

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Commercial Building is located at Third and Johnston Streets in downtown Alexandria one block from the Red River. Although the surrounding area is commercial in character, many of the buildings have been demolished, leaving large areas of parking lot. Several of the extant structures are low-scale, late 19th century brick, shop-fronted buildings. But these do not form a cohesive district. In any case the vast majority of the buildings in the area were built or severely modified within the last 20 years. The nominated building is one of about four tall buildings in Alexandria. Being the second tallest, it rises noticeably above much of the downtown area. The plan consists of open bay spaces on each floor with wooden partition walls. Each floor has a corridor which runs from end to end of the building with offices on each side. The building is entered off center in the main facade with a one bay, marble lobby. Behind the lobby is a pair of elevators and a fine staircase.

At one time the Commercial Bank and Trust Company was located at the Third Street end of the building (ground floor). The bank failed in the Depression and the area was reworked for a shop in the 1940's. The reworking included marble facing on the outside and new glass. The present owner plans to restore the bank area to its original appearance with old brick, where brick has been removed.

The building rests upon concrete footings with a concrete basement. The structure is steel frame with hollow tile infill and brick facing. Two of the buildings four sides (the Third Street facade and the Johnston Street facade) are articulated as follows. The remaining two sides are not meant to be seen having a simple brick surface with windows cut in.

The exterior has a strongly skeletal appearance with the traditional base, shaft, and cornice articulation typical of the "Chicago School" of commercial buildings. The two-story base is faced in crimson brick with large two-story openings between piers. The five main stories of the building (the shaft) are faced in grey brick. The building is surmounted by a moderately projecting cornice with a pressed copper architrave over pressed tin modillions.

The five main stories are lit by pairs of sash windows which are separated horizontally by piers and vertically by pairs of spandrel panels. The piers in both the base and the five main stories are trimmed in raised bricks resembling coining. The most noteworthy feature of the building is its decorative trim along the top of the base, below the cornice, in the spandrel panels, and above the top windows. Made of cast concrete, this ornamentation consists of repeating and interlacing geometric forms, in a manner reminiscent of Louis Sullivan.

SPECIFIC DATES	1915 - 1916
BUILDER/ARCHITECT	W. L. Stevens

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Commercial Building is significant as a major architectural landmark in Alexandria. It was the city's first skyscraper, and remains today the second tallest structure in town. The Commercial Building, with its seven-story height, with its base, shaft, and cornice articulation, and with its skeletal frame, large amount of glass, and repeating geometric ornamentation, is a good representative example of the early phase of the American "skyscraper" which was developed in Chicago in the 1880's. The Commercial Building is the only such example in Alexandria. Moreover it is one of about four examples in the northern half of the state.

The Commercial Building was built in 1915-1916 for Commercial Bank and Trust Company. It was designed by New Orleans architect W. L. Stevens and built on a lot at the corner of Third and Johnston Streets by Nicol, Langord and Johnston, a construction firm with home offices in Louisville, Kentucky. Commercial Bank and Trust Company, founded as Commercial Bank of Alexandria in 1902, bought the lot from James B. Thigpen in 1913 for \$42,750. The cost of construction of the building was about \$123,500.

The building was finished in March, 1916, and the bank moved into its new quarters on the ground floor. It continued to operate in this location until it failed in 1934 during the Great

Depression. The part of the building above the bank housed numerous tenants through the years. For many years the J. F. Ball Lumber Company occupied most of the sixth floor offices. Lumber broker John E. Thorsell also had his offices on the sixth floor. The main occupant of the fifth floor was the law firm of Blackman, Overton and Dawkins, attorneys for the bank. The Overton of the firm was U.S. Senator John H. Overton. John H. McSween, father of Congressman Harold B. McSween, joined this law firm as a secretary in 1919 and was admitted to the bar in 1927. He went on to become one of Alexandria's most prominent attorneys. Through the years, the offices of the building also housed many doctors, dentists, lawyers, and other types of firms.

In 1941, the liquidator of the Commercial Bank and Trust Company sold the building to a corporation named Commercial Building in Alexandria, Inc., headed by Frank C. Murphey. This corporation retained control of the building until 1975. Since that time it has passed through the hands of several owners.

#### MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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