

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Guardian Building  
other names/site number Union Trust Building

### 2. Location

street & number 500 Griswold Street  not for publication  
city, town Detroit  vicinity  
state Michigan code MI county Wayne code 163 zip code 48226

### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u>      </u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>      </u>	<u>      </u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>      </u>	<u>      </u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	<u>      </u> objects
			<u>      </u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:  
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

### 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Commercial

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

office building

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Commercial skyscraper

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation granite and Mankato stone

walls granite, brick with tile cladding

roof

other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Completed in 1929, the Guardian Building, then known as the New Union Trust Building, cost \$12 million to build. It rises 40 stories from the street to 485 feet. A distinctive feature of the building is the exterior ornament of tile cladding of triangles running in bands of green and white, orange and white, and black and gold. The Union Trust Bank wanted to create a public spirited image. This imaginative skyscraper was built on a long rectangular lot. A guidebook, prepared for the 50th anniversary celebration, reported:

Five buildings were wrecked to make way for the new structure. These were the Huron, Burns, Lewis, Butler and Standard Savings and Loan Association buildings. Wrecking began March 1, 1927.

The building is literally founded on bedrock. It rests upon 72 caissons sunk through hardpan to bedrock 120 feet below the surface of the ground.

The foundation was finished October 15, 1927, and eight trusses were erected, six weighing 60 tons each, one weighing 67 tons and one weighing 70 tons. Each was designed to support over three million pounds.

At the sidewalk level is a two-foot sill course of Somes Sound granite. Above this is a six-foot band of Montrose granite, then another band of the Somes Sound, above which is Mankato stone to the sixth story. Somes Sound granite comes from Maine, Montrose granite is quarried in northern Wisconsin, and Mankato stone comes from Mankato, Minnesota.

Above the Mankato stone is an ornamental band of green, tan and red-brown terra-cotta and glazed tile.

Wirt Rowland, the architect of the firm of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls worked closely with Mrs. Mary Chase Stratton of Detroit's Pewabic Pottery in formulating the different tiles used throughout the interior and exterior of the building.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D    NHL #4

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance

Significant Dates

Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1928  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1928  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person

Architect/Builder

Smith, Hinchman and Grylls;  
Rowland, Wirt (Principal Architect)

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Between the two World Wars, America was engaged in a period of feverish activity, constructing tall buildings particularly in New York, Chicago and Detroit. The automobile manufacturing city was busy building public and industrial buildings, hotels and movie palaces that were lavish by any national standards. Some of the most startling structures were downtown and a number were the work of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls, an architectural firm that employed a number of talented designers. The Union Trust (now Guardian) is one of the most ebullient examples of the use of Arts and Crafts tiles covering a steel skeleton. Only the 1920's--1930's could have produced such a structure -- an amalgam of the past and present taste in building.

The history of the American skyscraper produced a series of tall buildings that arose starting with Cass Gilbert's Woolworth building in New York. Detroit's Guardian Building is part of that progression. A tall building with a Gothic skin, the Woolworth was a sedate masterpiece which respected its setting. A number of new buildings were not so aesthetically pleasing, so in 1916, New York City established the zoning ordinance limiting the height and area of buildings in relationship to the width of the streets. This required the use of setbacks and permitted more light to filter into the narrow canyon-like streets. The old architectural concept of base, shaft and cap was replaced by the tall building whose top looked like a stepped Assyrian ziggurat.

The Chicago Tribune competition of 1922 served to focus attention on the design problems of the skyscraper. In view of Chicago's priority in this field, it is ironical that the first prize was won by two New Yorkers, John Mead Howells and Raymond M. Hood. Completed in 1924, their Tribune Tower did little more than perpetuate Gilbert's Gothicism. Emphatic vertical piers terminated in flying buttresses which were joined to an octagonal tower that recalled the famed Butter Tower of the Cathedral of Rouen in France.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings  
Survey # HABS MI-273
- recorded by Historic American Engineering  
Record # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property Less than 1 acre

UTM References

A 

1	7
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3	3	1	4	4	0
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4	6	8	8	2	0	0
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Zone Easting Northing

B 

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Zone Easting Northing

C 

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D 

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Lots ninety-nine (99) to one hundred three (103) inclusive, of Section Two (2) of the Governor and Judges' Plan of the City of Detroit, according to the plat recorded in Liber 34 of Deeds, Page 549, Wayne County records.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary is the same as the lot lines of the original structure.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Carolyn Pitts, Historian  
organization History Division, NPS date 2/9/89  
street & number 1100 L Street, NW telephone (202) 343-8166  
city or town Washington state DC zip code 20013

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The terra-cotta ornament is in the form of interlocking hexagons, with angles of alternately 60 and 30 degrees. This pattern and the stepped arch are the unifying decorative motifs that appear throughout the building. Rowland felt that the scale of the ornamentation should match that of the building and also be comprehended from a moving vehicle.

The main portion of the building is faced with an orange-tan colored brick which Rowland helped formulate. This application and color proved so popular that the manufacturer later marketed it under the name "Guardian Brick." The use of brick was unusual in such a large building, the preferred material being limestone or granite.

Rowland's use of it here (as a lower cost material than stone or terra-cotta) allowed more of the building budget to be spent for ornamentation of the exterior and the interior. In all, 1,800,000 bricks were used.

Awed visitors to the new building saw craggy contours that looked as if the entire structure had been chiseled from a cliff; exterior walls in a strange brick accented with glistening colored tiles; unfamiliar angles stemming from the Aztec; and interior spaces that were a bewildering though harmonious interplay of decoration. ...

The half-dome over the main entrance is made up of Pewabic tile. Because the idea of progress links itself in our minds today with the idea of aviation, the central design of this half dome is a conventionalized figure symbolizing progress with spread wings. In the three smaller medallions of the dome are portrayed the three divisions of commercial activity -- industry, agriculture and transportation.

In the window arch over the Congress Street entrance, the tile contains the beehive, symbolizing thrift and industry; the eagle, representing money; and the caduceus, symbol of authority and commerce.

On each side of the main entrance is a carved stone figure. One figure holds a sword, the other a key representing the safety and security that a financial institution offers. ...

The elevator doors are made of Monel metal, and were manufactured by the Dahlstrom Metallic Door Co. The use of Monel metal, a nickel alloy that was a forerunner of stainless steel, was a daring departure from bronze.

The elevator cabs were originally paneled in American walnut, with the grain of the wood forming the geometric pattern of the building. Most of

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the doors of the bank's business offices also were originally paneled in American walnut in this design. An example can be seen today near the guard desk at the south entrance.

The walls of the main lobby start with a band of Belgian black marble at the base. Numidian marble is above this band and Mankato stone above the marble.

Numidian marble was chosen for its characteristic blood-red color. To obtain marble of the exact color and quality desired for the lobby, a quarry in Africa that had been closed for 30 years was re-opened and enough marble taken from it for the lobby of the building.

The glass mosaic facing the Griswold Street entrance was designed by Ezra Winter and executed by the Ravenna Mosaic Company. Winter, who also designed the great mural in the main banking room, was a celebrated New York artist whose murals decorate great buildings throughout the United States. He was born in Manistee, Michigan.

The mural in the main lobby of the building is made of mosaic glass, thousands of pieces cemented together to form the complete design. This type of material was chosen because it is more permanent than paint and because the strength of its design harmonized with the tile of the lobby.

The mosaic contains the dedicatory sentence:

Founded on principles of faith and understanding, this building is erected for the purpose of maintaining and continuing the ideals of financial service which prompted the organization of this institution.

One of the most beautiful features of the lobby is the ornamental grille of Monel metal with its star-like design centered around a clock. The designs at the four corners of the clock's face are conventionalized reproductions of the Greek letters which stand for the signs of the zodiac. Beginning at the top and reading clockwise, they represent winter, spring, summer and fall.

The ceiling of the bank lobby was designed by Detroitier Thomas DiLorenzo. The original lighting fixtures of amber glass came from Czechoslovakia. The openness of both lobbies, the ornate design and carving all account for the nickname, "Cathedral of Finance."<sup>1</sup>

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Footnote

- 1 The Pilot: 50th Anniversary, 1979. (Reproduced by the State of Michigan.) (Unpaged.)

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Far more significant was the design that won the second prize. It was the creation of Eliel Saarinen of Finland, whose reputation was already well established in Europe. Turning his back on historical precedent, he visualized a bold soaring tower with discreet setbacks. Although the design was never realized, it was to have an incalculable effect upon the future evolution of the American skyscraper. In Chicago the aging Sullivan proclaimed it "a voice resonant and rich, ringing amidst the wealth and joy of life. In utterance sublime and melodious," he rhapsodized:

it prophesies a time to come and not so far away when we shall escape the bondage and the mania of fixed ideas. It goes freely in advance, and, with the steel frame as a thesis, displays a high science of design such as the world up to this day had neither known nor surmised. Rising from the earth ... it ascends in beauty, lofty and serene, until its lovely crest seems at one with the sky.<sup>1</sup>

Saarinen had a great deal of influence on American architecture in spite of his second place in the Tribune competition and particularly on one of the winning team's members, Raymond Hood, who became one of the masters of skyscraper design. Architects began to shed the ornamental historicism with which their creations were clad.

With a rapidly expanding economy in Detroit, the demand for downtown office space was critical and Griswold Street, Detroit's Wall Street, was rapidly developed. Three of the tallest buildings in this district were designed by Smith, Hinchman and Grylls. The Buhl, Penobscot and Union Trust went up in four short years.

A lion's share of all building activity fell to the firm of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls, and from their drafting boards came Renaissance public buildings, Gothic churches, Tudor mansions and clubs, and modern skyscrapers. During this period William E. Kapp was head of the architectural department of the firm, and to him was allotted the task of planning the layout of many of the buildings. With him worked several competent designers. One of the most talented of these was Wirt C. Rowland, who was responsible for determining the physical aspect of many of the firm's most important buildings. Rowland had been steeped in architectural history at Harvard. Fundamentally he was a Gothacist; but, like many of his contemporaries, he believed that the Gothic should be adapted to modern usage. This he was able to demonstrate in the design of the Jefferson Avenue Presbyterian Church of 1925. The buttressed pylons, the canopied niches, and the molded arches with their deep reveals were part of an extensive Gothic vocabulary then commonly applied to all types of buildings.<sup>2</sup>

But if there was historicism in their two earlier skyscrapers, the Buhl and Penobscot, this sober dignity was not appropriate for the Union Trust Company,

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which wanted a cordial, friendly image with the public, the most effective symbol of which would be a warm and colorful building.

Frank W. Blair, the president of the Union Trust Company, was an energetic, public-spirited man. Never afraid of new ideas, he was one of the first bankers in the county to lend support to commercial aviation. In the meantime Wirt Rowland had been developing further his theories of modern commercial architecture, and he realized that the opportune moment had come to bring them to fruition. He submitted a colored sketch of the proposed building to Blair and it met with immediate approval.

The plans for the building called for a thirty-six story structure. On the main floor would be a large banking room and lobby, while the numerous floors above would be devoted to office space. Provision was made for public elevators at the north end of the building and for private elevators for the use of the trust company at the south end. The disposition of the plan immediately suggested to Rowland a huge cathedral with a high tower at the north, a nave and aisles extending to the south, and terminated by an apse or small octagonal tower. He was reminded that the highest cathedral nave in the world (in Beauvais, France) was only half as high as the proposed building. He wondered how such a tall and narrow structure could be given an appearance of stability, since the necessity for window space precluded the use of piers as large as those at Beauvais. This problem he solved by the use of alternate solid and open bays on the vast expanse of wall surface.

Although Rowland was still guided by precedent in his concept of architectural masses, he was already convinced of the unsuitability of Gothic or Classical detail for the skyscraper. The decision to use brick veneer for the Union Trust Building suggested to him that this material might be the key to an entirely new system of decoration. Combined with glazed tile and polychrome terra-cotta, it offered unlimited possibilities of color, texture, and form. Color was desirable because it could be comprehended so easily. "We no longer live in a leisurely age," Rowland reflected:

nor do we move on streets from which it is possible to contemplate and enjoy minute sculptured detail. What we see we must see quickly in passing, and the impression must be immediate, strong and complete. Color has this vital power.<sup>3</sup>

There were a number of unique touches -- at the top of the north tower is a polygonal crowning feature decorated with a fret-work of burnished gold. When the building was first completed beams of moving colored lights radiated from this point at night. The brick used to fill in a steel skeleton of this

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size was unusual and the color of the brick became so popular that the manufacturer later marketed it under the name of "Guardian Brick."

The bank that originally occupied the building was the National Bank of Commerce and it leased the first 15 floors.

Security being foremost in the minds of the lending institution, the one (and only) freight elevator has the unusual capacity of 20,000 pounds, making it possible to run an armored car on it through a doorway at the Larned Street end of the building to unload the car indoors. The office of the chief of security was in the second basement, where his force of 32 officers were provided with a shooting gallery for target practice.

There was a system for "conditioned air," one of the first tall buildings to use this new idea. Only the first 16 floors were centrally cooled, however. Above that, packaged units cool portions of the building and these have been added in recent years.

In the northwest corner of the sixth floor is the Michigan White Pine room, a conference room paneled in knotty pine cut on the Orion, Michigan estate of Frank W. Blair, president of the Union Trust Company.

One of the most unusual architectural features of the Union-Guardian Building was the use of the stepped or notched arch. This was suggested by the natural way of piling brick without adding any curved or molded forms. The stepped form, in addition to serving as an arch, provided, with various modifications, the principal motif for the decorative scheme of the entire building. Above the Griswold street entrance are three notched arches supporting a recessed semidome decorated with glazed tiles of Pewabic pottery. The barrel-vaulted ceiling of the lobby was enlivened with gaily colored tiles of Rookwood pottery, as were the stepped vaults of the elevator alcoves. At the extremity of each alcove glow the rich colors of stained glass windows, and inserts of opaque glass stand out sharply on the Monel metal elevator doors. From the lobby the lofty barrel vault of the banking room with its massive piers may be glimpsed through a Monel metal grille. No wonder the Guardian Building, when first opened, was hailed as a "Cathedral of Finance."<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, six months after the completion of the building, the stock market crashed and the Union Trust Company failed. The company reorganized, however, in March of 1930 under the name of Union Guardian Trust Company and the building became the Union Guardian. In 1942, the building was taken over by the United States Army and in 1952 it sold at auction for \$6 million. In 1975, the Guardian Building was sold to Michigan Consolidated, which is, in turn, held by the General

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Electric Pension Trust with a lease-back contract. Since that time the building has undergone cleaning and repair of its terra cotta tile work and today it looks very much like the building the Detroit News in 1930 described as:

Color rampant, design daring ... freshness, vigor, courage. ... All in all the Union Trust is the most striking building because, besides size, it has individuality. The building is a blaze of color, both day and night, not to be rivaled by any building that now exists.<sup>5</sup>

The Guardian building was an icon in Detroit -- it still is.

Footnotes:

- 1 Thomas E. Tallmadge, The Story of Architecture in America (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936), p. 292.
- 2 W. Hawkins Ferry, The Buildings of Detroit (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968; rev., 1980), p. 328.
- 3 Ibid., p. 331.
- 4 Ibid., p. 331.
- 5 Detroit Free Press, January 23, 1930.

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