



## Peek Through Time: Elegant Dwight Building led 1890s rebirth of downtown Jackson buildings

Leanne Smith | [Ismith12@mlive.com](mailto:Ismith12@mlive.com) By Leanne Smith | [Ismith12@mlive.com](mailto:Ismith12@mlive.com)

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JACKSON, MI – In the "Gay Nineties," American industrialists flush with cash constructed large commercial buildings they named after themselves.

This building trend of the late 1890s even hit Jackson when the city's pioneer-built stores were being replaced or overshadowed by large, elegant office structures.

In 1897 alone, Jackson saw the construction of the McCormick Building, the Webb Block, **Jackson Corset Co.**, McLaughlin Elevator, Bell Telephone Building, Richard Building and Isbell Elevator.

But the largest commercial building built in Jackson in 1897 was the Dwight Building at 110-116 W. Michigan Ave. At a whopping \$40,000, it was the most expensive edifice erected in town that year.

Located downtown on W. Michigan Ave. in between what's now the Jackson County Tower Building and Walt's Health Food & Specialty Shop, the Dwight Building also dominated headlines in the 1970s due to its fall into disrepair and eventual demolition.

Percy D. Dwight chose the Merriman Block for the site of his new building. In 1840, Dwight Merriman, the father of Ella Merriman Sharp, opened his dry goods and grocery store there in what was downtown Jackson's first brick building.

Percy Dwight was the son of David F. Dwight, former president of the Jackson Gas Light Co. He graduated from Harvard in 1885 and practiced law five years before switching to industry, where he worked for several Detroit firms, including the Fisher Brothers of automobile fame.

Percy Dwight demolished Merriman's store and constructed a four-story building that eventually blended two styles of architecture.

The inside of the Dwight Building in 1975. The Dwight Building was located near the Jackson County Tower Building on Michigan Avenue in downtown Jackson. It was demolished in 1978. (File photos | [Mlive.com](http://Mlive.com))

File photos

The Dwight Building's open stairwell and horizontally designed stone exterior was neo-classical and classical Mediterranean. But its iron frame and skylight, which were constructed when two more floors were added in the mid-1900s, were characteristic of the "Chicago School of modern architecture."

The Dwight Building was known for its elaborate woodwork on the balcony balustrades that overlooked its interior

stairway. The open staircase encircled dozens of offices, and light from the skylight filtered down through the building to give it an "open storefront feeling."

Until the Jackson National Tower Building and the Harris Building were built in the 1920s, the Dwight building was Jackson's largest office structure.

Attorneys, doctors, dentists and real estate firms made it one of downtown Jackson's busiest centers. Retail and service stores filled its street-level spaces, and many of its tenants stayed for decades.

By 1962, the Dwight Building was showing its age, and the top two floors were closed off that year due in part to a dwindling number of tenants.

Also in 1962, Percy Dwight's daughters Laura and Frances, who were living in Boston, sold the building to Jacob Hark and Frank Brezniak, also of Boston. In 1969, Hark bought out his partner to take full ownership.

### Peek Through Time

*If you would like to suggest a notable person, place or event from the past for this weekly feature, please contact reporter Leanne Smith at 262-0720 or [ismith12@mlive.com](mailto:ismith12@mlive.com). To see more of these stories, **check out the archive**.*

By this time, the Dwight Building was half empty. And Hark was facing seven pages of violations issued from the city inspector's office. The foundation walls were deteriorating, the elevator shaft was crumbling, there were plumbing violations in nearly every room and the fire-escape system was called a disaster.

On Aug. 17, 1973, Lobby Lunch, the Dwight Building's major street-level tenant at the time closed its doors. Less than two months later, its remaining nine tenants were told to find new locations when the entire building was shut down.

Among them was William V. Cherry, owner of the first-floor Royal Shoe Shine, which went out of business. A shoe-shine service had been in the building since the early 1930s.

Second-floor father-and-son optometrists Oscar W. and Jerrol O. Pfeiffle moved to Spring Arbor Road. Oscar had worked in the Dwight building for 50 years.

The Dwight Building was located near the Jackson County Tower Building on Michigan Avenue in downtown Jackson. It was demolished in 1978. (File photos | Mlive.com)

[File photos](#)

Another father-and-son team, Glen L. and Robert L. Fisher relocated next door to the Jackson National Tower Building. Glen was an attorney who had been in the Dwight Building since 1913, while his son, an insurance salesman, had occupied his office since 1938.

Also in the building at the time were Howard R. Artz, an advertising salesman; Ivan S. Abbott, owner of Abbott Dental Laboratory; Dr. Saul Appel, a physician specializing in skin disease and allergies; attorney Guy E. Christian and Save-A-Lot Drugs, Inc.

Serious structural and safety deficiencies made it impractical to rehabilitate the Dwight Building. Worst of all, City Fire Inspector Daniel Ashley told the Citizen Patriot in 1975, it was a fire trap.

"The argument that it was a fine building in its day is hogwash," Ashley said. "It never was a fine building from a fire safety standpoint."

The problem, Ashley said, was that open stairway that would act as a "chimney" if fire ever broke out in the old building.

The closed Dwight Building fell prey to vagrants and vandals. The City Commission pushed for demolition, but met opposition from residents who wanted to preserve it as a historical site.

Jackson's historical preservation ordinance even passed during this debate but it could not save the Dwight Building from the wrecking ball.

In 1978, the city purchased it and the Moskin Building next door for \$1,000 each. Dunigan Brothers Construction Co. demolished both buildings that summer and Belden Asphalt Co. paved a new city parking lot that still exists on the site today.

### **Tidbits**

- The 1973 closing of the Dwight Building put 75-year-old elevator operator Cleida C. Dodd back in retirement. After originally retiring from Clark Equipment Co. 10 years earlier, Dodd started as part-time operator of the structure's 10-passenger elevator. The mother of 12, grandmother of 45 and great-grandmother of 35 decided to retire for good.
- Other tenants who left in the months prior to the shutdown included Western Union Telegraph Co., which had been there since the 1930s, and Marshall's Uniform Center, which had moved in during the early 1960s.
- Donna Ferguson, a draftsman and the last direct descendant of Jackson founder Horace Blackman, also once had a business with fellow draftsman Collette Divine in the Dwight building. The company created church bulletins throughout Jackson.
- Little is known about the Moskin Building, which was owned by Bennett Moskin of New York City and located between the Dwight Building and **the Miner Building**. But its tenants included an optical company and a crafts store.
- At the time of their demolition, the Dwight and Moskin buildings joined the ranks of other historic Jackson structures that already had met the wrecking ball. This included the old YMCA building, **Capitol Theatre**, Carter Building, Jackson Street City Hall, Muir's Drugstore, **the John O. Gilbert Chocolate Co.'s Confectionary and Ice Cream Parlor**, the old St. John School, the Cortland Street Fire Station, and **Smith-Winchester Co.** building.