

HABS  
MO,  
48-KANCI,  
12-

HABS No. MO-18

New York Life Insurance Building  
20 W. Ninth Street  
Kansas City  
Jackson County  
Missouri

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NEW YORK LIFE BUILDING

HABS No. MO-18

Location: 20 West Ninth Street  
Kansas City, Jackson County, Missouri

Present Owner: 20th West Ninth Street Corporation

Present Use: Office building leased by various tenants

Statement of Significance: Representing the city's expansion during the 1880s into a major business center, the New York Life Building is one of the most significant surviving structures in Kansas City. In 1890, the New York Life Building was the tallest and largest office building in the city and represented the first instance of an eastern company making a substantial investment in the city's development. The building is architecturally significant as a product of the important New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Begun 1887; completed 1890.
2. Architects: McKim, Mead, and White. Until recently, it was assumed that Stanford White was the principal architect, but Joseph Morrill Wells, who worked in the firm from 1878 to 1890 after an apprenticeship with Richard Morris Hunt, was actually responsible for most of the design. Ensclosed in the academic theories and practices of Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Wells augmented the development of ultra-conservative architectural design in the United States. His design for the Italian Renaissance facade of the Villard Mansion on Madison Avenue, New York, was instrumental in establishing a standard of taste which lingered well into the twentieth century. Wells died on February 2, 1890, at the age of thirty-seven, in New York; his role in the commission for the New York Life Building is documented in his obituary in the New York Times (Donald Hoffman, "New Light on the Old New York Life Building," Kansas City Star, April 30, 1967).
3. Sculptor: A monumental bronze sculpture above the building's entrance depicts an eagle with outstretched wings, protecting two eaglets in a nest from an intruding snake. An appropriate symbol for an insurance company, this work was commissioned by

from Italy, were laid by the Heter Brothers, who were supervised by foreman Antonio Rosa.

6. Original plan and construction: The building is reputed to have cost \$1,000,000. Jarus H. Knopp, a carpenter who worked on the New York Life Building, stated that common labor on the structure drew \$1.50 per day for 10 hours, carpenters \$2.25 for 10 hours, and bricklayers a little more. Approximately four weeks were required to raise each story. In addition to the office of the New York Life Insurance Company, the new building also provided rental space for other business offices. Much of the building's interior was adjusted to accommodate various tenants. The original plans, which were intended to be used for several additional New York Life Insurance Company buildings in other western cities, are said to exist, but have not been located. Branches of the New York Life Insurance Company in Omaha, Nebraska, and St. Paul, Minnesota, constructed similar versions of the building before the Kansas City structure was completed. The Omaha building is virtually identical to the others in scale, plan, and massing, but has minor variations in decorative detail. The building was constructed in 1888-89, and an additional story was added in 1920. In St. Paul, the New York Life Building was designed by the New York firm of Babb, Cook and Willard and constructed in 1887-89. Similar in style and overall concept, the St. Paul building, however, consisted of two unequal masses flanking a central court with no central tower. In addition, the design of the top two stories, with ornamental dormer windows in steep roofs behind stepped gables on the principal facades, evoked the late Renaissance architecture of the Netherlands or northern Germany. The building, located at Minnesota and East Sixth Streets, was razed in 1968.
7. Alterations and additions: The building's exterior is unaltered. The vestibule behind the main entrance was originally open to the air; the existing entrance doors and glazing are later additions. Throughout the years, the building's interior has been altered to accommodate the needs of new mechanical systems and the changing tastes of interior designs. The New York Life Insurance Company completely remodeled the building in 1933 at the cost of \$3,000,000. Four Otis elevators were installed, and most of the original mechanical systems were probably replaced. Throughout the building are dropped acoustical ceilings and many of the mosaic corridor floors and original interior wood and glass partitions have been replaced or covered. The elevator lobby behind the entrance vestibule has been partially modernized, but the interior court has remained virtually intact. New flush doors have been added to the north, east, and west walls, and all but

the New York Life Company, whose own insignia was an eagle atop a ball supported by two kneeling figures. Once attributed to the studio of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the sculpture has now been established as the work of the sculptor's lesser-known brother, Louis (Mitchell, There Is No Limit, pp. 16-37). Weighing two tons, the sculpture was cast by Henry Bonnard Bronze Company, New York, in 1891, and was probably installed early the same year. Identical sculptures were also cast for the New York Life Insurance Company buildings in Omaha, Nebraska, and Saint Paul, Minnesota. Both sculptures still exist, but they have been moved from their original locations. The Omaha sculpture was moved to the new Omaha National Bank building when the New York Life Insurance building was vacated. The St. Paul eagle is now located at the Jackson Parking Ramp, and the New York Life Building has been demolished. Louis Saint-Gaudens' better known works include the lions for the Boston Public Library and the figures for Union Station in Washington, D. C.

4. Original and subsequent owners: William T. Boosh purchased the open land for the New York Life Building in December 1886 from George F. Winter, James Hewson, and W. H. Enotts for \$238,000 (Kansas City Star, December 13, 1886, page 1). The property originally included additional land north and west of the buildings, but at the present time, the property description includes only the building itself; beginning at the northeast corner of 9th and Baltimore, hence north 160', hence east 120', hence south of north line of 9th Street and hence west to the beginning. Book 32 (page 98) and Old Book 32 (page 117) of the Land List Index in the Register of Deeds, Jackson County Courthouse, lists the following transactions.

Date	Grantee
12/30/1893	New York Life Insurance Company
7/18/1924	Mitrose Investment Company
6/19/1931	New York Life Insurance Company
11/22/1944	Granthurst Realty Company
2/17/1945	Charles F. Curruy et al
1/02/1957	Twenty West Ninth Corporation

5. Builder, suppliers: The general construction contract was awarded to Narcross Brothers of Worcester, Massachusetts, who built a plant at 3rd and Broadway, Kansas City, manufacturing bricks, which were then fired by the local firm of Stumph and McClellan. The architect's superintendent was F. E. Hill. Exterior window sash and frames were made in Boston, Massachusetts, and the exterior finish was shipped, pre-cut and numbered, from Vermont. The marble, mosaic floors, imported

the center section of the dramatic, glazed barrel vault has been covered on the exterior.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: Various photographs depicting the building at different periods in the Montgomery Collection, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library. Similar views appear in most of the late nineteenth century view books of Kansas City. The only known early interior views were published in Picturesque and Descriptive Kansas City, Missouri, Neenah, Wisconsin: Art Publishing Company, 1890.
2. Bibliography:
  - a. Unpublished sources: Statement by Jarus H. Knapp, a carpenter who worked on the construction of the building, written about 1940; on file at the Kansas City Landmarks Commission. Data concerning the building since the 1940s is available in the files of the Charles F. Curry Real Estate Company, which manages the building.
  - b. Published sources:

Harper's Weekly, September 15, 1888 (supplement).

Hoffmann, Donald, "New Light on the Old New York Life Building," Kansas City Star, April 30, 1967.

Hughes' Kansas City Views, Kansas City: Hughes Publishing Company, 1896.

Kansas City Journal, December 14, 1886.

Kansas City Star, December 13, 1886; February 25, 1891.

Mitchell, Giles Carroll, There is no Limit: Architecture and Sculpture in Kansas City, Kansas City: Brown-White Company, 1934.

Picturesque and Descriptive Kansas City, Missouri, Neenah, Wisconsin: Art Publishing Company, 1890.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The New York Life Building is a particularly impressive example of adapting the design principles, elements, and motifs of Italian Renaissance palaces for the late nineteenth century "skyscraper." Heavy massing combined with restrained detailing on the principal facade and in the interior public spaces project qualities of self-assured solidity and refined "good taste" -- appropriate statements for an insurance company building. Only the south and west facades are ornamented; the north and east facades are unarticulated brick walls with irregularly spaced window openings, responding to the functional needs of the interiors.
2. Condition of fabric: The building has been well maintained and is in excellent condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Layout, shape, and massing: At ground level, the building is a rectangle, 120 feet long on the south (front) facade and 160 feet on the sides. Above the second story, the building is 'H' shaped, with equal ten-story rectangular wings linked by a central tower rising approximately three stories higher, to a total height of 210 feet.
2. Wall construction, design, and decoration:
  - a. Principal facade (south): Two equal projecting wings of two bays, each linked by a central entrance, creates a facade five bays wide. Above the second story, the central bay is recessed to the tower, and the two-bay articulation of the wings is repeated on their inner faces. The facade's overall composition reflects the classical concern for balancing horizontal and vertical elements. The elevation of the ten-story wings is divided into three horizontal zones. The first three stories are faced with sandstone ashlar and are articulated by tall arches with transom bars and oversized voussoirs that enframe the windows on the first and second stories. Above the arches are simple paired windows. The common bond wall surface of the second zone consists of alternating horizontal bands of brick projecting at the corners, simulating quoins. The arches are outlined in molded brick with terra cotta insets and a terra cotta frieze of palmettes forms an ornamental band at the springing of the arches. A terra cotta medallion ornaments the spandrel between the arches.

The third zone is separated from that below by another string-course and is articulated by two pairs of arched openings framing single windows on the eighth and ninth stories. The top story is treated as a paneled frieze, with alternating terra cotta medallions and small windows; the surfaces are faced with sandstone except in the panels where the brick is exposed. A heavy terra cotta overhanging cornice above the frieze is highly ornamented with dentils, brackets, medallions, and lions heads, and capped with acroteria.

The central tower's facade is identical to that of the wings through the second zone, or seventh story. The tower's wall surface above the second zone is stepped back, creating attenuated piers topped by arches framing single windows. Capped by an overhanging hipped roof and ball finial, the top story of the tower is articulated by three unglazed rectangular openings on each side; an Ionic column divides each of the three openings. Unlike the remainder of the building, the tower is equally ornamented on all sides.

- b. West facade: The architectural elements of the west facade are identical to those of the south face wings; the two-bay composition is simply stretched horizontally to form eight repeating bays.
  - c. North and east facades: The east side, west side, and three-sided lighted court, created by the tower and the inner faces of the wings, are unornamented brick walls laid in common bond. Most of the window openings are evenly spaced, with plain stone lintels and sills.
3. Foundations: According to Janus Knapp, a carpenter who worked on the construction of the building, bedrock was found fifty-six feet below the level of 9th Street and five feet was excavated in solid rock. "Large footing rocks which form the base of the foundation were quarried behind Walruff Grove at what is now 31st and Southwest Boulevard." Visible foundations are cut stone and brick.
  4. Structural system, framing: The building is brick bearing-wall construction. A series of seven steel reinforced piers, coursing the center of each wing on all floors, providing internal support between the bearing walls. Steel I-beams (probably the first used in Kansas City) support the floors, and are spaced every four feet, with terra cotta infill.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The arched main entrance occupies the central bay of the south facade and is recessed slightly from the wall surface. The highly ornamented sandstone arch springs from piers and is filled by an elaborate wrought-iron grille. The entrance is framed by two monolithic polished granite columns with pilasters responds in antis, supporting a lintel which functions as a transom bar. The words -- The New York Life Insurance Company -- and the date 1888 in Roman numerals were originally on the bar; the company name has been removed.

Above the entrance, an open sandstone screen of fluted pillars, supporting an entablature, links the projecting wings of the facade. An ornamented partial arch crowns the screen and provides the base for the Louis Saint-Gauden's eagle hovering above.

A second entrance, with no special articulation, occupies the third bay from the northwest corner of the west facade.

- b. Windows: Most of the windows are wooden double-hung sash with one-over-one lights. Where glazing fills arched openings, the top sash conforms to the shape of the arch (as in the window of the ninth story), or the opening is subdivided by wooden mullions and transoms (as on the first and second stories).

6. Roof: The roofs of the main wings are flat.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: A vestibule, behind the main entrance, leads to an elevator lobby and interior court with glazed roof. These public spaces occupy the center section of the building with office spaces on either side. On the upper floors, the tower section holds the elevators and provides spaces for small lobbies. The remainder of the plan varies from floor to floor, but generally speaking, a corridor from each side of the tower section connects with each wing and intersects with another corridor running down the center of the wings from front to rear, with offices on either side. The building provides approximately 125,000 square feet of rental space.

2. Architectural treatment of notable interior spaces:

- a. Entrance vestibule: A wide marble staircase of seven treads ascends from the center of the vestibule floor (at sidewalk level) to the elevator lobby. Marble stairs, on either side of the staircase, descends to the basement level. At the start of the ascent, tall bronze lamps are contained in the balustrades and carved marble volutes substitute for railings. The floors are red Vermont marble ashlar faces the walls, and the room is covered by a gilded barrel vault with double rows of coffers separated by ribs of bound lansol leaves. The entrance to the elevator lobby at the top of the staircase is framed by a portico of monolithic pink marble columns with bronze Corinthian capitals supporting a projecting architrave with overhanging bracketed cornice. The portico frieze bears a shield with the monogram of the New York Life Insurance Company.
- b. Elevator lobby: Providing a corridor between the vestibule and the interior court, the elevator lobby has been transformed by the installation of modern elevators, fluorescent lighting in the ceiling, tile floor covering, and modern entrances into the office spaces. The original walls are faced with grey marble, and the wall piers with palmette and anthemion bands simulating capitals, support a simple entablature. The walls between the columns on the north side and between the piers are skeletal, with marble mullions framing modern doors and glazing. A glazed oculus, framed in a circular, marble band, within an arch of veined, pink marble, pierces the center of the arched section of the north wall above the entablature. The corresponding section of the south wall contains the same arch, but an arched opening with a grille replaces the oculus. The mosaic tile floor covering is white with geometric borders of black, gold and grey. A large interlocking double figure eight with polished red marble centers, ornaments the middle of the floor. The interior circle borders contain continuous and overlapping figure eights with stylized floral and star motifs.

The interior court is covered by a coffered metal and glass barrel vault with elaborate bronze frills supporting the glass in each of the coffers. The three central rows of coffers are railed slightly above the remainder of the vault, permitting small side windows that open for ventilation. The interior vault was originally open to light; unfortunately, all but the three center rows of coffers have been covered.

Between the east wall piers, a marble staircase with carved marble balustrade ascends to a landing, turns, and climbs to the second floor. A heavy, cast-iron railing, painted gold, runs along the top of the staircase wall.

Triple-armed bronze torches centered on the wall piers illuminate the interior court. Originally gas, the torches have been converted to electricity.

- d. Other interior details: Whereas most of the interior on the upper floors has been thoroughly modernized, some corridors retain the original mosaic tile floors, cherry office doors, and glazed panels in the partition walls. Two offices on the ninth floor have old paneling, as well as ornate fireplace mantels that may be original. Smooth plaster columns with composite capitals encase the exposed interior supporting steel pins. (See photograph of the 1890 interior of the Merchants National Bank). Many of the capitals still remain above the dropped ceilings (see photograph).
3. Stairways: In addition to the marble staircases in the vestibule and the interior court, there is an eight-story, cast-iron stairway of rectangular plan in an open well on the west side of the building.
  4. Lighting: Whereas gas and electricity were originally used, fluorescent ceiling lights now provide most of the illumination. The only surviving, original fixtures are in the entrance vestibule and interior court.
  5. Heating: Three low pressure Lyons boilers, gas and oil fired, with a standby coal boiler, feed a hot water heating system. Underground oil storage tanks hold 12,500 gallons.
- D. Site and surroundings: Propitiously situated in the central business district on the northeast corner of the intersection of 9th Street and Baltimore Avenue, the New York Life Building has been a significant element in the Kansas City urban landscape. The building creates a visual terminus for Baltimore Avenue, which runs directly into the south facade slightly west of center, jogs west and continues. The building's imposing mass and height creates a dramatic vista for more than a mile down Baltimore Avenue.

For many years, the New York Life Building was in the center of the financial district of the city. However, most banking institutions, insurance companies, and the Board of Trade have since moved away, their buildings demolished. Presently, the building is virtually surrounded by extremely unsympathetic parking structures, undeveloped

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land and small business. Some new office buildings have been constructed nearby and an urban renewal plan calls for the redevelopment of the area and for retaining the building.

Prepared by: Charles A. Herrington  
Architectural Historian  
National Park Service  
October 1972; June 1975

ADDENDUM TO:  
NEW YORK LIFE INSURANCE BUILDING  
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REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

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