office remained in the building until 1932, at which time it moved to 817 Walnut. Later in the decade, the management office moved from the Walnut address to the Coca-Cola bottling offices at 2540 West Pennway.

In 1922 the structure at 21st and Grand, still known as the Coca-Cola Building, was sold. The building went into foreclosure in 1929 and was then repurchased by the Candler family. Renamed the Candler Building in 1932, the Candlers owned it until 1947, at which time they gave the building to Emory University. Three years later, Emory sold it to a New York investor, I. Jerome Riker, who in turn sold it to the Western Auto Company the following year.

The Western Auto Company was founded in Kansas City by George Pepperdine, a bookkeeper, in 1909. He sold automobile parts by mail, mainly Ford Model Ts. His business quickly expanded, and the company moved from their original location at 1426 Grand to the Coca-Cola Building in 1928, occupying the 11th floor. Over time, Western Auto acquired more and more of the space in the building. By 1951, the company bought the building and renamed it the Western Auto Building, placing a large "Western Auto" sign on the roof in 1952. It is still there today.

Beginning in 1961, the Western Auto Company changed hands several times. Advance Auto Parts of Roanoke, Virginia, bought the company in 1998, and the new owners put the Western Auto Building up for sale in June of 1999. Some interior alterations have taken place over the years, but the basic plan of rooms and offices remain the same. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

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