

Scarritt Building

818 Grand Avenue
completed 1907

by Susan Jezak Ford

The skyscraper was undoubtedly the most important architectural innovation of the turn of the century. Made possible by the invention of the elevator and encouraged by ever-increasing property values in downtowns across the country, the skyscraper took form in the early 1900s and evolved into an omnipresent building form. One of Kansas City's earliest skyscrapers was the Scarritt Building, an ornate, 12-story structure at 9th Street and Grand Avenue from 1906 to 1907.

When it was built, the \$1 million Scarritt Building was praised as a very modern structure, representing the latest in architectural style and construction methods. It occupied 97 feet of Grand Avenue and 120 feet of 9th Street. The fireproof building contains an interior steel skeleton surrounded by reinforced concrete. The entrance to the building faces south, providing a two-story base clad in granite gray terra cotta tile for the upper towers. The second story of the building is capped by a heavily embellished string course, from which two, ten-story towers rise.

The towers are separated by a light well that provided ample interior light to the offices in each tower in the days of feeble electric light bulbs. This turn-of-the-century desire for natural light is fully met in the structural layout of this building. The first seven stories of each tower are clad in vitrified brick on the outside of the building and in white enamel brick in the light court, for increased light reflection to interior spaces. The top two stories are identified by another decorated terra cotta string course between the ninth and tenth floors. The building is capped by an ornate cornice, garnished with antefixae, or decorative upright tiles projecting from the flat roof.

The building incorporated "all the latest and most modern principles in heating and ventilating," according the *Kansas City Journal* and allowed each of the 500 steam heat radiators to be



controlled by its own thermostat. The electric wiring was deemed the most elaborate in Kansas City and included five electric elevators. The building's 400 windows were said to be not only fireproof, but resistant to weather and dust as well, adding to the comfort, safety, and cleanliness of the structure.

The building's design was the product of the architectural firm of Root and Siemens, an off-shoot of the well-known Chicago firm of Burnham and Root. Walter Root, younger brother to John Wellborn Root, worked for his brother's business before he was sent to Kansas City in 1886 to oversee the construction of several buildings designed by the firm. By 1888, he had decided to remain here, and he formed a partnership with George Siemens that lasted for the rest of his life. The firm designed many residential buildings, churches, city and commercial structures, but the Scarritt Building is their best known work.

The Scarritt Building's aesthetic design bears a strong resemblance to works done by Chicago architect Louis Sullivan. Sullivan, one of the fathers of the Chicago School of architecture, was very influential in the design of the country's earliest skyscrapers. The Scarritt Building closely follows his recommendation that a tall building should be comprised of a base, shaft, and cornice. The ornate, floral embellishment of Sullivan's buildings was often imitated, and the Scarritt Building bears a strong resemblance to several of Sullivan's Chicago creations. The deeply cut tile that adorns the entrance and interior crown moldings of the Scarritt Building highlights organically influenced forms entwined with geometric patterns, similar to Sullivan's designs of the early 1900s.

The construction of the Scarritt Building solidified the northwest corner of 9th and Grand as a core of downtown activity. The building filled a former deep excavation that, for years, was nothing more than two small shacks set in a pit and surrounded by billboards. The erection of the structure not only changed the appearance of the corner, but also brought first-class businesses to the location. The building attracted a variety of tenants representing the fields of investments, real estate, land development, education, and even the promotion of Mount Washington Cemetery. The Scarritt Building was part of a construction boom along Grand Avenue that included several skyscrapers, hotels, apartments, theaters, and restaurants. Following a few, intense years of building activity, Kansas City was left, not with a clearly defined main street, but with the beginnings of a substantial business district.

The Scarritt Building was built and managed by the Scarritt Estate Company, a firm that evolved out of the estate of the Reverend Nathan Scarritt. Scarritt was one of the largest early property owners in Kansas City, as well as one of the first millionaires here. The Scarritt Estate Company was managed by his son, Nathan, one of his six children.

The adjoining Scarritt Arcade, was also built from 1906 to 1907 and served as a connection via a tunnel between its entrance at 819 Walnut with the sub-basement of the Scarritt Building. The four-story arcade continued the Chicago School theme of tile trim carved with abstracted floral designs. Its design also brought an abundance of natural light into the interior of marble, tile, and mahogany through the use of interior light wells.

Diverse tenants provided services and diversions for shoppers and strollers along its well-lit, indoor path. "You will find a man's hat store, a millinery store, a ticket office, a lunch parlor and numerous other enterprises in the Arcade," an article in a 1908 issue of *The Kansas City Spirit* magazine proclaimed. As promised, the William P. Brown company made and remodeled men's hats, Barbre and Watson, Exclusive Milliners displayed a bounty of ladies' hats, and the Erie Railroad office could send travelers all the way to New York. Lunch was served on mahogany tables and leather upholstered chairs at the Woodford Farm Pure Milk Parlor, "where you can get milk that is not tinted blue, and a luncheon that need not be followed by any aids to digestion," the magazine continued. The arcade's many diversions basically created an interior street within the downtown location.

The Scarritt Building and Scarritt Arcade were placed on the National and Kansas City Registers of Historic Places in 1971 in recognition of their superior architecture. The nomination to the National Register cites the Scarritt Building as "the finest example of a Chicago School skyscraper in Kansas City" and as "a unique example of the turn-of-the-century preoccupation with natural light." The Sullivan-esque architectural embellishments of this early skyscraper are still rare in Kansas City and the light-filled atrium and light well are energy-efficient features copied by many of today's newest buildings.

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