

# Pigott building reached 210 feet into the skyscape

Built in 1929 for \$1,000,000, the Pigott building was the first skyscraper in Hamilton and one of the first in Ontario.

Hamilton architects Bernard and Fred Prack used Art Deco/Gothic Revival style (which was popular for a short time in New York) to make this building unique. It was called the most beautiful building in Hamilton and the most interesting in the province.

Flanked by the Sun Life Building, its strong vertical lines, elongated middle and stacked segments drew viewers' eyes upward. It reached a height of 210 feet and had 18-storeroys above the pavement.

The latest and most sophisticated methods of construction were used by the Pigott Construction Co. Parts for the building were brought from all over the world. Glass came from Belgium while steel window frames were bought in England. Many of the other parts came from across Canada.

The exterior was decorated with tyndall limestone sheathing which covered the steel skeleton. The interior was richly decorated in the traditional manner with marble and fine tiles.

The lobby was painted by church decorators using the colours red, blue, and gold. Stained glass windows were installed which depicted scenes of interest relating to the building. Searchlights, which

revolved every 30 seconds, were installed on the rooftop to notify people of its presence as far as 80 miles away with its 2-million candle beam.

Three months before the completion of the building, two-thirds of it was already rented. Doctors, architects, engineers, and other businesses were in a hurry to move into their new luxury offices. The Bank of Montreal took the entire ground floor of the building the same day as the fire in the old Bank of Montreal office. They had to cope with only half of the space for some time since the other half was not finished yet but the next day the bank opened at the right time at the new location serving customers.

Many people, including the elevator man, Willie Thompson, remembered it as a bright time for the building. The windows were always clean, the floors shining, many staff members always hurrying around to make sure that everything looked its best. Joseph Pigott, the head of the Pigott Construction Co. at the time, took a real pride in his work.

The Pigott building continued to be a popular office building until the 1970s when it was sold to a new owner, Capital Development Company. In the early 1980s, the steel and limestone structure changed hands several times, almost becoming a hotel.

There was a suggestion to build a luxury hotel in the Pigott and Sun Life buildings for a long time until the city and Henry Lang, the head of the project, finally agreed on the terms. It was supposed to bring many jobs to Hamilton. But all the work on the hotel stopped when 14 men working on demolishing the interiors were not paid, and it was clear that the developer would not be able to afford the project. The city did not want to be left with two empty sites marring the downtown streetscape. As a result, the buildings were left standing.

Many pieces of the Pigott building, including doors, marble, and door handles were sold at that time. The elevators were shut down to save on electricity. Only Willie Thompson stayed behind, living in a small room in the basement, walking around the empty building on his own. Willie vowed that he would stay in the Pigott building forever, even after he died.

The Pigott building was designated as a property of historic and architectural value or interest by the city of Hamilton in 1984. The designation also mentioned the Commercial Centre, which was on the site before Pigott building. In 1986, Luciano Pupolin, plumbing and heating contractor, purchased the building hoping to restore it. He was willing to invest \$10 million to bring the building back to life. The construction of condominiums and a parking lot containing 110 spaces began.

Mr. Pupolin sold the building in the middle of reconstruction to the Toronto Development Company because it was clear that a more substantial investment was required. This company would complete renovations, provide management and maintenance, and lease the units.

When the building was sold, it was discovered that the historically important stained glass windows, massive revolving doors, and fancy woodwork had been taken from the building. It was thought that the loss occurred sometime near the beginning of the hotel construction project. The stained glass windows were later found in a second hand antique shop, and purchased for \$12,000. They were put back in place in the lobby of the Pigott building.



• *Different view offered of the Pigott building.*

The Pigott and Sun Life buildings were combined to make Heritage Gardens, a condominium and retail project. The building has 109 apartments, including a fancy two-floor penthouse equipped with a fireplace and personal elevator stop. The demand for the old luxury condominiums was surprising and within eight months 92 out of 109 apartments had been sold.

While no longer the highest point in the city, the Pigott Building is still a distinguished component of downtown Hamilton.

- Margaret Houghton