

**Dallas Landmark Commission  
Landmark Nomination Form**

**1. Name**

**historic:** Mercantile Bank Building  
**and/or common:**  
**date:** 1943-1958

**2. Location**

**address:** 1704 Main Street  
**location/neighborhood:** Downtown/Central Business District  
  
**block:** 135/96      **lots:** 5-8, So. 20' of 4&9  
  
**land survey:** tract size: 0.551 acre

**3. Current Zoning**

**current zoning:** CA-1

**4. Classification**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>	<u>    </u> museum
<u>    </u> district	<u>    </u> public	<u>    </u> occupied	<u>    </u> agricultural	<u>    </u> park
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial	<u>    </u> residence
<u>    </u> structure	<u>    </u> both	<u>    </u> work in progress	<u>    </u> educational	<u>    </u> religious
<u>    </u> site	<b>Public</b>	<b>Accessibility</b>	<u>    </u> entertainment	<u>    </u> scientific
<u>    </u> object	<b>Acquisition</b>	<u>    </u> yes:restricted	<u>    </u> government	<u>    </u> transportation
	<u>    </u> in progress	<u>    </u> yes:unrestricted	<u>    </u> industrial	<u>    </u> other, specify
	<u>    </u> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> no	<u>    </u> military	<u>    </u>

**5. Ownership**

**Current Owner:** Mercantile Complex LP  
  
**Contact:** Gary Pitts, Beeler, Guest Owens Architects **Phone:** 214-520-8878  
  
**Address:** 4245 N. Central Expressway, #300 **City:** Dallas **State:** TX **Zip:** 75205

**6. Form Preparation**

**Date:** June 15, 2005  
**Name & Title:** Robert Mawson, Vice President  
**Organization:** Heritage Consulting Group  
1120 NW Northrup Street, Portland, OR 97209  
**Contact:** John Tess, President **Phone:** 503-228-0272

**7. Representation on Existing Surveys**

Alexander Survey (citywide) local state national National Register  
H.P.L. Survey (CBD) A B C D Recorded TX Historic Ldmk  
Oak Cliff TX Archaeological Ldmk  
Victorian Survey  
Dallas Historic Resources Survey, Phase \_\_\_ high \_\_\_ medium \_\_\_ low

For Office Use Only

Date Rec'd: \_\_\_\_\_ Survey Verified: Y N by: \_\_\_\_\_ Field Check by: \_\_\_\_\_ Petitions Needed: Y N  
Nomination: Archaeological Site Structure(s) Structure & Site District

**8. Historic Ownership**

original owner: Mercantile National Bank  
significant later owner(s):

**9. Construction Dates**

original: 1943  
alterations/additions: 1958/1963

**10. Architect**

original construction: Walter W. Ahlschlager  
alterations/additions: Broad & Nelson

**11. Site Features**

natural: None  
urban design: High-rise urban

**12. Physical Description**

Condition, check one: \_\_\_\_\_ excellent \_\_\_\_\_ deteriorated \_\_\_\_\_ unaltered \_\_\_\_\_ Check one:  
\_\_\_\_\_ x good \_\_\_\_\_ ruins \_\_\_\_\_ x altered \_\_\_\_\_ x original site  
\_\_\_\_\_ fair \_\_\_\_\_ unexposed \_\_\_\_\_ moved(date \_\_\_\_\_)

Describe present and original (if known) physical appearance. Include style(s) of architecture, current condition and relationship to surrounding fabric (structures, objects, etc). Elaborate on pertinent materials used and style(s) of architectural detailing, embellishments and site details.

The Mercantile Building (1943) is located at 1704 Main Street in the City of Dallas, Dallas County, Texas. Specifically, it is located on Lots 5-8 and the southern 20 feet of lots 4 and 9 of Block 96/135.

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 12*

*(Page 1 of 2)*

Setting: The Mercantile National Bank Building is located on the western third of Block 96/135. It faces west onto Ervay Street located between Main Street on the north and Commerce Street on the south. The building is located at the historic core of downtown Dallas, surrounded by buildings dating to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, predominately in the classic commercial style reflective of the 1910s and 1920s.

Site: The site is rectangular. It runs the full block between Main and Commerce, 200 feet across the north-south axis. Along the east-west axis, the parcel is 120 feet. The parcel is essentially flat, sloping down 6 feet east to west. The Mercantile Bank is built to the lot line with no character-defining landscape features.

Structure: The Mercantile National Bank Building is a steel-frame structure with full basement and subbasement. It measures 200 feet east and west and 117½ feet on the north and south. Framing is rectilinear with a footing grid of ten (along the east/west axis) by five (along the north-south axis). Grid width varies but is generally consistent between 17 and 19 feet. To accommodate a two-story area on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, cross girders were installed on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> floors to transfer the weight. Floor heights typically are slightly more than eleven feet.

Exterior: Designed in the Art Moderne style, the building offers complicated, if symmetrical, rectangular massing that translates into strong vertical lines. While the primary entrances were located on the north (Main Street) and south (Commerce Street), the primary façade is the western, facing toward Ervay Street. All three facades are similar in design and materials. Over time, the Art Moderne impact of the original design has been reduced, particularly by an effort in the 1960s to unify the appearance of all buildings on the block by masking the lower floor exterior with an overhanging aluminum and glass curtainwall system.

The bank building consists of five parts: The base is a four-story box built to the lot lines, 200 feet east and west and 117½ feet north and south. The box is roughly 91 feet in height, though because of grade changes taller along Commerce.

As originally built, the base was a complicated and subtle affair. It was massed into three distinct sections. The ground floor provided a strong horizontal band with Texas pink granite complemented by glass storefronts. On floors 2-4, the skin was limestone. Fenestration in the form of recessed single windows separated by light terra cotta spandrel panels emphasized the vertical on floors 2 and 3. At the fourth floor, then, the fenestration was altered to reassert the horizontal. On the north and south, the building entrances were three stories tall and trimmed in Texas pink granite, then flanked by symmetrical bays of recessed windows and spandrels unified vertically by fluted vertical trim spanning the two story height. Today, the entire base is covered with an overhanging glass and aluminum curtainwall in a rectangular grid over a first story base of green stone.

On top of the base is the primary massing: A rectilinear block of beige brick centered on the base, rising 23 stories. Generally, the block is 96 feet on the north-south axis and nearly 84 feet on the east-west, with a cutout roughly 18 feet square at the north and southeast corners. It is centered and set back toward the east.

Attached to this tower, between floors five and twelve are several additional rectilinear massings. These massings present a complicated series of setbacks on all facades that, taken as a whole, emphasize the vertical plane. The most dominant massings are at floors five through twelve at the north and south, where the core block extends to the building face, and at floors five through eight at the primary west façade where a block 130 feet across is centered and extends to that building face.

All of the varied rectangular masses are beige face brick defined by consistent fenestration with repetitive equal-sized vertical bands of recessed single windows and terra cotta spandrels. Bays vary slightly in symmetry and in width.

At the top, above the 27<sup>th</sup> floor, rectangular attic stories form a pedestal to a weather spire. Here are four additional floors with four additional penthouses for mechanicals. These are centered and aligned at the east. At the 29<sup>th</sup> floor, the mass reduces in size by twelve feet along the north-south and then at the third penthouse level to a nine by fourteen foot block. The key feature of these top attic stories are giant clock faces, one on each of the four facades. These clock faces were installed in 1958 and are replacements. The original clock faces were installed in 1943 and first replaced in 1948. In 1958, in conjunction with the transformation of the mechanical rooms at the top into executive offices, the clocks were raised and new faces installed. Atop the attic stories is a 115-foot illuminated weather spire. Honored at the time as the outstanding neon sign constructed in the United States that year, the spire has 144 lights, flashing green for fair weather, red for foul, while the height of white circular rings moving up or down indicated whether the temperature was warmer or cooler.

Interior Use: The Mercantile Bank Building was designed as a mixed use project with retail on the ground floor, main banking rooms at floors two and three plus the subbasement and office space on floors four through twenty-seven

Alterations: Three major exterior changes have occurred. The first was the replacement of the original wood clock face in 1948 with a metal one. At that time, the spire was raised 50 feet to 545 feet and the lighting modified to revolve. The second occurred in 1958 when the attic mechanical floors were adapted for executive office space, the clock tower moved and the weather spire installed. The third occurred in 1963 when the aluminum and glass curtainwall cladding and greenstone storefront base was installed. The building was abandoned by the bank when a new building was constructed across the street in 1987. The complex remained mostly vacant until

2005-2006, when the Mercantile Building was the subject a major renovation effort. The building, which had sat empty for a number of years, was modified to accommodate reuse as housing by Cleveland-based Forest City Enterprises beginning in late 2005. As part of this effort, 14-story Mercantile Securities Building - 1949; 22-story Mercantile Dallas Building - 1958; and 5-story Mercantile Securities Annex Building - 1972, were demolished and the original 1942 building retained and adapted.

### ***13. Historical Significance***

*Statement of historical and cultural significance. Include: cultural influences, special events and important personages, influences on neighborhood, on the city, etc.*

The 31-story Mercantile National Bank (1943) was designed by Chicago architect Walter W. Ahlschlager as a masterful statement of the Art Moderne style. It was the only major American office building completed during World War II and including its spire was the tallest building west of the Mississippi River for over a decade -- until 1954 when the 35-story Republic Bank Building was built in Dallas. Its construction was a major investment and expression of faith in Dallas as a primary city of the Southwest and specifically in downtown Dallas. In addition to its architectural design and landmark stature, the building is notable for its association with dominant Dallas community and business leader, Robert L. Thornton.

History of the Building: On Monday, June 24, 1940, Robert Thornton, the sixty-year old founder and President of the 24-year-old Mercantile National Bank, announced plans to erect a 25-story building on the site of the City's historic post office. Formed in 1916 by Thornton, Mercantile National was the City's third largest bank and the state's 10<sup>th</sup> largest with gross earnings of \$991,784 and total deposits of \$41 million. As editorialized by the Dallas Morning News the next morning, "The largest construction project in the main business district in postdepression years, the new bank will show everyone who has eyes to see that Dallas is not a city of idle calamity howlers, but a community that is making use of its opportunities and that has faith in the future. R. L. Thornton, president, and the other officers and directors of the bank deserve the community's thanks for their enterprise in taking a progressive step from which the whole city will benefit."

The site was symbolic. In 1883, the citizens of Dallas -- a city of 38,000 -- recognized the importance of a federal post office as a city anchor and contributed nearly 20% of the funds necessary to buy the site. The building was started the next year and with a soaring clock tower was patterned after the Romanesque Post Office along Pennsylvania Avenue in the Nation's Capital. At the time of completion, the Dallas Post Office was considered one of the most substantial buildings in the country. Decades later, however, the building was outmoded and in 1931, the post office moved to a new five-story federal building located at Ervay and Bryan. The old building was vacated. (*Dallas Morning News, March 4, 1930 and June 25, 1940*)

By the end of the 1930s, the government offered the site for sale with a \$1.25 million minimum bid. Three bidders were rumored: Z. E. Marvin, George Dahl, and Chicago architect Walter W.

Ahlschlager. Of the three bidders, the most public and perhaps well-formulated concept was that of Ahlschlager. He announced his concept publicly in April, 1938. Ahlschlager proposed an Art Moderne 36-story office building – twice the size of the Magnolia Building, the City's tallest at the time. However, in January, 1939, the Federal Government rejected all proposals as none met the minimum bid requirement. (*Dallas Morning News*, April 17, 1938 and June 25, 1940)

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 13*

*(Page 2 of 9)*

Subsequently, the Federal Government removed the minimum bid, stipulating only that the parcel sell at its fair market value. This action however did not attract any of those previously interested and gained only one addition proposal: a bid of \$375,000. The parcel was appraised at \$596,000. Given the lack of development interest, some civic leaders proposed creating a downtown park. This possibility increased when the Federal Government allowed the post office building to be razed, but enthusiasm for a park eventually dissipated. (*Dallas Morning News, January 26, 1939 and June 25, 1940*)

Once the site was cleared, the Federal Government again put the parcel out to bid a third time. Now, Mercantile Bank offered \$607,000 (\$7.6 million in 2003 dollars) for the lot, \$11,000 above the appraised value. Bank President Robert Thornton was rather vague about plans beyond a modern office structure. "No detailed thought has been given either to the time of construction or the architecture of the building," Thornton stated to the Dallas Morning New reporters. It might be 20 or 25 stories tall – regardless he intended to "make it the last word in modern office buildings." According to Thornton, "purchase of the site for the bank's new home reflected the officers and directors' confidence in the future of the Southwest and particularly faith in Dallas as the key city of the area." (*Dallas Morning News, January 26, 1939; June 25, 1940 and June 26, 1940*)

To advance discussions, in August of 1940, Thornton traveled to visit banks in Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, paying particular attention to the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society Building. Built in 1932 and designed by Howe and Lezcaze, the 38-story bank building was considered the first modern skyscraper in the United States. It offered a prototype for Thornton and interestingly many of the interior design concepts for the banking floor were translated to the Mercantile. It was likely during this time that Thornton was in discussion with Ahlschlager and becoming familiar with his design concepts as well. The key link in this discussion perhaps was Leo Corrigan, a Dallas realtor. Corrigan had been part of Ahlschlager's earlier 1938 development team for the site and accompanied Thornton on his travels. (*Dallas Morning News, August 18, 1940*)

Regardless, concepts and relationships formalized so that in April, 1941, Thornton announced that construction would begin soon. Architectural plans had been presented and approved by the Board of Directors, excavation would begin shortly and the building would be ready for occupancy by December 31, 1942. The 30-story air conditioned building was to be the most modern offices, in design and comfort. His purpose was "to erect a modern, comfortable and efficient banking home for today and tomorrow, and at the same time to build for Dallas one among the nation's most modern office buildings, and to add what we could to the famous Dallas skyline." The building, the first owned by Mercantile Bank, would be the tallest and the first erected in downtown Dallas in over a decade since the Tower Petroleum Building. (*Dallas Morning News, April 27, 1941*)

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 13*

*(Page 3 of 9)*

Ground on the Mercantile was broken on June 2, 1941 with Thornton, the Dallas Mayor pro tem, the architect and others in a public ceremony. Perhaps an omen, Ahlschlager – an avid golfer – score a hole in one at the Glen Lakes Golf and Country Club that very day. (*Dallas Morning News, June 2, 1941*)

Ahlschlager issued his construction drawings for a 36-story Art Moderne steel frame building on July 14, 1941. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Thornton offered to halt construction and give the steel to the war effort. The government declined the offer, the steel already having been cut to the specific needs of the Mercantile. The building was permitted on January 31, 1942. Six months later, the steel framing reached the 30<sup>th</sup> floor. The anticipated cost was \$1.7 million (\$20.6 million in 2003 dollars). It would be 439 feet tall, have 465,000 square feet of floor area and a daily population of 3,000 people. (*Dallas Morning News, November 14, 1943*)

Construction was a celebrated Dallas event. Covered spectator canopies were constructed for a “Sidewalk Superintendent Club” with 50,000 members. Before the building was complete, the United States government committed to taking 10 floors, or 125,000 square feet. The original clock was installed on April 29, 1943 and the 465,000 square foot building occupied on November 14, 1943. It officially opened for business on the following day. (*Dallas Morning News, November 14, 1943*)

The new headquarters for the Mercantile National Bank offered several significant advances for the industry: The building incorporated a cellular floor system in the banking lobby and areas, this system provided dedicated in-floor raceways for electrical and communication distribution, and allowed officers and tellers to be located anywhere on the floor. Common today, this was the first application in Dallas. (*Dallas Morning News, November 14, 1943; Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith, Work, Service*)

The open floor plan for the banking lobby was also innovative and a first for Dallas. By locating this space on the second floor, the bank could easily control security and eliminate cross-traffic from the retail and office tenants. This in turn allowed the teller windows to be of curved glass and eliminated the need for cages. (*Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith, Work, Service*)

For an institution inherently dedicated to conveying powerful symbols of security and dignity, the banking space was dramatic and unique. The extensive use of Italian Chairo marble and walnut was opulent. The high ceilings were impressive, and the wall space filled with two massive wood mosaic murals, each 11 by 33 feet, by renowned Texas artist Buck Winn, Jr. The murals contained over 5,000 pieces of wood from 1,200 square feet of raw material. At the time, they were considered the largest wood murals in existence. Even the incorporation of artwork within the bank was considered innovative. (The murals were removed in 1958; it is unknown what happened to them.) (*Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith, Work, Service*)



**Continuation Sheet**

**Item # 13**

**(Page 4 of 9)**

The vaults were located in the sub-basement. Here were the safe deposit boxes, trunk vault, cash vault and bond vault. Manufactured by Mosler, the vault doors were manufactured of three kinds of steel and were considered drill and torch proof – yet impressive with polish steel trim. Access was via a special bank elevator from the second floor lobby, as well as the office elevators. Also innovative was a “drive-in” teller operation at the east. This was a first for Dallas and newspaper images from the 1940s and 1950s show cars lined up for the convenience. (*Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith Work, Service*)

In the words of the bank, “To tour the Mercantile Bank Building is to thrill to an around-the-clock pageantry of commercial, government and industrial enterprise in an architectural setting that for utility, innovation and distinction of design and execution, stamps the office structure as probably the most interesting in the entire southwest. . . . The building marks midtown Dallas’ business, shopping, theater and hotel district.” At its peak, the building had a daily population of 3,000 working in nearly 600 businesses. (*Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith, Work, Service*)

In 1948, to accommodate its growing retail bank business, Mercantile expanded its lobby into the second floor of the adjacent building. Constructed that year by LMS Development Corporation, the adjacent Mercantile Securities Building was a 15-story steel frame office structure designed by William D. Reed. At the same time, Mercantile expanded its public image by extending the spire by 50’ to 545’, modifying the lighting to create revolving illumination and replacing the original wooden clock faces. (*Dallas Morning News, August 24, 1947; October 26, 1947 and May 23, 1948; Dallas Times Herald, August 9, 1948 and August 10, 1948*)

As the lobby was being expanded, the bank also began planning a new building: A \$2 million full block 3-story office building with four floors of parking below grade. As described in the 1949 annual report, Brown said that when they moved into the tower in 1943, they fully expected that it would be sufficient room for growth. Yet, within the last five years, the bank’s deposits double. The new building, called Mercantile Commerce Building, was intended to accommodate the next phase of growth and to respond to the rising impact of the automobile. Also designed by Ahlschlager, the Mercantile Commerce was to be owned and operated by the bank. The garage would house 1,500 cars on a rotating basis on three acres of underground space. Opening in July, 1950 after 18 months of construction, it was one of the first underground garages in Dallas. (*Dallas Morning News, July 2, 1950*)

In 1955, amidst its other projects, LMS announced yet another project on the Mercantile block: with Broad & Nelson as architects, they proposed a \$5.8 million 19-story office building at the northwest corner of Commerce and St. Paul on land leased for 99 years. The 239,530 square foot building would be owned by LMS and feature ground floor retail. Mercantile Bank proposed

**Continuation Sheet**

**Item # 13**

**(Page 5 of 9 )**

leasing 28,090 square feet, including relocation of its drive-in deposit facilities to the first lower level and additional space on the first floor. As of the announcement date, the building had not been named; it would later be named the Mercantile Dallas Building. Construction began in July, 1956 with permanent financing provided by Equitable Life. (*Dallas Morning News, April 24, 1955, April 26, 1955, August 4, 1957 and October 27, 1957*)

As construction began on the Mercantile Dallas, the Mercantile National Bank launched a comprehensive remodeling of its banking floors throughout the block. This space consisted of both owned and leased space, beginning with nearly 60,000 square feet of its own space in the tower; 6,800 square feet leased on the second floor of the Securities building and 28,090 square feet on the lower, first and second floor in the Dallas building. Work also included remodeling the top three office floors of the tower and enlarging the tower, transforming a mechanical room into the 31<sup>st</sup> floor, which served as an executive dining room. It also included raising the clock face and installing a weather tower above the clock. Finally, with the "drive-in" lane relocated, a new first floor linkage between the Mercantile Tower arcade and the Mercantile Securities building was crafted. At the same time, Mercantile added eight floors to its own Commerce Building located across the street. These floors added over 200,000 square feet to the bank's real estate portfolio. As the Commerce Building was being completed, the bank also added a pedestrian tunnel to connect the Commerce Building and parking garage through with the Mercantile banking floor at the Securities Building. (*Dallas Morning News, August 4, 1957, October 27, 1957; February 23, 1958, October 5, 1958, December 7, 1958; March 6, 1959 and March 3, 1963; Dallas Times Herald, April 29, 1960*)

The 1950s was a decade of incredible growth at Mercantile Bank. Capital and surplus at the bank had grown three times with deposits topping \$300 million. The employee count topped 570 and by the end of the 1950s, Mercantile National Bank was one of the 100 largest banks in the country. The bank attributed its success to "(1) the opportunity for growth in the Southwest, specifically in Dallas; and (2) that opportunity was foreseen and grasped by the bank's leadership." (*Dallas Morning News, February 2, 1949, October 27, 1957, January 20, 1960 and August 3, 1960*)

In 1967, Mercantile acquired the leaseholds for the Commerce Building and bought the remaining parcels on Block 96. At the same time, it completed a franchise agreement with the city to allow an overhang and installed an aluminum and glass curtainwall at the lower four floors to transform the Mercantile block from an amalgam of three buildings into appearing as a single entity. Coinciding with this work, the bank began construction of the 5-story Dallas annex, construction of the Jackson parking garage and expansion of its network of underground tunnels – completed in the early 1970s. (*Dallas Times Herald, December 15, 1965 and January 30, 1968*)

## *Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 12*

*(Page 1 of 2 )*

Setting: The Mercantile National Bank Building is located on the western third of Block 96/135. It faces west onto Ervay Street located between Main Street on the north and Commerce Street on the south. The building is located at the historic core of downtown Dallas, surrounded by buildings dating to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, predominately in the classic commercial style reflective of the 1910s and 1920s.

Site: The site is rectangular. It runs the full block between Main and Commerce, 200 feet across the north-south axis. Along the east-west axis, the parcel is 120 feet. The parcel is essentially flat, sloping down 6 feet east to west. The Mercantile Bank is built to the lot line with no character-defining landscape features.

Structure: The Mercantile National Bank Building is a steel-frame structure with full basement and subbasement. It measures 200 feet east and west and 117½ feet on the north and south. Framing is rectilinear with a footing grid of ten (along the east/west axis) by five (along the north-south axis). Grid width varies but is generally consistent between 17 and 19 feet. To accommodate a two-story area on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, cross girders were installed on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> floors to transfer the weight. Floor heights typically are slightly more than eleven feet.

Exterior: Designed in the Art Moderne style, the building offers complicated, if symmetrical, rectangular massing that translates into strong vertical lines. While the primary entrances were located on the north (Main Street) and south (Commerce Street), the primary façade is the western, facing toward Ervay Street. All three facades are similar in design and materials. Over time, the Art Moderne impact of the original design has been reduced, particularly by an effort in the 1960s to unify the appearance of all buildings on the block by masking the lower floor exterior with an overhanging aluminum and glass curtainwall system.

The bank building consists of five parts: The base is a four-story box built to the lot lines, 200 feet east and west and 117½ feet north and south. The box is roughly 91 feet in height, though because of grade changes taller along Commerce.

As originally built, the base was a complicated and subtle affair. It was massed into three distinct sections. The ground floor provided a strong horizontal band with Texas pink granite complemented by glass storefronts. On floors 2-4, the skin was limestone. Fenestration in the form of recessed single windows separated by light terra cotta spandrel panels emphasized the vertical on floors 2 and 3. At the fourth floor, then, the fenestration was altered to reassert the horizontal. On the north and south, the building entrances were three stories tall and trimmed in Texas pink granite, then flanked by symmetrical bays of recessed windows and spandrels unified vertically by fluted vertical trim spanning the two story height. Today, the entire base is covered with an overhanging glass and aluminum curtainwall in a rectangular grid over a first story base of green stone.

## *Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 12*

*(Page 2 of 2)*

On top of the base is the primary massing: A rectilinear block of beige brick centered on the base, rising 23 stories. Generally, the block is 96 feet on the north-south axis and nearly 84 feet on the east-west, with a cutout roughly 18 feet square at the north and southeast corners. It is centered and set back toward the east.

Attached to this tower, between floors five and twelve are several additional rectilinear massings. These massings present a complicated series of setbacks on all facades that, taken as a whole, emphasize the vertical plane. The most dominant massings are at floors five through twelve at the north and south, where the core block extends to the building face, and at floors five through eight at the primary west façade where a block 130 feet across is centered and extends to that building face.

All of the varied rectangular masses are beige face brick defined by consistent fenestration with repetitive equal-sized vertical bands of recessed single windows and terra cotta spandrels. Bays vary slightly in symmetry and in width.

At the top, above the 27<sup>th</sup> floor, rectangular attic stories form a pedestal to a weather spire. Here are four additional floors with four additional penthouses for mechanicals. These are centered and aligned at the east. At the 29<sup>th</sup> floor, the mass reduces in size by twelve feet along the north-south and then at the third penthouse level to a nine by fourteen foot block. The key feature of these top attic stories are giant clock faces, one on each of the four facades. These clock faces were installed in 1958 and are replacements. The original clock faces were installed in 1943 and first replaced in 1948. In 1958, in conjunction with the transformation of the mechanical rooms at the top into executive offices, the clocks were raised and new faces installed. Atop the attic stories is a 115-foot illuminated weather spire. Honored at the time as the outstanding neon sign constructed in the United States that year, the spire has 144 lights, flashing green for fair weather, red for foul, while the height of white circular rings moving up or down indicated whether the temperature was warmer or cooler.

Interior Use: The Mercantile Bank Building was designed as a mixed use project with retail on the ground floor, main banking rooms at floors two and three plus the subbasement and office space on floors four through twenty-seven

Alterations: Three major exterior changes have occurred. The first was the replacement of the original wood clock face in 1948 with a metal one. At that time, the spire was raised 50 feet to 545 feet and the lighting modified to revolve. The second occurred in 1958 when the attic mechanical floors were adapted for executive office space, the clock tower moved and the weather spire installed. The third occurred in 1963 when the aluminum and glass curtainwall cladding and greenstone storefront base was installed. The building was abandoned by the bank when a new building was constructed across the street in 1987. The complex remained mostly vacant until

2005-2006, when the Mercantile Building was the subject a major renovation effort. The building, which had sat empty for a number of years, was modified to accommodate reuse as housing by Cleveland-based Forest City Enterprises beginning in late 2005. As part of this effort, 14-story Mercantile Securities Building - 1949; 22-story Mercantile Dallas Building - 1958; and 5-story Mercantile Securities Annex Building - 1972, were demolished and the original 1942 building retained and adapted.

### ***13. Historical Significance***

*Statement of historical and cultural significance. Include: cultural influences, special events and important personages, influences on neighborhood, on the city, etc.*

The 31-story Mercantile National Bank (1943) was designed by Chicago architect Walter W. Ahlschlager as a masterful statement of the Art Moderne style. It was the only major American office building completed during World War II and including its spire was the tallest building west of the Mississippi River for over a decade -- until 1954 when the 35-story Republic Bank Building was built in Dallas. Its construction was a major investment and expression of faith in Dallas as a primary city of the Southwest and specifically in downtown Dallas. In addition to its architectural design and landmark stature, the building is notable for its association with dominant Dallas community and business leader, Robert L. Thornton.

History of the Building: On Monday, June 24, 1940, Robert Thornton, the sixty-year old founder and President of the 24-year-old Mercantile National Bank, announced plans to erect a 25-story building on the site of the City's historic post office. Formed in 1916 by Thornton, Mercantile National was the City's third largest bank and the state's 10<sup>th</sup> largest with gross earnings of \$991,784 and total deposits of \$41 million. As editorialized by the Dallas Morning News the next morning, "The largest construction project in the main business district in postdepression years, the new bank will show everyone who has eyes to see that Dallas is not a city of idle calamity howlers, but a community that is making use of its opportunities and that has faith in the future. R. L. Thornton, president, and the other officers and directors of the bank deserve the community's thanks for their enterprise in taking a progressive step from which the whole city will benefit."

The site was symbolic. In 1883, the citizens of Dallas -- a city of 38,000 -- recognized the importance of a federal post office as a city anchor and contributed nearly 20% of the funds necessary to buy the site. The building was started the next year and with a soaring clock tower was patterned after the Romanesque Post Office along Pennsylvania Avenue in the Nation's Capital. At the time of completion, the Dallas Post Office was considered one of the most substantial buildings in the country. Decades later, however, the building was outmoded and in 1931, the post office moved to a new five-story federal building located at Ervay and Bryan. The old building was vacated. (*Dallas Morning News, March 4, 1930 and June 25, 1940*)

By the end of the 1930s, the government offered the site for sale with a \$1.25 million minimum bid. Three bidders were rumored: Z. E. Marvin, George Dahl, and Chicago architect Walter W.

Ahlschlager. Of the three bidders, the most public and perhaps well-formulated concept was that of Ahlschlager. He announced his concept publicly in April, 1938. Ahlschlager proposed an Art Moderne 36-story office building – twice the size of the Magnolia Building, the City's tallest at the time. However, in January, 1939, the Federal Government rejected all proposals as none met the minimum bid requirement. (*Dallas Morning News*, April 17, 1938 and June 25, 1940)

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 13*

*(Page 2 of 9)*

Subsequently, the Federal Government removed the minimum bid, stipulating only that the parcel sell at its fair market value. This action however did not attract any of those previously interested and gained only one addition proposal: a bid of \$375,000. The parcel was appraised at \$596,000. Given the lack of development interest, some civic leaders proposed creating a downtown park. This possibility increased when the Federal Government allowed the post office building to be razed, but enthusiasm for a park eventually dissipated. (*Dallas Morning News, January 26, 1939 and June 25, 1940*)

Once the site was cleared, the Federal Government again put the parcel out to bid a third time. Now, Mercantile Bank offered \$607,000 (\$7.6 million in 2003 dollars) for the lot, \$11,000 above the appraised value. Bank President Robert Thornton was rather vague about plans beyond a modern office structure. "No detailed thought has been given either to the time of construction or the architecture of the building," Thornton stated to the Dallas Morning New reporters. It might be 20 or 25 stories tall – regardless he intended to "make it the last word in modern office buildings." According to Thornton, "purchase of the site for the bank's new home reflected the officers and directors' confidence in the future of the Southwest and particularly faith in Dallas as the key city of the area." (*Dallas Morning News, January 26, 1939; June 25, 1940 and June 26, 1940*)

To advance discussions, in August of 1940, Thornton traveled to visit banks in Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, paying particular attention to the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society Building. Built in 1932 and designed by Howe and Lezcaze, the 38-story bank building was considered the first modern skyscraper in the United States. It offered a prototype for Thornton and interestingly many of the interior design concepts for the banking floor were translated to the Mercantile. It was likely during this time that Thornton was in discussion with Ahlschlager and becoming familiar with his design concepts as well. The key link in this discussion perhaps was Leo Corrigan, a Dallas realtor. Corrigan had been part of Ahlschlager's earlier 1938 development team for the site and accompanied Thornton on his travels. (*Dallas Morning News, August 18, 1940*)

Regardless, concepts and relationships formalized so that in April, 1941, Thornton announced that construction would begin soon. Architectural plans had been presented and approved by the Board of Directors, excavation would begin shortly and the building would be ready for occupancy by December 31, 1942. The 30-story air conditioned building was to be the most modern offices, in design and comfort. His purpose was "to erect a modern, comfortable and efficient banking home for today and tomorrow, and at the same time to build for Dallas one among the nation's most modern office buildings, and to add what we could to the famous Dallas skyline." The building, the first owned by Mercantile Bank, would be the tallest and the first erected in downtown Dallas in over a decade since the Tower Petroleum Building. (*Dallas Morning News, April 27, 1941*)

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 13*

*(Page 3 of 9)*

Ground on the Mercantile was broken on June 2, 1941 with Thornton, the Dallas Mayor pro tem, the architect and others in a public ceremony. Perhaps an omen, Ahlschlager – an avid golfer – score a hole in one at the Glen Lakes Golf and Country Club that very day. (*Dallas Morning News, June 2, 1941*)

Ahlschlager issued his construction drawings for a 36-story Art Moderne steel frame building on July 14, 1941. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Thornton offered to halt construction and give the steel to the war effort. The government declined the offer, the steel already having been cut to the specific needs of the Mercantile. The building was permitted on January 31, 1942. Six months later, the steel framing reached the 30<sup>th</sup> floor. The anticipated cost was \$1.7 million (\$20.6 million in 2003 dollars). It would be 439 feet tall, have 465,000 square feet of floor area and a daily population of 3,000 people. (*Dallas Morning News, November 14, 1943*)

Construction was a celebrated Dallas event. Covered spectator canopies were constructed for a “Sidewalk Superintendent Club” with 50,000 members. Before the building was complete, the United States government committed to taking 10 floors, or 125,000 square feet. The original clock was installed on April 29, 1943 and the 465,000 square foot building occupied on November 14, 1943. It officially opened for business on the following day. (*Dallas Morning News, November 14, 1943*)

The new headquarters for the Mercantile National Bank offered several significant advances for the industry: The building incorporated a cellular floor system in the banking lobby and areas, this system provided dedicated in-floor raceways for electrical and communication distribution, and allowed officers and tellers to be located anywhere on the floor. Common today, this was the first application in Dallas. (*Dallas Morning News, November 14, 1943; Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith, Work, Service*)

The open floor plan for the banking lobby was also innovative and a first for Dallas. By locating this space on the second floor, the bank could easily control security and eliminate cross-traffic from the retail and office tenants. This in turn allowed the teller windows to be of curved glass and eliminated the need for cages. (*Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith, Work, Service*)

For an institution inherently dedicated to conveying powerful symbols of security and dignity, the banking space was dramatic and unique. The extensive use of Italian Chairo marble and walnut was opulent. The high ceilings were impressive, and the wall space filled with two massive wood mosaic murals, each 11 by 33 feet, by renowned Texas artist Buck Winn, Jr. The murals contained over 5,000 pieces of wood from 1,200 square feet of raw material. At the time, they were considered the largest wood murals in existence. Even the incorporation of artwork within the bank was considered innovative. (The murals were removed in 1958; it is unknown what happened to them.) (*Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith, Work, Service*)



The vaults were located in the sub-basement. Here were the safe deposit boxes, trunk vault, cash vault and bond vault. Manufactured by Mosler, the vault doors were manufactured of three kinds of steel and were considered drill and torch proof – yet impressive with polish steel trim. Access was via a special bank elevator from the second floor lobby, as well as the office elevators. Also innovative was a “drive-in” teller operation at the east. This was a first for Dallas and newspaper images from the 1940s and 1950s show cars lined up for the convenience. (*Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith Work, Service*)

In the words of the bank, “To tour the Mercantile Bank Building is to thrill to an around-the-clock pageantry of commercial, government and industrial enterprise in an architectural setting that for utility, innovation and distinction of design and execution, stamps the office structure as probably the most interesting in the entire southwest. . . . The building marks midtown Dallas’ business, shopping, theater and hotel district.” At its peak, the building had a daily population of 3,000 working in nearly 600 businesses. (*Mercantile National Bank, 27 Years, Faith, Work, Service*)

In 1948, to accommodate its growing retail bank business, Mercantile expanded its lobby into the second floor of the adjacent building. Constructed that year by LMS Development Corporation, the adjacent Mercantile Securities Building was a 15-story steel frame office structure designed by William D. Reed. At the same time, Mercantile expanded its public image by extending the spire by 50’ to 545’, modifying the lighting to create revolving illumination and replacing the original wooden clock faces. (*Dallas Morning News, August 24, 1947; October 26, 1947 and May 23, 1948; Dallas Times Herald, August 9, 1948 and August 10, 1948*)

As the lobby was being expanded, the bank also began planning a new building: A \$2 million full block 3-story office building with four floors of parking below grade. As described in the 1949 annual report, Brown said that when they moved into the tower in 1943, they fully expected that it would be sufficient room for growth. Yet, within the last five years, the bank’s deposits double. The new building, called Mercantile Commerce Building, was intended to accommodate the next phase of growth and to respond to the rising impact of the automobile. Also designed by Ahlschlager, the Mercantile Commerce was to be owned and operated by the bank. The garage would house 1,500 cars on a rotating basis on three acres of underground space. Opening in July, 1950 after 18 months of construction, it was one of the first underground garages in Dallas. (*Dallas Morning News, July 2, 1950*)

In 1955, amidst its other projects, LMS announced yet another project on the Mercantile block: with Broad & Nelson as architects, they proposed a \$5.8 million 19-story office building at the northwest corner of Commerce and St. Paul on land leased for 99 years. The 239,530 square foot building would be owned by LMS and feature ground floor retail. Mercantile Bank proposed

leasing 28,090 square feet, including relocation of its drive-in deposit facilities to the first lower level and additional space on the first floor. As of the announcement date, the building had not been named; it would later be named the Mercantile Dallas Building. Construction began in July, 1956 with permanent financing provided by Equitable Life. (*Dallas Morning News, April 24, 1955, April 26, 1955, August 4, 1957 and October 27, 1957*)

As construction began on the Mercantile Dallas, the Mercantile National Bank launched a comprehensive remodeling of its banking floors throughout the block. This space consisted of both owned and leased space, beginning with nearly 60,000 square feet of its own space in the tower; 6,800 square feet leased on the second floor of the Securities building and 28,090 square feet on the lower, first and second floor in the Dallas building. Work also included remodeling the top three office floors of the tower and enlarging the tower, transforming a mechanical room into the 31<sup>st</sup> floor, which served as an executive dining room. It also included raising the clock face and installing a weather tower above the clock. Finally, with the "drive-in" lane relocated, a new first floor linkage between the Mercantile Tower arcade and the Mercantile Securities building was crafted. At the same time, Mercantile added eight floors to its own Commerce Building located across the street. These floors added over 200,000 square feet to the bank's real estate portfolio. As the Commerce Building was being completed, the bank also added a pedestrian tunnel to connect the Commerce Building and parking garage through with the Mercantile banking floor at the Securities Building. (*Dallas Morning News, August 4, 1957, October 27, 1957; February 23, 1958, October 5, 1958, December 7, 1958; March 6, 1959 and March 3, 1963; Dallas Times Herald, April 29, 1960*)

The 1950s was a decade of incredible growth at Mercantile Bank. Capital and surplus at the bank had grown three times with deposits topping \$300 million. The employee count topped 570 and by the end of the 1950s, Mercantile National Bank was one of the 100 largest banks in the country. The bank attributed its success to "(1) the opportunity for growth in the Southwest, specifically in Dallas; and (2) that opportunity was foreseen and grasped by the bank's leadership." (*Dallas Morning News, February 2, 1949, October 27, 1957, January 20, 1960 and August 3, 1960*)

In 1967, Mercantile acquired the leaseholds for the Commerce Building and bought the remaining parcels on Block 96. At the same time, it completed a franchise agreement with the city to allow an overhang and installed an aluminum and glass curtainwall at the lower four floors to transform the Mercantile block from an amalgam of three buildings into appearing as a single entity. Coinciding with this work, the bank began construction of the 5-story Dallas annex, construction of the Jackson parking garage and expansion of its network of underground tunnels – completed in the early 1970s. (*Dallas Times Herald, December 15, 1965 and January 30, 1968*)

**Continuation Sheet**

**Item # 13**

**(Page 6 of 9)**

In 1983, Mercantile outlined plans for a new downtown headquarters, a 60-story office tower constructed in partnership with Cadillac Fairview Urban Development. Designed by Philip Johnson and John Burgee, the proposed building offered 1.6 million square feet of office space and be the second largest office tower in Dallas. Led by chairman George Clark, Mercantile would occupy 600,000 square feet of the new building and be a 50% partner with Cadillac Fairview. However, shortly after announcing the project and before completion, as with many financial institutions in the 1980s, the bank found itself woefully overextended and failed. (The proposed building was constructed and is today the Bank One Center, completed in 1987.) (*Dallas Times Herald, October 12, 1983*)

In 1984, with financing from Principal Mutual Life, Leper Capital acquired the Mercantile Complex. Shortly after, the partnership failed and the loan went into default. At the same time, MBank – the successor bank to Mercantile, moved its operations out of the building, leaving the building nearly vacant. By 1988, the building had one non-retail tenant, the Hartnett family law firm, occupying the 28<sup>th</sup> floor; of the retail spaces, the building only housed a jeweler, drugstore and barbershop. In 1989, the building's mortgager, Principal Mutual Life, purchased the entire 1.3 square foot Mercantile complex for \$30 million in a foreclosure sale. Bank One acquired the assets of MBank that same year. (*Dallas Morning News, December 1, 1988 and August 2, 1989*)

Robert L. Thornton and the Mercantile Bank: The Mercantile National Bank Building was constructed at the direction of Robert L. Thornton. Thornton founded the bank in 1916 and played an influential role in the development of the city's economy and by extension its community development. Dubbed by Chamber of Commerce leaders as "Mr. Dallas", Thornton wanted to build a suitably distinguished edifice.

The first private banking house in Dallas opened in 1868 with capital of \$20,000. Five years later, the bank was reorganized as the City Bank of Dallas. By 1885, Dallas had six banks operating. In 1905, the State of Texas established a bank charter system that guaranteed deposits with Dallas as one of the reserve locations. That year, the city had six national banks, two state banks, and 20 private banks. The passage of the Federal Reserve Act and the establishment of Dallas as the 11<sup>th</sup> District headquarters – the result of strenuous efforts by Dallas bankers – centralized banking functions and established the city as the dominant regional banking center. From that point forward, bank clearings, collections and currency for hundreds of banks in Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona – as well as Texas – passed through Dallas.

Following the establishment of the Federal Reserve District, Robert Thornton and his business partners opened a private bank near the courthouse in 1916. The Stiles, Thornton & Lund Bank represented Thornton's first successful business enterprise, one that would grow into the third largest bank in the City, and would propel him into leadership positions in civic, government and business affairs.

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 13*

*(Page 7 of 9 )*

Robert Lee Thornton was born in 1880 in Hico, Texas. As a child, he moved with his family to a farm at Bristol, near Ennis, in Ellis County south of Dallas. Picking "a bale of cotton a day," according to his own recollections, he completed the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and briefly attended the Ferris Institute in nearby Ferris, Texas, while also working as a dry goods clerk for \$25 a month at the Sparkman Brothers General Store. Thornton borrowed money from his employer to attend Metropolitan Business College in Dallas in 1891. By the age of 24, he was working as a traveling candy salesman in Indian Territory (later Oklahoma) for the Plow Candy Company in Dallas.

In 1910, Thornton opened a book and stationary company, Thornton & Bracey, with a former candy company colleague. Although the business started out successful, the State of Texas passed legislation that offered free textbooks to all Texas students, legislation which brought him financial ruin. He subsequently formed a mortgage company that also failed.

In 1916, Thornton and his brother in law, A. C. Stiles, capitalized \$14,000 in jitney notes (automobile loans) and with another \$6,000 borrowed from another brother in law, Shreveport oilman W. P. Stiles, opened the Stiles, Thornton & Lund Bank. The business was located in part of a room at 704 Main Street in downtown Dallas. Thornton was bank president. The bank opened on October 14, 1916. First day deposits were \$12,000 and the partners found customers among "ice wagon drivers, mule buyers, jitney drivers, farmers, streetcar conductors and cotton men." Many years later, Thornton recounted that his greatest fear then was whether other Dallas banks would accept checks drawn on his bank.

After the first year, the bank issued \$100,000 in stock, received a state banking charter, and was renamed the Dallas County State Bank. Thornton focused on providing services to working people when banking was generally perceived as useful for or available only to the well-to-do. Jitney notes, loans to working people to enable them to purchase automobiles, were unheard of among established banks in Dallas, but Thornton and his partners saw the opportunity for enormous growth and proudly offered them.

In 1920, the bank moved to larger quarters at Main and Lamar, and joined the Federal Reserve. By 1923, with \$500,000 in capital, the name was again changed to Mercantile Bank & Trust. A year later, and now \$1 million in capital, the name was changed to Mercantile National Bank. Dubbed the "Big Friendly Bank for Everybody", Mercantile's growth continued unabated through the 1920s, employing 100 people in 1926 with \$11 million in deposits. With a growing reputation as a successful and entrepreneurial banker, Thornton was elected President of the Texas Bankers Association for the 1924-25 term.

The Crash of 1929 and subsequent depression hurt Mercantile as it did other banks. Deposits slumped until 1932. Through the 1930s, the Mercantile could boast several firsts in Dallas banking: first airplane loan, first Personal Loan Department, first FHA loans, first Industrial Development Department, and first acceptance of deposits by mail.

Thornton's reputation continued to blossom and he was readily accepted by other civic leaders such as Nathan Adams, president of First National Bank, and Fred Florence, president of Republic Bank. Thornton was elected President of the Chamber of Commerce in 1933 and served three terms. During this time, and subsequently for two decades, he chaired the Chamber's Industrial Development Committee, focusing on attracting new business to the Dallas region. He also served on boards of directors of numerous other businesses, including railroads, insurance and utility companies.

Thornton's major civic commitment was his service on the board and executive committee of the Texas Centennial Exposition. His leadership and tenacity resulted in the selection of Dallas over many more likely prospective cities, including San Antonio and Houston, for the site of the 1936 World's Fair celebrating Texas' 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. He was described as relentless in his quest for financial backing for the fair, pressuring businessmen to contribute to the fair that would put Dallas on the map.

His civic leadership never flagged. He was Director of the 1937 Pan American Exposition, and during World War II he co-chaired the War Chest Drive's Special Gifts, Big Gifts and Employers' Gifts Divisions. He served as President of the State Fair for 25 years and then Chairman of the Board until his death. He served as director of the Southwestern Medical Foundation, Trinity River Improvement Association, Dallas Opera, Dallas Symphony, and as a founding member of the Dallas Citizens Council.

Thornton retired as CEO of the Mercantile National Bank in 1947, and focused more exclusively on civic projects. In 1953, he was elected mayor –serving for eight years to 1961. Among his critical initiatives were the Forney Dam, the expansion of Love Field, and construction of a new library, city auditorium and convention center.

Known as "Mr. Dallas", Thornton received the 1947 Linz Award, the city's most distinguished honor. He also received the Greater Dallas Planning Council's Distinguished Citizen Award in 1955, the Man of Vision Award in 1959, and an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree from the University of Dallas in 1963 – among other awards. Thornton died in 1964.

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 13*

*(Page 9 of 9)*

In the words of the program announcing the opening of the Mercantile National Bank, "one man, R. L. Thornton, Founder and President, stands out as the dynamic figure, the force that has made the institution one of the outstanding banking houses of the Southwest." Thornton created the bank, and through his leadership, the tower. No resource better evokes his vision, tenacity and achievement.

*(The previous section on Robert Thornton was drawn substantially from The Handbook of Texas Online entry for Robert Lee Thornton. Other sources include Dallas Morning News, September 11, 1949 and the Landmark Designation Report prepared by Architexas, November 15, 2000)*

## ***14. Bibliography***

Ahlschlager, Walter W., Mercantile Bank Building (Building Plans dated 7-14-41)

Architexas Project Files, Mercantile Bank Building Complex

Dallas Landmark Commission Landmark Nomination Form: Mercantile Bank Building & Mercantile Securities Building

Dallas Morning News

March 4, 1930

April 17, 1938

January 26, 1939

June 25, 1940

June 26, 1940

August 18, 1940

April 27, 1941

November 14, 1943

August 24, 1947

October 26, 1947

May 23, 1948

August 10, 1948

February 2, 1949

September 11, 1949

July 2, 1950

April 24, 1955

April 26, 1955

August 4, 1957

October 27, 1957

February 23, 1958

October 5, 1958

December 7, 1958

March 6, 1959

January 20, 1960

August 3, 1960

March 3, 1963

May 3, 1964

March 30, 1965

December 1, 1988

August 2, 1989

## **14. Bibliography**

Dallas Times Herald

April 29, 1960

December 15, 1965

January 30, 1968

October 12, 1983

Heritage Consulting Group Project Files

Marcel Quimby, FAIA and Lila Knight, Dallas Downtown Historic District National Register nomination, 2002

Marcel Quimby, FAIA, "Mercantile National Bank Complex Chronology", n.d.

Marcel Quimby, FAIA, and Lila Knight, "Supplemental Information to the Downtown Dallas National Register Nomination", unpublished, September 2004.

Mercantile National Bank, "27 Years, Faith, Work, Service" (Unpublished, November, 1943)

New York Times (March 30, 1965)

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps



**15. Attachments**

*District or Site Map* \_\_\_\_\_ *Additional descriptive material*  
*Site Plan* \_\_\_\_\_ *Footnotes*  
*x Photos (historic & current)* \_\_\_\_\_ *Other:* \_\_\_\_\_

**16. Inventory of Structures-Historic District Only (Page \_\_\_ of \_\_\_)**

*Please complete this form for each structure in a proposed historic district*

**a. Location and Name**

*Mercantile Bank Building*  
*1704 Main Street*

**b. Development History**

*Original owner:* *Mercantile National Bank*  
*Architect/builder:* *Walter W. Ahlschlager, Architect*  
*Broad & Nelson, Architect of Alterations*  
*Construction/alteration dates: 1943*  
*1947-48, 1958, 1963-64 (Alterations)*

**c. Architectural Significance**

*Dominant style:* *Modern Movement*  
  
*Condition: Good*      *Alterations: Modern Movement*

**d. Category**

*Contributing* \_\_\_\_\_ *Compatible* \_\_\_\_\_ *Non-contributing* \_\_\_\_\_  
*excellent example of an* *supportive of the district in age,* *intrusive; detracts form the*  
*architectural style that is* *style and massing but is not* *character of the district*  
*typical of or integral to the* *representative of the significant*  
*district; retaining essential* *style, period and detailing, or*  
*integrity of design* *area of significance typical of*  
*the district*

**e. Statement of Significance**

Architecturally, the building is a unique resource in the city of Dallas by virtue of its design and size. It is also noteworthy in the body of work of Walter W. Ahlschlager, the original architect.

***Continuation Sheet***

***Item # 16-e***

***(Page 1 of 3 )***

Walter Ahlschlager, Architect: The Mercantile Bank Building was designed by noted Dallas architect Walter Ahlschlager and is an important building type within his body of work.

Ahlschlager was born in 1887 to prominent Chicago architect John Ahlschlager. John Ahlschlager had a thriving practice focused on churches, private residences, and apartment buildings throughout the region. Walter followed in his father's footsteps, attending Armour Institute of Technology in Chicago (today, the Illinois Institute of Technology) and joining the firm in 1905 at the age of 18. When his father died in 1914, Ahlschlager continued the firm and expanded the practice into theaters and office buildings. In 1918, he designed the Pantheon Theater, Chicago's first movie palace. Other works in the Chicago area included the Sheridan Plaza (NR; 1920), Cass-Superior Apartment (1921), Covenant Club (1923), Belmont Theater (1926), and Woolworth Building (1928). He also designed the Detroit Towers (1922) in Detroit, the Peabody Hotel (1925; NR) in Memphis, Beacon Hotel and Theater (1926) and Roxy Theater (1927) in New York. His first tower commission was the 45-story Medinah Athletic Club Hotel in Chicago (1929; NR), followed by the 49-story Carew Building in Cincinnati (1931).

Ahlschlager first visited Dallas in the late 1930s when he organized a proposal to redevelop the City's historic post office site. Eventually, Ahlschlager established a working relationship with Robert Thornton, then President of Mercantile Bank, and was hired to design the Mercantile Bank Building, initially announced as a 36-story building and later reduced to 31. Upon receiving the commission for the Mercantile, Ahlschlager relocated his practice and family to Dallas.

In addition to designing the Mercantile Building and Commerce Building for Mercantile Bank, the architect developed a very successful practice and also became an active developer. His first commission after the Mercantile Bank was a 4-story parking garage for Ashley DeWitt. In 1944, he proposed a 22-story 700 room hotel. In 1947, he designed \$4.8 million Monroe Building and the \$750,000 Floyd West & Company building. The next year, Ahlschlager designed a \$2 million 11-story Reserve Loan Life Insurance Building. In 1950, Ahlschlager joined with Clint Murchison and John Murchison on a \$5 million 600-unit housing project at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio. The same year, he worked with W. W. Caruth in designing Inwood Village. Two years later, he paired with Preston Reynolds to develop the 5-story 3200 Maple Street office complex, which sold upon completion for \$1 million. Two years later, again with Reynolds but also with his son, Walter Jr., he designed and developed a \$6.5 million regional shopping Center in Denver. At the same time, Ahlschlager designed the \$1.75 million Furniture Wholesale Mart (1954), a proposed 60-story residential building in northeast Dallas for Pollard Simons (1963), and a \$6.25 million 11-story residential building called the Wedgewood (1964) where he lived. Ahlschlager died in Dallas in 1965 at the age of 77.

*(The previous section on Walter Ahlschlager was drawn substantially from the New York Times, March 30, 1965; Dallas Morning News, May 3, 1964 and Dallas Morning News, March 30,*

1965)

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 16-e*

*(Page 2 of 3)*

Donald S. Nelson: The architect for the alterations was Donald S. Nelson of the Dallas firm of Broad & Nelson.

Donald S. Nelson was born in Chicago, Illinois on February 10, 1907, the son of August G. and Diana (Frederickson) Nelson. After graduating from high school, he attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he received a bachelor of architecture degree in 1927 at the age of 20. During his studies, he attended the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts at Fontainebleau in 1925. In the year of his graduation, he received the Paris Prize from the Society of Beaux Arts Architects which enabled him to study at the Ecole National Supérieur des Beaux Arts in Paris for three years. Upon returning, in 1929, Nelson joined the Chicago firm of Bennett, Parsons, and Frost. The firm specialized in city planning and civic improvement, doing work internationally as well as locally. Among the firm's and Nelson's projects was design work for the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition, under the Exposition's Architectural Commission led by Hubert Burnham, Edward Bennett and John Holabird. Nelson designed the United States Government Building as well as many of the corporation buildings at the Chicago fair.

In 1935, George L. Dahl, chief architect of the Texas Centennial Fair, invited Nelson and several other Chicago architects to come to Dallas and work on the fair. Serving as one of the fair's chief designers, Nelson helped plan the layout and overall arrangement of the fair, as well as designing the World Exhibits Building. After the completion of Fair Park in 1937, Nelson remained in Dallas and established a private practice from 1937 to 1940. He was selected by the Federal Fine Arts Commission to be the architect for the federal memorials for the Texas Centennial. W. W. Ahlschlager hired Nelson as an associate architect to work on the Mercantile National Bank tower in 1940. During World War II, Nelson served as Chief of Planning and Design for the United States Army Air Force in Washington, D.C. from 1942 to 1946. In 1946, he joined Thomas D. Broad to form the firm of Broad & Nelson. He remained with the firm through the rest of his professional career.

Nelson successfully made the transition from the Beaux-Arts style to Modernism after World War II. Among his larger commissions for commercial and public buildings are: the Dallas Mercantile Bank Complex (1940-47); the Texas Memorial Grand Lodge Temple in Waco (1950); the Dallas County Government Center (1969); the Scottish Rite Library and Museum in Waco (1969); and the Experimental Science Building at The University of Texas (1951). Nelson was noted for his ability to integrate the other fine arts into the design of his buildings.

*Continuation Sheet*

*Item # 16-e*

*(Page 3 of 3)*

Nelson received numerous design awards at both the state and national level, including the Meritorious Design Award from the Texas Society of Architects (1950) and *Progressive Architecture* magazine's Design Award (1956). He served as president of the Dallas Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1956 and as secretary-treasurer of the Texas Architecture Foundation from 1950 to 1954. Nelson was made a Fellow in the American Institute of Architects in 1954. He was also a member of the Architecture League of New York, and a charter member of the Texas Society of Architects. He married Matilda Fowler on September 17, 1929. The couple had one son. Nelson died in Dallas on January 4, 1992.

*(The previous section on Donald S. Nelson was drawn substantially from The Handbook of Texas Online entry for Donald S. Nelson.)*

Architectural Style: Although the pedestal is shrouded by a curtainwall installed in the 1960s, the 31-story bank building is a masterful design in the Modern Movement.

Whereas earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century styles relied to a degree on ornamentation and decoration, the Modern Movement relies more on building form and massing. A hallmark of the Movement is the reluctance toward decoration. Finishes typically are smooth with uniform wall surfaces. Windows typically are flush with the exterior wall plane with minimal detail and metal frames. Fenestration is relied upon to give definition. Roofs are typically flat. Decoration is typically minimal.

As detailed in the Section 12, Ahlschlager's design for the Mercantile relied heavily on massing to create a visual image of verticality. Looking at the Ervay Street façade, the image is both vertical and symmetrical with a central tower rising 31 stories, capped by a clock tower and spire and shouldered by 7-story masses on the north and south and a 3-story pedestal base. Fenestration, with the use of recessively contrasting spandrel panels, creates an image of vertical ribbons, subtly accentuated by select use of coping, trim and sills. While the upper floors are largely without decoration, original detailing at the north and south entrances and at the storefront level created character to the pedestrian.

Architectural Significance: The Mercantile Bank Building is a unique resource in the City of Dallas. It was the only major American office building completed during World War II and the first major office building in Dallas since the construction of the Dallas Power & Light and Petroleum Tower buildings in 1931. Including its spire, the Mercantile was the tallest building west of the Mississippi River for over a decade -- until 1954 when the 42-story Republic Bank Building was built in Dallas.

## **17. Designation Criteria**

**History, heritage and culture:** Represents the historical development, ethnic heritage or cultural characteristics of the city, state, or country.

**Historic event:** Location of or association with the site of a significant historic event.

**Significant persons:** Identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the culture and development of the city, state, or country.

**Architecture:** Embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, landscape design, method of construction, exceptional craftsmanship, architectural innovation, or contains details which represent folk or ethnic art.

**Architect or master builder:** Represents the work of an architect, designer or master builder whose individual work has influenced the development of the city, state or country.

**Historic context:** Relationship to other distinctive buildings, sites, or areas which are eligible for preservation based on historic, cultural, or architectural characteristics.

**Unique visual feature:** Unique location of singular physical characteristics representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the city that is a source of pride or cultural significance.

**Archeological:** Archeological or paleontological value in that it has produced or can be expected to produce data affecting theories of historic or prehistoric interest.

**National and state recognition:** Eligible of or designated as a National Historic Landmark, Recorded Texas Historic Landmark, State Archeological Landmark, American Civil Engineering Landmark, or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

**Historic education:** Represents an era of architectural, social, or economic history that allows an understanding of how the place or area was used by past generations.

***Recommendation***

***The Designation Task Force requests the Landmark Commission to deem this nominated landmark meritorious of designation as outlined in Chapter 51 and Chapter 51A, Dallas Development Code.***

***Further, the Designation Task Force endorses the Preservation Criteria, policy recommendations and landmark boundary as presented by the Department of Planning and Development.***

***Date:***

---

***Chair  
Designation Task Force***

---

***Chair  
Designation Task Force***

***Historic Preservation Planner***