

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

Historic name First National Bank Tower

Other names/site number FirstMerit Tower

2. Location

street & number 106 South Main Street n/a not for publication

city or town Akron vicinity

state Ohio code _____ county Summit code _____ zip code 44308

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:
 entered in the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 determined eligible for the
National Register
 See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the
National Register
 removed from the National Register
 other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper _____ Date of Action _____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/financial and business

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/financial and business

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Art Deco

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation	<u>concrete</u>
roof	<u>low slope built up roof</u>
walls	<u>brick, terra cotta, limestone,</u>
other	<u>glass and metal storefronts</u>

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

See continuation sheets

**First National Bank Tower (FirstMerit)
Akron, Summit Co., OH**

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary location of additional data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: _____

**First National Bank Tower (FirstMerit)
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10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property less than 1/2 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing	Zone Easting Northing
1 <u>17 456415 4547800</u>	3 _____
2 _____	4 _____

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

The plot roughly coinciding with the building line located in Lots 1 and 2, block 10, King's Addition, Akron, Ohio: Beginning at the intersection of the easterly line of South Howard Street with the southerly line of East Mill St., and running thence with the northerly line of Lot 1 and the southerly line of East Mill Street S 74 degrees E 204 feet 10-5/8 inches to the westerly line of South Main Street; thence with the westerly line of South Main Street S 26 degrees 15 minutes W 108 feet 10 inches to the middle of a party wall [now removed]; thence along the middle of said party wall N 74 degrees W 172 feet 2-7/16 inches to the easterly line of South Howard Street; thence following said street line N 5 degrees 53 minutes W 37 feet 5-3/4 inches to an angle in said street line, thence continuing along South Howard Street N 16 degrees E 72 feet 6 inches to the place of beginning.

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

Property boundary of original and current owner

11. Form Prepared By

name/title organization Elwin C. Robison, Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc.

date 28 April 2006

street & number 1869 East Aurora Road, Suite 300

telephone 330.487.1100

city or town Twinsburg state Ohio zip code 44087

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white** photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name FirstMerit Corporation, Inc.

street & number 106 South Main Street

telephone 330.996.6449

city or town Akron state OH zip code 44038

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of

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this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Engineering

Commerce

Period of Significance

1931

Significant Dates

construction begun June 1930

dedication 23 July 1931

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Walker and Weeks Architects, Cleveland, Ohio

Carmichael Construction Co., contractor

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**First National Bank Tower (FirstMerit)
Akron, Summit County, Ohio**

The First National Bank of Akron Tower, now called the FirstMerit Tower, anchors Akron's downtown at the southwest intersection of Mill and South Main Streets (Figure 01). It consists of a 28-story tower fronting South Main Street, with an eight-story annex to the west. Originally the west elevation of the eight-story annex fronted on South Howard Street, but that street was vacated and now serves as the entrance ramp for the Cascade Parking deck. The original elevation to the west is covered by two levels of parking deck and a new stone clad entrance pavilion (Figure 12). The south elevation originally was obscured up to the sixth story by a party wall building. However, the adjacent buildings were demolished to form the Cascade Plaza in 1967. Currently the First National Bank Tower shares the city block with three additional isolated mid-rise buildings with the Cascade Plaza in between. The property being nominated consists of the First National Bank (FirstMerit) Tower and its immediate building line.

Exterior:

The First National Bank Tower is Akron's tallest building at 28 stories and 309 feet high.¹ It was designed by Walker and Weeks Architects of Cleveland, Ohio in the Art Deco style in 1929. Construction began on 20 October 1929,² with the dedication of the building on 23 July 1931.³ The structure consists of two primary masses: the 28-story tower to the east (Figure 7), and the eight-story mass behind the tower commonly referred to as the west annex (Figure 10). The tower is articulated by setbacks which increase the apparent height of the building as it tapers upward. The first setback in the Tower occurs at the 13th floor where the building steps back approximately 12 feet on the north and south elevations. The 19th floor setbacks are small triangular areas where the tower's square corners transition to a chamfer. At the 24th floor, the chamfered corners step back only slightly, while the walls recess further creating a projecting pier at each corner. Unlike the side elevations with their multiple setbacks, the front façade of the building goes straight up without interruption to the 24th floor, so that the South Main Street facade presents an imposing front to the street (Figure 7, Figure 9). Huge floodlights on the 24th story setback terrace illuminate the top four stories. The lit masonry acts as a crown positioned on the top of the building, emulating buildings erected in New York City, such as the New York Radiator Building. At the 19th story parapets, thin pencil-like light beams shine up against the four 12-foot corner panels of the Tower for added effect.⁴

Unlike the tower with its setbacks, the eight-story west annex has elevations which are unbroken from the ground to the parapets. This section was constructed first to provide the bank with office space while the tower was constructed. The west annex houses the three story banking hall on the main level, with a shopping arcade underneath and offices above. A small penthouse is located in the southwest corner of the west annex which houses elevator machinery and HVAC equipment. Large windows originally illuminated this space on the north because at the time of construction, a party wall building occupied the land to the south. In order to introduce light and air into the offices on the upper floors in this part of the building, a light well was cut into the west annex on the south side from the fourth floor up (Figure 4).⁵ Since the removal of the adjacent buildings and construction of the Cascade Plaza in 1967, this light well

¹Preliminary reports gave a figure of 290 feet, see "Local Bank To Build At Cost of \$2,000,000." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 9 Mar. 1929: 1. However, as constructed the 28th floor roof is 309 feet above the first floor, and 321 feet above the Arcade level which has a ground floor entrance to the west.

²Grismer, Karl H. *Akron and Summit County*. Akron, Ohio: Summit County Historical Society, 1952. p. 432.

³"New Bank Tower Open To Public." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 23 July 1931: 1.

⁴"Arrange Three Days For Public To Visit Tower." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 July 1931: 10.

⁵"Symbolic Style of Tower Lines Deserves Study."

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**First National Bank Tower (FirstMerit)
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cutout can be seen on the south elevation. When the adjacent party wall building was removed for plaza construction, a new granite cladding was installed up to the seventh floor of the tower, and new windows were installed in the banking room in the west annex. In 2000 the granite cladding was removed and a temporary weather coating was applied (Figure 8). It is the intention of FirstMerit to install a more permanent cladding in the near future.

The steel frame features built-up columns and beams using cover plates riveted to rolled shapes to strengthen them. Deep riveted trusses carry the loads of the upper floors over the open banking hall. Primary wind bracing is placed along the perimeter of the tower, with columns and beams reinforced by multiple cover plates riveted to the rolled sections. A total of 3,600 tons of steel was used to construct the building's structural system.⁶

Floors consist of concrete pan joists in the west annex. However, in the tower portion concrete floor slabs are supported on open web steel joists, an early use of the technology. These open web steel joists have a small channel for the top chord, and a crimped plate for the bottom chord. The web portion is formed by a bent steel rod which zigzags up and down and is welded to the top and bottom chords. This contrasts with the typical double angle chords commonly used today. First developed in the early 1920's, inclusion of open web steel joists was an early use of this new technology.⁷ Of the fourteen patents issued by the US Patent Office between 1924 and 1936, eight were issued to northern Ohio engineers. With so much local action in the development of this new technology, it is logical that a prominent Akron building would take advantage of this new building construction product.

The structure features a curtain wall of primarily brick, terra cotta and Indiana limestone supported by outriggers and steel plates cantilevered from the steel frame. Brick piers run from the storefronts uninterrupted to the parapets, giving a vertical emphasis to the building. The brick has a white glaze with dark flecks, imitating limestone from a distance. The spandrels use a brick with a darker glaze, giving a receding shadow effect. Projecting dark bricks are spaced in a uniform grid across the spandrel to give an accent of color and additional light / shadow definition (Figure 13). The terra cotta panels in the parapets feature a floral motif with dark glazed recesses behind the three dimensional molded elements (Figure 14). Consistent with the Art Deco style, the patterns molded into the terra cotta feature wavy or zig-zag lines which create a dynamic contrast of light and shadow. Most of the brick and terra cotta were produced in Akron and its vicinity.⁸

The base of the building is clad in limestone up to the fourth story. The gently rounded profile of vertical reeds sets up the vertical rhythm carried by the brick piers above. At ground level are display storefronts with large plate glass panels and Monel metal trim. By discontinuing the heavy brick piers at the street level, the architect took advantage of the maximum amount of available display area for stores and lighting for offices.

The original main entry along Main Street was a three-story recess faced by an aluminum grillwork (Figure 7). The scale of the entry, together with the unbroken 24 story surface above, triggered updrafts and swirling winds around the

⁶ "Steel Tests Show Fine Measurements." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 July 1931: 11.

⁷ Jonathan Ochshorn, "Truss Systems in 20th-Century Architecture," *Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Architecture*, Taylor and Francis Publishers, 2003.

⁸ "Symbolic Style of Tower Lines Deserves Study." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 July 1931: 10.

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east face of the Tower. Additionally, the extensive grillwork was difficult to clean.⁹ The entry's reconfiguration in 1940 eliminated the maintenance and updraft problems.¹⁰ Glass revolving doors and a projecting canopy replace the original entrance (Figure 11). The focal point of the front entry is the "Security" figure over the doorway. The terra cotta sculpture depicts a Native American woman clenching a box in her hands. The figure is graceful yet powerful and imposing. Two eagles, one above the projecting canopy and the other originally placed above the Howard Street entrance, were used by the architects to symbolize strength, keenness of vision and efficiency, as does the bank which the eagles protect.

The most prominent change to the exterior is the addition of a wireless transmitter tower on the 28th floor roof. This pyramidal steel tower was added when microwave telecommunications equipment came into common usage. Currently there are nearly 20 antennas on the roof serving various cell phone, long distance, and local wireless networks.

Interior:

The Main Street entrance lobby is clad in marble and accented with aluminum fixtures. Upon entering the lobby, one sees the building directory, made of aluminum and featuring geometric and chevron patterns typical of the Art Deco style (Figure 21). Six elevators are placed in the core of the Tower. Three elevators serve floors one through 11, while the opposite bank of elevators serves 12 through 26.¹¹ These express elevators could obtain speeds of 800 feet per minute, which was impressive for its time.¹² The original elevator doors have been replaced in the main lobby, but the original doors are present in the Arcade level below (Figure 17). To the rear of the elevator lobby is the aluminum post deposit box, which has a slot at the top for inserting mail, and below is a large aluminum door featuring an eagle design (Figure 22). Beyond the elevator lobby is the main banking room. It is elevated five steps above the main entrance in order to accommodate the shopping arcade below. When constructed, it had 29-foot ceilings creating an open and expansive space. All of the columns, pilasters and countertops were crafted from domestic Tennessee marble and aluminum.¹³ With the addition of the south windows into the banking hall in 1967, the entire area was reconfigured with a new layout and new finishes.

Because the site slopes down towards the west, the Arcade (Figure 15) had a ground floor entrance on the west elevation along Howard Street, but it is below grade on the east elevation at Main Street. This partly subterranean shopping arcade was designed to maximize the rentable retail space available. The west elevation of the west annex originally had an Arcade level entrance and glass storefronts, but construction of the Cascade Parking Deck has covered that portion of the facade. Now a low, battered granite form serves as the entry from the elevated Cascade Plaza, with one of the original eagles placed above the granite wall (Figure 12). This new entrance leads down to the main banking hall in the west annex via twin escalators.

The aluminum and glass entry to the safe deposit vault (Figure 20) is located at the foot of the stairs leading from the main lobby to the shopping arcade. An aluminum screen which provides security to the area features a moon and star motif. The double doors use horizontal lines combined with a scallop pattern, and the transom above the doors

⁹ "Face-Lifting Set At First Central." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 27 Aug. 1940: 15.

¹⁰ "Face-Lifting Set At First Central."

¹¹ Walker and Weeks, "The Central Tower Building of the Central Depositors Trust Company," Akron: 12 December 1930.

¹² "Roof Offers Splendid Panorama of Akron." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 July 1931: 11.

¹³ Walker and Weeks, op. cit.

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features two male figures pulling taut a rope wrapped around a box, representing security (Figure 19). The original elevator doors remain on this level, using vertical lines and a scallop pattern similar to that of the safe deposit doors (Figure 17).

Lobbies and corridors in the upper hall have been altered through renovations in most of the building below the 12th floor, but the upper section of the tower (with its smaller floor plate that is less desirable in today's office rental market) retains much of the original corridor and lobby finishes. A white veined marble wainscot framed with wood trim characterizes these upper lobbies. Where original dark stained oak doors are present, they have a door handle with a escutcheon plate that has a stylized bas relief of the tower. Most original corridors also have a vertical mail slot on the hinge rail. Terrazzo floors remain in most of these upper lobbies.

A state-of-the-art mechanical system originally ventilated the building. It produced 1 1/2 million cubic feet of washed air per hour. Seven thousand gallons of water were used every hour to wash incoming air and keep the system running. After leaving the spray chamber, the air passed through a series of plates that eliminated moisture. Large blowers made of steel and powered by 25-horsepower electric motors drove the air into the structure. Separate ventilating systems in different sections of the building were each able to handle 500,000 cubic feet of air an hour. Foul air was piped and emptied far above the tower roof. Because of the ventilating system, the huge ornate paneled windows in the main banking room were inoperable.¹⁴ These systems have all been upgraded over time, but the building still takes advantage of the ductwork and chases included in the original design.

¹⁴ "Provides Washed Air Throughout." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 July 1931: 10.

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The First National Bank Tower is Akron's first skyscraper and still is its tallest building. It was designed by Walker and Weeks Architects of Cleveland, Ohio. It represents a cutting-edge Art Deco design by a significant regional architectural firm, hence its nomination under Criteria C. The form of the Tower is defined by setbacks, which became symbols of modern skyscraper construction following the New York City setback law of 1916. Its physical size also reflects the economic growth of Akron, fueled largely by the rubber and tire industry. The project was begun by the Central Savings and Trust Company, which later was known as the Central Depositors Bank, and then for most of its history was called the First National Bank of Akron. Currently known as the FirstMerit Tower, it is the flagship bank building in Akron, and its growth mirrored the growing industrial base and economic activity of the greater Akron region, hence its nomination under Criteria A.

The architectural significance of Akron's First National Bank Tower is best highlighted with a comparison to the Terminal Tower in Cleveland (National Register, 1976). Both buildings served as the premier skyscrapers for their respective cities for decades. Both buildings mark the primary transportation node in the urban grid and were objects of pride for their citizens. However, whereas Cleveland's Terminal Tower is a conservative architectural statement from a long established Chicago firm, the First National Bank Tower is a cutting-edge design by a relatively young regional firm.¹⁵ While the Terminal Tower has close stylistic affinities to the 1907 Metropolitan Life Tower in New York,¹⁶ the First National Bank Tower shares its aesthetic vision with Eliel Saarinen's futuristic second-place entry for the Chicago Tribune Competition of 1922. The firm of Walker and Weeks looked beyond the regional standards and practices of the day and stylistically joined the major financial centers of the world with their bold Art Deco design.

Background History:

Akron's early history is tied to the canal which ran through its central business district. The Ohio and Erie Canal connects Lake Erie at the city of Cleveland to the Ohio River at Portsmouth, Ohio. Thus Akron had a direct water connection to New York City via the Great Lakes and Erie Canal, or New Orleans via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Akron's founding in 1825 coincides with the beginning of the construction of the canal which was completed in 1832. The 17 locks in Akron created water power opportunities for industry. Pottery and barrel-making were the primary early industries.

By the 1860s, railroads had begun to eclipse the canals as the primary mode of transportation. As the canal-dependent industries did before them, the railroad-dependent factories located as close to the main line and spurs as possible. As the canals were replaced by railroads, large flour mills replaced the small canal-supporting industries, and farm implement manufacturers replaced barrel factories. The farm implement companies in turn spawned machine tool factories, parts manufacturers and other supplier industries. Pottery-makers were also taking advantage of the area's natural deposits of high quality clay. However, the biggest growth in Akron was to come from the tire industry. Dr. Benjamin Franklin Goodrich was attracted to Akron by a Board of Trade flyer. With the establishment of B. F. Goodrich, Firestone, Goodyear, Seiberling, and other tire manufacturers, Akron was poised for significant growth. The automobile created a huge demand for tires, and Akron became the self-proclaimed "Rubber Capital of the

¹⁵ "Roof Offers Splendid Panorama Of Akron," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931: 11.

¹⁶ The Metropolitan Life Building, Napoleon LeBrun and Sons, is based on the Venice campanile, while the Terminal Tower, Graham, Anderson, Probst, and White (1929) is loosely based on the campanile of the Cathedral in Seville.

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World.” World War I accelerated this growth, as thousands of people migrated to the area to get new high-paying jobs in the rubber factories. War production directly contributed to Akron's expansion, prompting the locally used nickname “the fastest growing city in the world.”¹⁷ It is this growth and economic prosperity that culminated in the construction of the First National Bank Tower.

The story of the construction of the First National Bank Tower actually begins with the development of the local banking industry. The Bank of Akron was established in 1845 when the city of Akron was small and commerce from the Ohio Canal was booming. In 1863, two national banks were established, First National and Second National Banks.¹⁸ As the Civil War progressed, Akron prospered like never before. New industries thrived, money poured into the town, payrolls soared, and merchants enjoyed record-breaking business.¹⁹ In 1904 Akron's first major bank, Central Savings and Trust, was established. This bank eventually funded the construction of the First National Bank Tower.²⁰ In 1918 Central Savings and Trust established itself at the intersection of Main Street and Mill Street (Figures 6 and 23) - what was then the Hamilton Building - and remained there throughout its lifespan, where the Tower now stands. By the late 1920s, the institution decided it needed a more imposing home and that Akron needed a signature office building. On October 30, 1929, at the same time construction began on the new tower, Central Savings and Trust absorbed the Depositors Savings and Trust Company. The resulting Central-Depositors Bank and Trust Company was headed by G. Karl Dietz and George H. Dunn.²¹

These mergers and acquisitions mirrored the growth of Akron during these years. With the growth of the automobile industry came a proportionate demand for automobile tires. The rubber industry in Akron underwent an expansion that mirrored the growth of manufacturing in and around Detroit. The following table from U.S. Census data shows the rate of growth of Akron from 1900 through 1940:

Year	City Rank in US	Population
1900	#87	42,728
1910	#81	69,067
1920	#32	208,435
1930	#35	255,040
1940	#38	244,791

As can be seen in the table, the greatest rate of growth occurred between 1910 and 1920 when Akron went from a #87 ranking of population in US cities to #32. Population growth over this decade was approximately 200%. This growth is what created the economic base to support the banking infrastructure of Akron, of which the First National Tower was its greatest physical manifestation.

After the decision was made by the Central Savings and Trust Company to build the Tower, they organized the Akron Central Tower Company in the summer of 1929 which, in turn, planned the two million dollar structure.²² Walker and

¹⁷ Although not the fastest growing by national standards, it did enjoy a 200% growth rate from 1910 to 1920, see the US Census record table below.

¹⁸ “First National Bank of Akron” Newspaper clipping from personal collection of Hugh S. Hill, source unknown.

¹⁹ Karl H. Grismer, *Akron and Summit County*. Akron: 1952, p. 202.

²⁰ Scott Dix Kenfield, ed. *Akron and Summit County Ohio 1825-1928*. Akron: 1928, p. 303.

²¹ Grismer, 431-53.

²² Grismer, 432.

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Weeks, a Cleveland-based architecture firm, received the commission to design the Tower. The First National Tower was to be one of the variations of a new building style that Walker and Weeks named “modern.”²³ Originally from Massachusetts, Walker and Weeks moved to Cleveland in 1905, and set up their own office on Euclid Avenue in 1911. The partnership of Walker and Weeks grew during a period of rapid urban growth in the 1920s and as their firm grew, they carved a secure niche for themselves designing banks, offices, and commercial buildings. They had no competition within 300 miles of Cleveland. Their firm offered a combination of things that made them highly successful: aggressive salesmanship, competent delivery of services and superior design. They brought a surprising variety of style into their designs even though the main programs of all their banks were extremely similar. Walker and Weeks produced more than a hundred mutations of the basic Classical and Renaissance styles such as the temple front, colonnade, arch, and rusticated walls. The firm met extraordinary demands of largeness of scale and complexity because of their internal office structure. In its heyday their firm had over 60 staff members which topped most large businesses at that time. Staff members brought in most of the firm’s work and their method of marketing, as well as offering a complete planning service, was the reason for their success. In a time period when it was nearly impossible to speak of an architect’s personal style, Walker and Weeks were considered by many to have a recognizable style, mainly Neoclassic.²⁴

The combination bank and office building was a distinct type in the prewar period that found expression in many new buildings. Walker and Weeks’ typical designs followed a common pattern. A classical street façade of two or three stories provided a base for a shaft of identical floors, which was topped by a separate band of upper stories (like the First National Bank Tower’s “crown”), a colonnaded section, or simply a cornice. Almost without exception these buildings were faced with Indiana limestone, marble or granite at the street-level stories, terra cotta ornamentation, or a matte glazed-brick for the main shaft. The interior banking room was usually a single long, rectangular space and frequently had an elevated platform for the bank officers at one end. It may have columned aisles, a flat-beamed or coffered ceiling, a shallow vaulted ceiling, or rarely, an open truss roof. Access to the office tower was provided by a separate elevator lobby located at either the main entrance before entering the banking room, or through a different entrance at the side or rear of the building.²⁵ The First National Bank Tower follows most of these typical criteria, but its height, multiple setbacks, and Art Deco style make it a unique design.

The First National Bank Tower was built in the Art Deco style, a new modern architectural style influenced by the machine age and its new technologies. Some of the most outstanding characteristics of the style are low relief, geometric forms, naturalistic elements, and figural designs (zigzags, chevrons, stylized floral and leaf motifs, conventional figures and animals). Materials used include polychrome terra cotta, colored mirrors, aluminum, marble, cast stone, and limestone. There was an emphasis on verticality through the introduction of multiple vertical lines, a rejection of historical style elements. However, the basic massing and proportioning of Art Deco buildings tends to follow traditional models established in the Neo-classical styles.

The Tower was to be twice as tall as any building in Akron at the time of construction in 1929. Construction took place in two phases. The west side of the building facing Howard Street was eight stories and was occupied before Tower construction even began. The banking room occupied the entire first floor of the Tower. A restaurant served in the northeast corner of the Tower at street level, an arcade of shops (Figure 15) existed at the basement level with an

²³ Eric Johannesen, *A Cleveland Legacy: The Architecture of Walker and Weeks*. Kent, OH: 1999, p. 44-46.

²⁴ Johannesen, 6-7.

²⁵ Johannesen, 33-34.

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entrance off Howard Street, and a parking garage was built at sub-level with accommodations for 64 cars at completion.²⁶

Building construction was awarded to Carmichael Construction Company and, soon after, the Hamilton Building was demolished to begin Tower erection on July 25, 1930.²⁷ The entire Tower frame was erected in a three-month period, beginning in September and ending in November 1930. The Burger Iron Company, who erected the steel, built a structure that was technologically up-to-date. Floors are supported by open web steel joists, and the masonry veneer is held in place by corrugated metal ties. Numerous tests were done on the Tower steel by a Pittsburgh testing laboratory who found it to be one of the most exact jobs ever tested by that laboratory. Variations in the measurements were less than 3/8 inch, whereas most skyscraper jobs fluctuate between 3/4 and 2 1/2 inches.²⁸

In the main banking room, the days of tellers behind cages were eliminated. A new type of banking screen was designed for closer contact between teller and customer. Also, the room was organized for increased flexibility for rearrangements of departments and spaces. One of the results in this early open office plan was more typewriter clatter noise. Testing was done to create a system reducing noise and vibration and, at the same time, reflecting light to brighten the space. Asbestos fiber and hair were combined to create a noise-deadening system in the banking quarters. This acoustic felt absorbed between 50 and 75 percent of the clatter produced by an ordinary typewriter.²⁹

The bold brick piers, imposing Main Street facade with its cavernous entry, and the Art Deco style suggest the drive and ambition which built Akron as The Rubber City. At the time it was built, the First National Bank Tower utilized the latest in design and building technologies, and featured a rapid yet accurate construction. These design features and elements were proudly proclaimed to reflect the building's function as well as the character of Akron's community.³⁰

The First National Bank Tower is one of the greatest single developments in the history of Akron. It symbolized for local newspapers the spirit of Akron, the faith its people had in its strength and the community and a measure of confidence in Akron's future.³¹ Despite the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, construction on the Tower

²⁶ "Local Bank To Build At Cost Of \$2,000,000," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 9 Mar 1929:1.

²⁷ Grismer, 432.

²⁸ "Steel Tests Show Fine Measurements," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931: 10.

²⁹ "No Noise!," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931:14.

³⁰ "Symbolic Style of Tower Lines Deserves Study," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931: 10.

³¹ "Faith In Akron," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 11 Mar 1929: 4.

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continued. The Tower was formally dedicated on 23 July 1931. Thousands of people visited and ventured to the top, viewing the entire city.³² Music and flowers filled the main banking room and souvenir booklets were passed out to every guest. An opening luncheon was held at the Mayflower Hotel. Guest speakers and all prominent Akronites attended. Despite all the commotion at the opening, banking business was conducted as usual.³³ The bank moved all belongings over to the Tower overnight and placed everything in its exact location as if nothing was disturbed so that it was up and running the next morning at opening. Tellers went about their business as if nothing had ever happened.³⁴

The positive impact the Tower had on the community was evident in Akron's changing skyline. There were many other seven-to-ten story buildings erected in the same time period, meeting the demands of the local economy. However, the First National Bank Tower did not just house businesses - it made a statement about the city of Akron and its economic role in the region. Like few other cities in the nation at that time, Akron was expanding its civic, industrial, and commercial influence.³⁵ The construction of the First National Bank Tower was vital in establishing Akron not just as a manufacturing center, but a financial one as well. More than any other single building, The First National Bank Tower reflects the economic growth of the tire industry and its related support industries.

³² "New Bank Tower Open To Public," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 23 Jul 1931: 14.

³³ "Arrange Three Days For Public To Visit Tower." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931: 10.

³⁴ "City Bank Opens Business In New, Improved Office," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 7 Jul 1931: 24.

³⁵ "Akron's Changing Skyline Reflects Great Prosperity," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 11 Mar 1929: 21.

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2. "Arrange Three Days For Public To Visit Tower." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931: 10.
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4. "Face-Lifting Set At First Central." *Akron Beacon Journal*. 27 Aug 1940: 15.
5. "Faith In Akron," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 11 Mar 1929: 4.
6. "First National Bank of Akron" Newspaper clipping from personal collection of Hugh S. Hill, source unknown.
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8. Johannesen, Eric. *A Cleveland Legacy: The Architecture of Walker and Weeks*. Kent, OH: 1999, p. 44-46.
9. Kenfield, Scott Dix, ed. *Akron and Summit County Ohio 1825-1928*. Akron: 1928, p. 303.
10. "Local Bank To Build At Cost Of \$2,000,000," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 9 Mar 1929: 1.
11. "New Bank Tower Open To Public," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 23 Jul 1931: 14.
12. "No Noise!," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931: 14.
13. "Steel Tests Show Fine Measurements," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931: 10.
14. "Symbolic Style of Tower Lines Deserves Study," *Akron Beacon Journal*. 22 Jul 1931: 10.
15. Walker and Weeks, "The Central Tower Building of the Central Depositors Trust Company," Akron:
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- Figure 5 - 16th - 18th Floor Plan
- Figure 6 - Aerial view of Akron before demolition of Hamilton Building
- Figure 7 - Exterior view c. 1931 showing original configuration of main entry
- Figure 8 - Exterior view showing current configuration of main entry and south façade
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- Figure 11 - Current configuration of entry along Main Street
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- Figure 14 - Terra cotta spandrel panel
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Figure 20 - Vault door on Ground Level

Figure 21 - Building Directory at Main Street entry lobby

Figure 22 - Post Deposit Box in elevator lobby on 1st Floor.

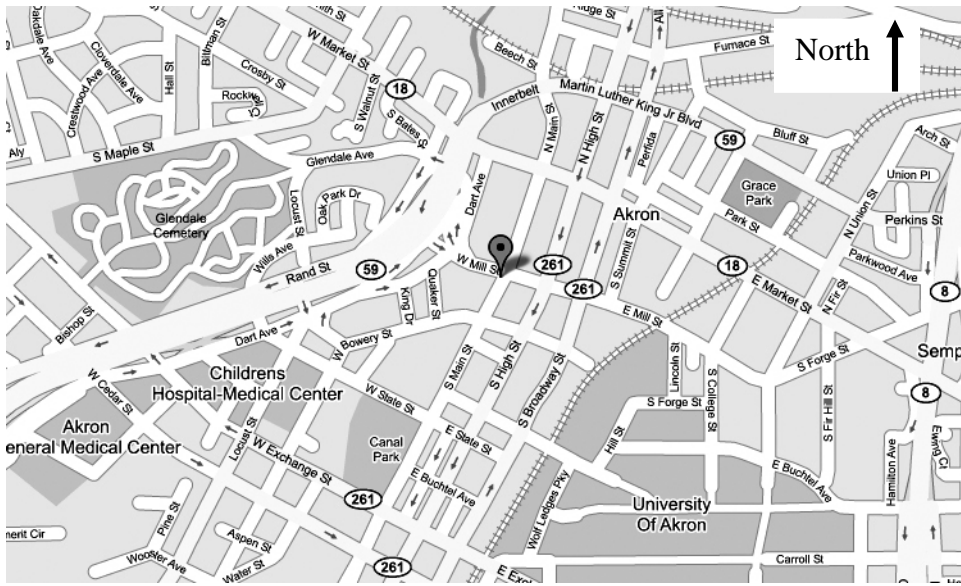


Figure 1 Area map of the First National Bank of Akron (now FirstMerit).

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South Main St. above

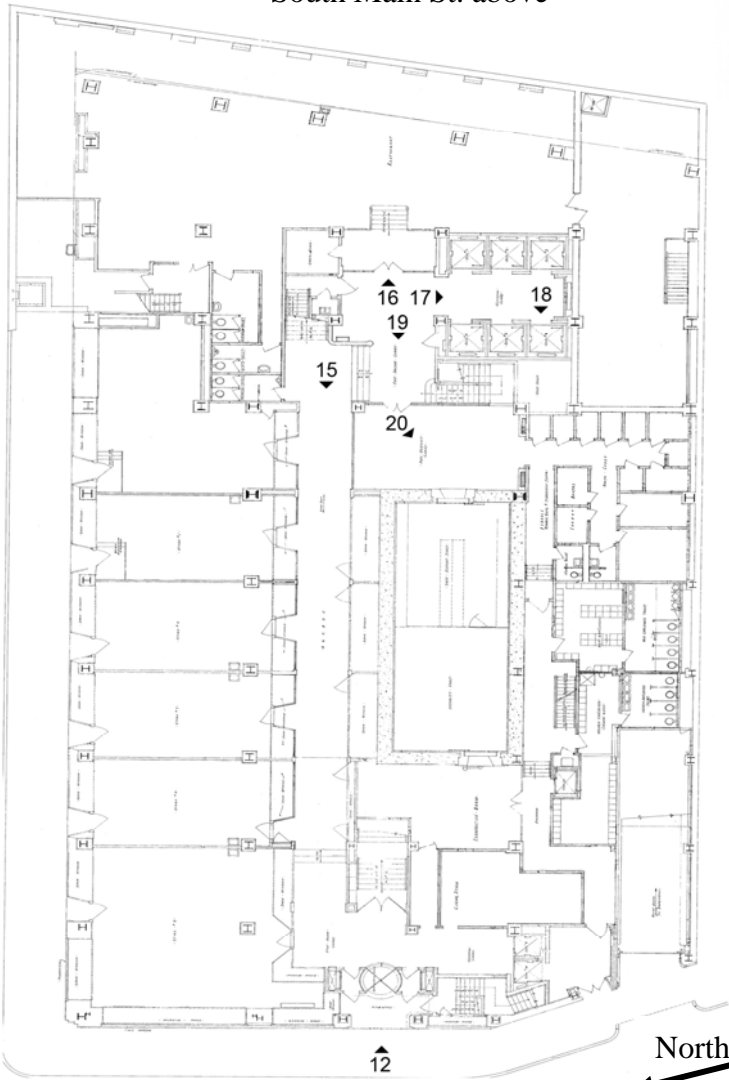


Figure 2 Ground floor plan (Arcade level) with key for Figures.

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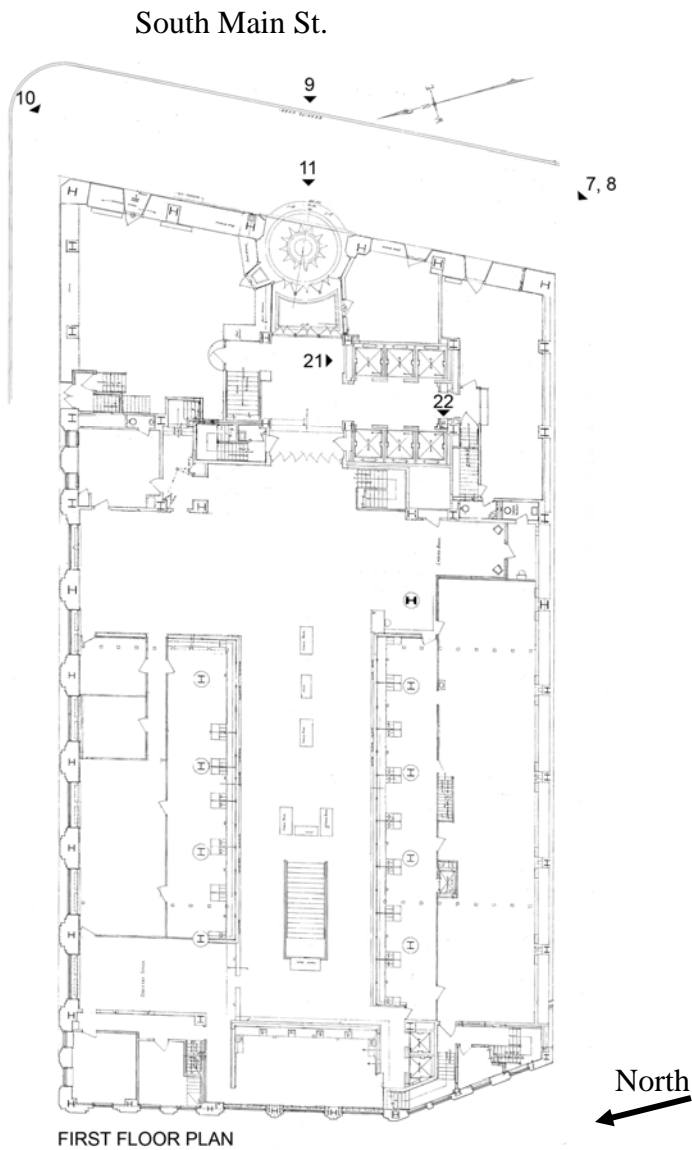


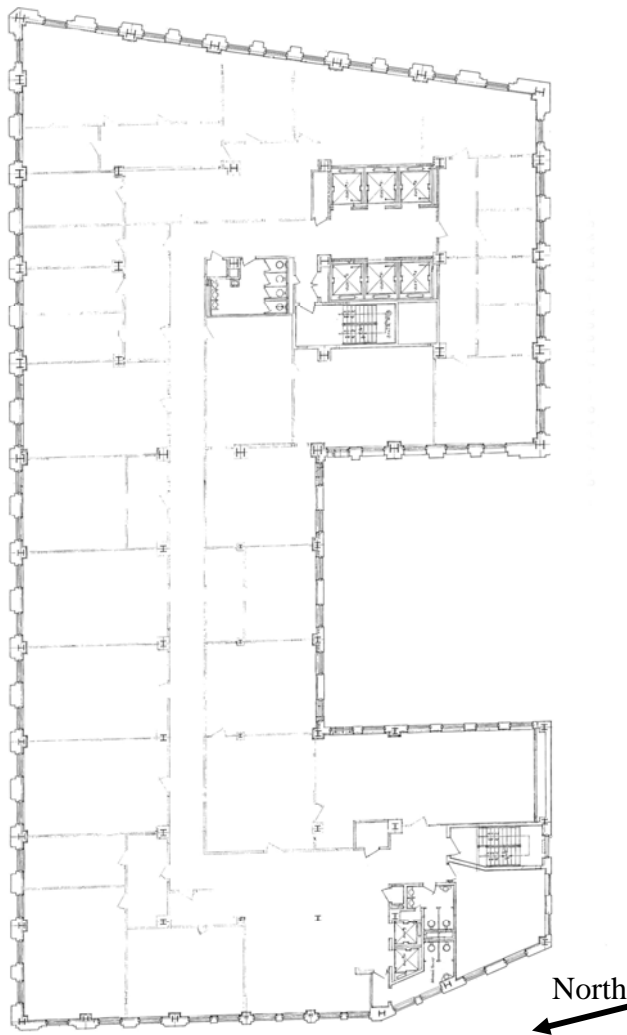
Figure 3 First Floor Plan (South Main Street level) with photo keys.

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6TH - 8TH FLOOR PLAN

Figure 4 Typical floor plan 6th to 8th floors.

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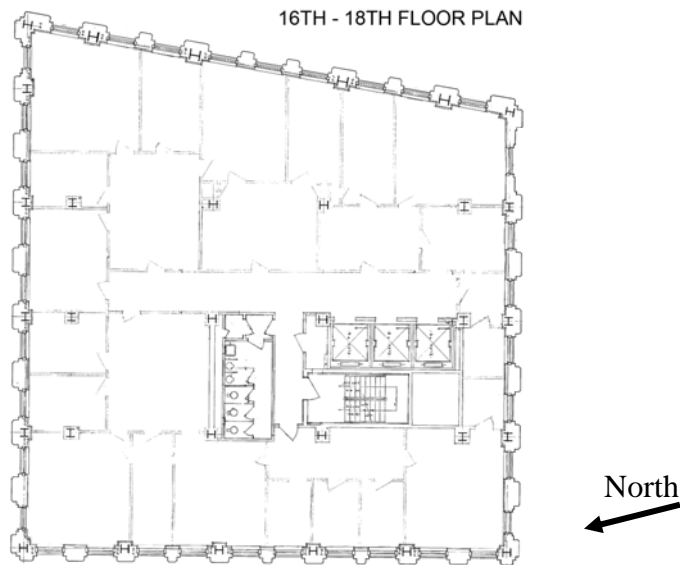


Figure 5 Typical floor plan in the tower, 16th to 18th floors.



Figure 6 Aerial view of the building site prior to construction, c. 1929.

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Figure 7 First National Bank c. 1931 showing the original entryway before renovations in 1940 and the adjacent party wall commercial buildings.



Figure 8 First National Bank from the southeast, 2005. Note the former party wall on the lower 6 stories of the south elevation, and the new banking hall windows inserted that wall.

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Figure 9 East elevation, 2005.



Figure 10 First National Bank from the northeast, 2005. Note the west annex to the right.

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Figure 11 South Main Street entrance, 2005.



Figure 12 West entrance on to Cascade Plaza, 2005. This entrance, one level above the South Main Street level, replaces the Hower Street entrance that was eliminated with the parking deck and plaza construction in 1967.

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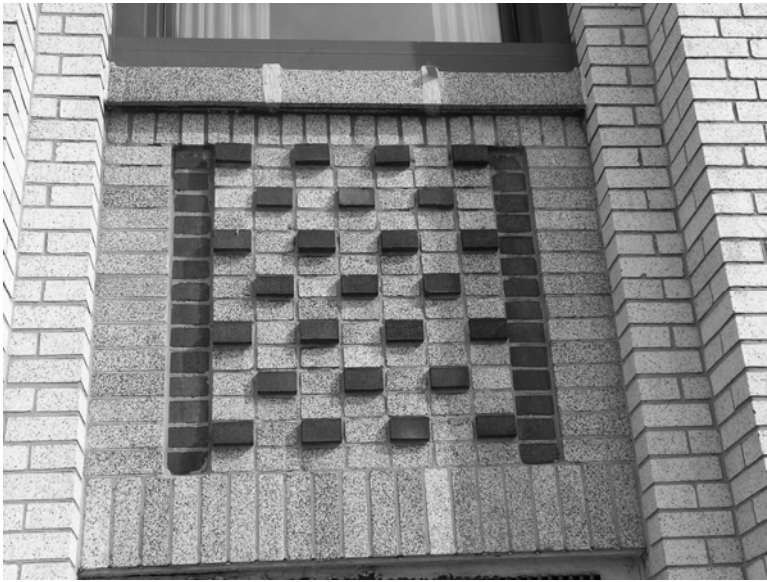


Figure 13 Typical brick spandrel on the tower.



Figure 14 Typical decorative terra cotta parapet.

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Figure 15 Interior view of the Arcade level.



Figure 16 Interior view of the dining room area on the Arcade level.

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Figure 17 Interior view of the elevator lobby on the Arcade level with the only original elevator doors in the building.



Figure 18 Entrance to the safe deposit area on the Arcade level.

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Figure 19 Safe deposit vault door.



Figure 20 Building registry in the South Main Street lobby.

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Figure 21 Mail drop in the elevator lobby.

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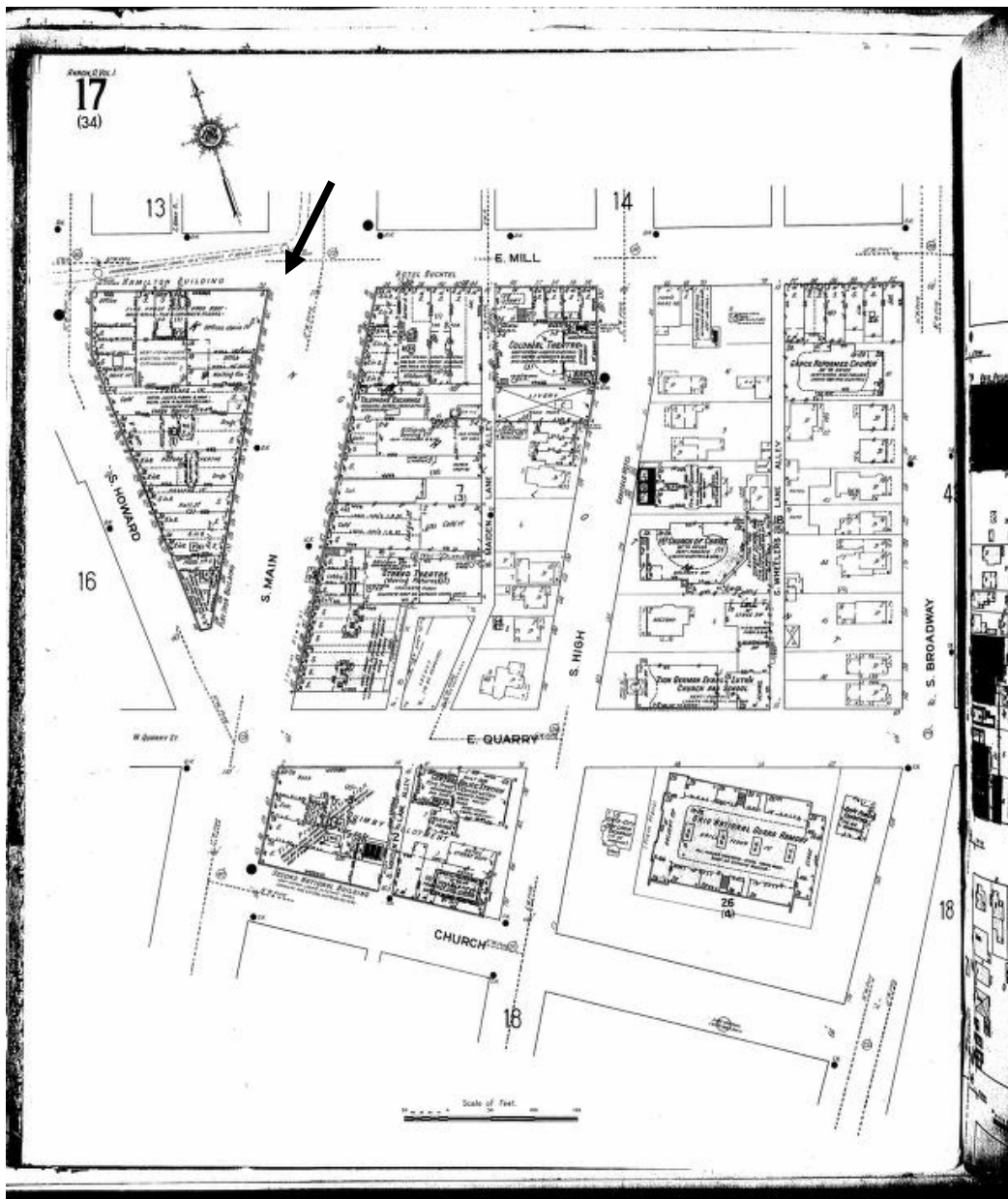


Figure 22 1916 Sanborn Fire Insurance map showing the Hamilton Building which formerly occupied the site.

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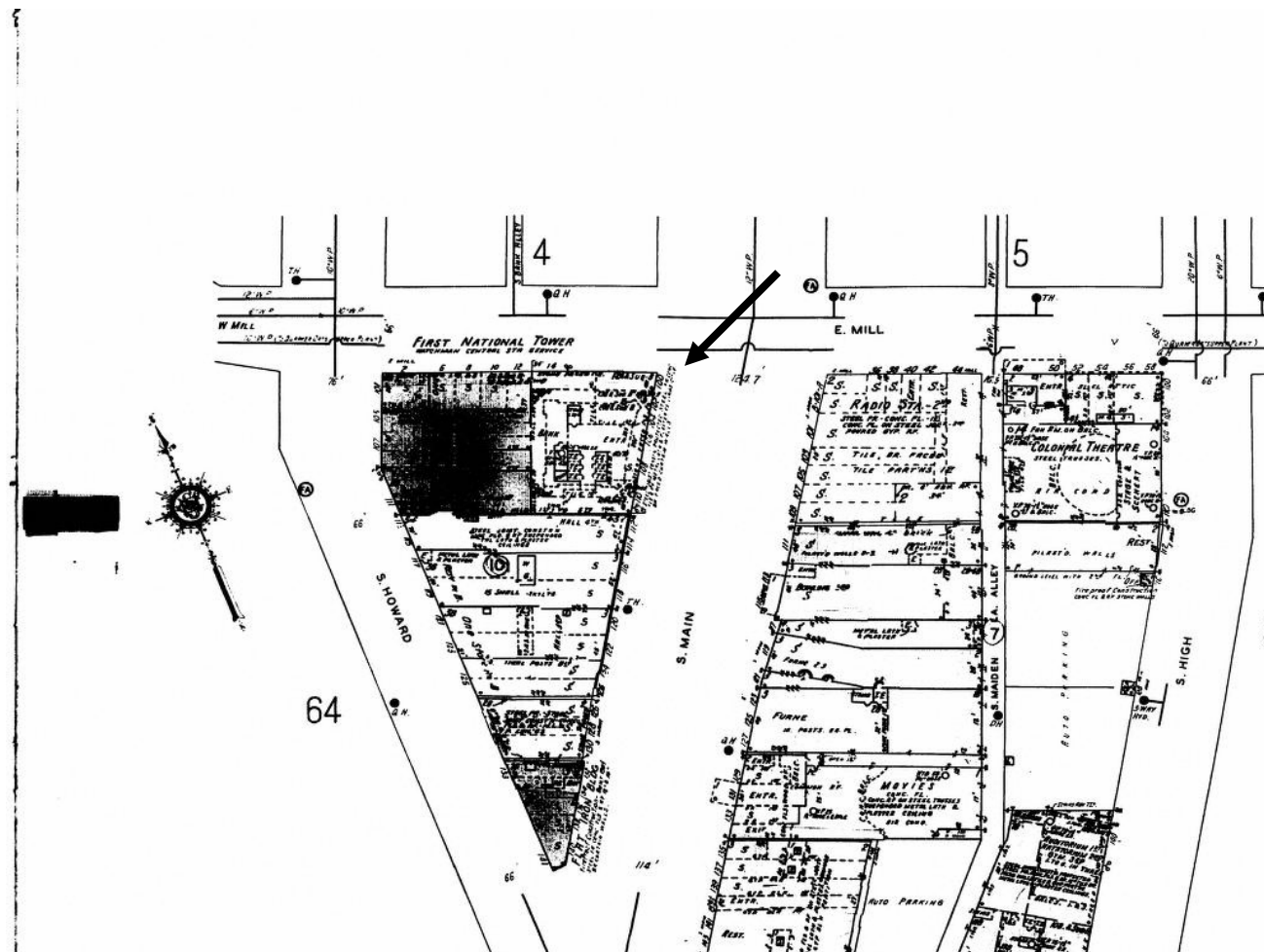


Figure 23 Sanborn Fire Insurance map of 1940, showing the building before destruction of adjacent party wall structure in 1967.

First National Bank
Tower, Summit
Co., OH

17 456415 4547800



4548
5'

NORTH CANTON 16 MI.

4546

(AKRON EAST) T. 2 N.
4766 III SW

T. 1 N.

4545

YOUNGSTOWN 40 MI.