

Boley Building

12th and Walnut Streets
completed 1908

By Ann McFerrin

The Boley Building, built in 1908, is the design of Louis Curtiss, a talented and eccentric architect originally from Canada. It is located on the northwest corner of 12th and Walnut in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. The design of the building is very significant, as it differed greatly from styles of buildings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is one of the earliest examples in the world of metal-glass curtain wall construction. With this design, it appears that a transparent glass wall encloses the structure of the building as opposed to the building supporting the windows. Steel and reinforced concrete form the support to walls of glass. This type of building is considered commonplace today, as used in many modern skyscrapers, but at the time the Boley Building was built, it was a most uncommon style.

Louis Curtiss was born in Ontario, Canada in 1865. He arrived in Kansas City about 1890 after studying at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and travelling in Europe. A private person, he rarely talked about his childhood. He went into business with architect Frederick Gunn for a few years, but the partnership later dissolved and Curtiss went out on his own.

At the time the building was constructed, the property was owned by two entities. One was the Atkins Trust and the other was the Walpole Estate. In 1866, James Burris Atkins bought the north part of the property (about 50 feet) for \$500. Although Atkins was in the milling business, he made a great deal of money in ownership of various parcels of real estate downtown. In 1880, Richard C. Walpole purchased the southern portion of the property (about 40 feet) for \$14,800. Mr. Atkins died in 1886, leaving his property to his widow, Mary McAfee Atkins. When Mary McAfee Atkins died in 1911, she left money in her will to help fund a "Museum of Fine



Arts." Monies made through the sale of her portion of the Boley Building (in 1915) and other properties were later incorporated with those of William Rockhill Nelson to create what is now the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

Charles N. Boley's clothing business was located at 10th and Main from 1904 until 1909. Formerly a newspaper editor, he became a very successful businessman. He announced the construction of a new building for his Boley Clothing Company in 1908 to be built on property he had leased for 99 years at 12th and Walnut. There was a saloon on the property at the time, but that was cleared off and construction began July 1908.

In preparation, an innovative method was used for excavation of the ground. Instead of using horses and wagons to carry unneeded "dirt up a steep incline out of the excavated area" away from the construction site, boxes of dirt were taken out by a derrick, with the horses and wagons remaining on the street level.

There had been previously a building with an all-glass front built in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1899, but because of fragility, it collapsed in 1903. When Louis Curtiss was hired to design the building for Mr. Boley, Curtiss used his own skills as an engineer and architect to develop the innovative design. The larger glass area provided a better view of merchandise for sale inside the building. In addition, rolled steel columns were used for the first time in the construction, as opposed to the earlier use "of steel plates riveted together." There was over 15,000 square feet of glass in the façade. The floors are cantilevered, which means they are anchored on one end and project from the attached point. The façade is hung from the cantilevered portions, with the support columns back away from the façade.

Light was the focus of the building. Not only was much of the exterior made of panes of glass, but the use of glass also extended to the interior. The showcases and cabinets were of glass. The elevator shafts incorporated the use of plate glass instead of ironwork. Strong lights and mirrors were used on the inside, making the building look larger than it was. There was some oak woodwork. The foyer was of tile and mosaic. Linoleum covered the concrete floors. Advertising as "The Daylight Store," the building opened on March 31, 1909, with a big celebration, including band music and tours of the building.

In 1918, the Hallidie Building opened in downtown San Francisco, designed by Willis J. Polk. Larger than the Boley Building, it is

sometimes incorrectly credited as being the first glass curtain-wall building. There are some similarities in both buildings, but the Boley Building predates the Hallidie Building by several years. The Hallidie's architect, Willis J. Polk, lived in Kansas City at one time. Polk and Curtiss were both members of the same architectural club, the Kansas City Architects Sketch Club, in the late nineteenth century.

In 1915, Dr. W. S. Woods purchased the north part of the property from the Atkins Trust. The southern portion remained in the Walpole Trust. Mr. Boley's clothing business closed in 1916. Other occupants of the building have been the Federal Film Company and the Vitagraph Film Company and the Bliss Cafeteria. Several jewelry stores have been in the building, including the Oppenstein Jewelry Company. In 1917, an explosion from an acetylene gas tank used by a jeweler exploded. One person was killed and several people injured. For several years, the building was also the headquarters of the Katz Drug Company, owned by Michael and Isaac Katz. The building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1971.

Upon the death of Dr. W. S. Woods, his portion of the property went to his heirs, including his granddaughter, Mrs. James M. Kemper, and her family. The south part of the structure continued to be owned by the Walpole Trust until 1979, when it was bought by Tower Properties. The chairman and president of Tower Properties at that time was James M. Kemper, Jr.

In the mid-1980s, buildings between 11th and 12th streets north of the Boley Building were torn down to build the AT&T Town Pavilion. Because of its historical significance, the Boley Building was renovated and became an anchor for the project. Occupants of the building have come and gone but Mr. Boley's name remains, etched in the masonry above the top floor on the 12th and Walnut side.

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