

**HERITAGE PROPERTY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION REPORT**



**UNION BUILDING**  
212 KING STREET WEST, TORONTO

Prepared by:

Heritage Preservation Services  
City Planning Division  
City of Toronto

July 2010

## 1. DESCRIPTION



Illustration, Canadian General Electric Building, now known as the Union Building  
(Source: Toronto Historical Board Collection)

<b>212 King Street West: Union Building/Canadian General Electric Building (1908)</b>	
ADDRESS	212 King Street West (northwest corner of Simcoe Street)
WARD	Ward 20 (Trinity-Spadina)
LEGAL DESCRIPTION	Plan 223E, Part Block D
NEIGHBOURHOOD/COMMUNITY	King-Spadina
HISTORICAL NAME	Union Building
CONSTRUCTION DATE	1908
ORIGINAL OWNER	Canadian General Electric Company
ORIGINAL USE	Commercial (offices and warehouse)
CURRENT USE*	Commercial (restaurant and offices) * This does not refer to permitted use(s) as defined by the Zoning By-law
ARCHITECT/BUILDER/DESIGNER	Darling & Pearson, architects
DESIGN/CONSTRUCTION/MATERIALS	Brick and stone cladding; brick, stone, wood, metal & terra cotta trim
ARCHITECTURAL STYLE	Edwardian Classicism
ADDITIONS/ALTERATIONS	1953: bridge connecting #212 & #214 King; 1950s, 1970s & 1980s: alterations to entrances
CRITERIA	Design/Physical, Historical/Associative & Contextual
HERITAGE STATUS	Listed on City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties
RECORDER	Heritage Preservation Services: Kathryn Anderson
REPORT DATE	July 2010

## 2. BACKGROUND

This research and evaluation report describes the history, architecture and context of the property at 212 King Street West, and applies evaluation criteria to determine whether it merits designation under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act. The conclusions of the research and evaluation are found in Section 4 (Summary).

### i. HISTORICAL TIMELINE

Key Date	Historical Event
1902 Apr	The Canadian General Electric Company's acquisition of part of the former Upper Canada College campus on King Street, west of Simcoe Street, is announced in <u>The Toronto Daily Star</u>
1902 May	According to land records, University of Toronto trustees <sup>1</sup> sell the property at the northwest corner of King Street West and Simcoe Street to the Canadian General Electric Company in a transaction that remained unregistered until December 1903
1904 Aug	CGE is first recorded in the tax assessment rolls as the owner of vacant property on the north side of King Street, west of Simcoe Street
1907 Apr	The <u>Contract Record</u> announces the pending construction of a five-storey building on the subject property
1907 July	CGE applies for a building permit for its new office building according to newspaper reports
1908 Aug	An "unfinished building" owned by the Industrial Realty Company of Canada, a subsidiary of the Canadian General Electric Company, at the northeast corner of King and Simcoe is recorded in the City's tax assessment rolls
1908 Dec	The new Canadian General Electric Company Building, designed by architects Darling and Pearson, is profiled in the December 1908 issue of <u>Construction</u> magazine
1912	The Canadian General Electric Company Building is first illustrated on Goad's Atlas for 1910 updated to 1912
1973	Now known as the Union Building, the site is listed on the inaugural City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties

### ii. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### King-Spadina Neighbourhood

The property at 212 King Street West is part of the King-Spadina Neighbourhood, the area that developed north of Front Street West between Simcoe Street and Bathurst Street, with King Street West and Spadina Avenue as its major commercial arteries. The origins of the district date to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century after the founding of the Town of York and the extension of that community westward as New Town. In the early 1800s, the relocation of the Provincial Legislature (Third Parliament Buildings, 1829-32) to Simcoe Place on Front Street West was accompanied by high-end residential development that drew community leaders to the

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<sup>1</sup> The lands were the original location of Upper Canada College, which was founded as a private boys' school in 1829 and, eight years afterward, placed under the control of King's College, the forerunner to the University of Toronto

neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1829, two years later Upper Canada College opened an expansive campus on Russell Square, the tract on the north side of King Street West, west of Simcoe Street. After the private boys' school moved to its present site on Lonsdale Road in 1891, representatives of the University of Toronto (which formed the College's Board of Governors) organized the subdivision and sale of the original property.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Great Fire of 1904 destroyed the existing manufacturing district along Front Street near Bay Street, Toronto's industrial sector was relocated to the King-Spadina neighbourhood. The area was chosen for its proximity to the city centre, the availability of streetcar service for workers, and the presence of the steam railways, which had arrived in Toronto in the mid 1800s and constructed tracks and shipping facilities. The evolution of King-Spadina in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can be traced on the Goad's Atlases, extracts from which are included in Section 6 of this report.

Despite the upheavals of the Great Depression of the 1930s followed by World War II, King-Spadina remained an active industrial area until the 1950s when the combination of large tracts of land, lower taxes and new highways for truck transport drew manufacturers to Toronto's suburbs. Although the clothing industry continued its dominance in the neighbourhood (which was later dubbed the Fashion District) many of the former warehouses stood vacant as the area's industrial zoning restricted other uses.<sup>3</sup> The revitalization of King Street, west of Simcoe began in the 1960s when Toronto entrepreneur Edwin "Honest Ed" Mirvish restored the Royal Alexandra Theatre and converted many of the adjoining warehouses into eating establishments that served the theatre's patrons. By the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roy Thomson Hall (1982) and the Princess of Wales Theatre (1993) opened on this section of King Street West, which was named Toronto's Entertainment District.

#### Union Building/Canadian General Electric Company Building

The building at 212 King Street West was commissioned by the Canadian General Electric Company Limited, which was founded in 1892 to consolidate the Canadian operations of a number of international conglomerates that generated and supplied electricity and produced electrical equipment. By 1895, the company's Canadian investors had assumed majority control. The newly constituted operation was headquartered in Toronto, where its first major undertaking was the supply of energy to the Toronto Railway Company, operators of the city's first electric-powered transit system. During Canadian General Electric's formative years, the company was headed by Frederic T. Nicholls, a businessman, publisher and politician who was a pioneer in Ontario's energy industry.

In April 1902, The Toronto Daily Star reported that "the Canadian General Electric Company has bought a section of the old Upper Canada College grounds, and will erect a fine large

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<sup>2</sup> The institutional character of the area continued through the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Government House, the official residence of the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, completed in 1870 on the southwest corner of King Street West and Simcoe Street, opposite Upper Canada College

<sup>3</sup> In 1996, the former City of Toronto adopted the King-Spadina Part II Plan, which relaxed land-use controls in the neighbourhood

building on the corner of Simcoe and King streets (sic).”<sup>4</sup> No building activity occurred on the site until the summer of 1907, when the July 24<sup>th</sup> edition of the same newspaper noted that the company had applied for a building permit to erect a five-storey office building on the subject property. The premises were described as “recently completed” when the site was photographed and profiled in the December 1908 edition of Construction magazine.

Beginning in 1908, the City Directories recorded the Canada Foundry Company as the principal occupant of the new building. A subsidiary of Canadian General Electric, the Canada Foundry Company had its manufacturing complex on Lansdowne Avenue, south of Davenport Road, but apparently retained offices on King Street until the World War I era. This coincided with Canadian General Electric’s construction of the neighbouring office building and warehouse at 214 King Street West in 1917, with the company and another of its subsidiaries, Canadian Allis-Chalmers Limited, occupying both structures.

Canadian General Electric retained the property at #212 King until the mid 1950s. Following the refurbishment of the nearby Royal Alexandra Theatre (1907) in the early 1960s, the Canadian General Electric Building and the other warehouses in the block attracted commercial tenants that catered to theatre patrons. The site is more recently known as the Union Building.<sup>5</sup>

### Darling and Pearson, Architects

The Toronto architectural partnership of Darling and Pearson designed the Canadian General Electric Company Building (1908). The firm’s principal, Frank Darling (1850-1923) was educated in Toronto where he apprenticed with the noted Toronto architect Henry Langley. Beginning in 1869, Darling worked in the offices of the preeminent English architects George Edmund Street and Sir Arthur Blomfield, who were both regarded for their designs in the popular High Victorian Gothic style of the era. Darling returned to Canada in 1873 and, apart from a brief solo period in the late 1870s, worked with a series of associates for the remainder of his career. All of his partnerships benefited from Darling’s role as official architect for Trinity College, the commissions from the Anglican Diocese he received as the son of a well-known Toronto clergyman, and his long affiliation with the Bank of Montreal and the Bank of Commerce (forerunner to the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce). In the 1880s, when Darling shared a practice with Samuel Curry, their employees included English-born architect John Pearson (1867-1940). Pearson’s work on the Victoria Hospital for Sick Children (1889, the College Street predecessor to today’s Hospital for Sick Children) purportedly resulted in his elevation to full partner, along with colleague Henry Sproatt. The firm was renamed Darling and Pearson in 1897. While Darling and Pearson’s best-known commissions included city’s first skyscrapers at Yonge and King, the Toronto General Hospital’s College Street Wing, and the Royal Ontario Museum, the Canadian General Electric Building on King Street West was mentioned among his commissions of note in the tributes that followed Darling’s death in 1923.

### iii. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

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<sup>4</sup>The Toronto Daily Star (April 29, 1902),9

<sup>5</sup>The CGE Building at 214 King Street West was designated under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act by By-law No. 1230-2007

The Union Building is designed with features of Edwardian Classicism applied to an early 20<sup>th</sup> century warehouse. Its appearance is the result of the developments of the previous century, when new technologies, specifically steel frame construction and elevators, allowed buildings to grow increasingly taller. These advancements were coupled with the influence of the Chicago's World Columbian Exposition of 1893, which featured the "White City" of Beaux-Arts inspired and classically-detailed buildings. By the close of the 1800s, office buildings and warehouses hid their structural components and, in the case of manufacturers, production facilities behind facades that were embellished with classical elements. Edwardian Classicism emerged as the prevalent style in Canada, when it was particularly favoured for commercial and public buildings in the period leading up to World War I.<sup>6</sup> In Toronto, this turning away from the architectural excesses of the Victorian era in favour of the dignified elegance and order of Edwardian Classicism coincided with the Great Fire of 1904, which provided an opportunity for architects to apply the style in the new manufacturing district. Edwardian Classicism is exhibited in the design of the Union Building, where the principal façade and the adjoining elevations follow a tripartite with a base, shaft and cornice inspired by the classical column. The contemporary elements of the building are found in the ample fenestration (a characteristic of both the style and the era)<sup>7</sup> and its rare application of terra cotta for the decorative detailing.

Originally rising five stories, the Union Building has a long rectangular plan with the narrow end forming the principal (south) façade on King Street West (the mansard roof containing the sixth floor was added in 1985<sup>8</sup>). The fifth-floor roofline is marked by an elaborate metal and terra cotta cornice with brackets. Above the first-floor base that features channelled brickwork, the shaft displays terra cotta detailing. On the south façade, the main entrance is raised and centrally placed in a stone surround with sidelights (the doors are not original). A classically-detailed portico with paired columns, an entablature with triglyphs, and an elaborate cartouche protects the entrance, which is flanked by rounded-arched window openings with stone hood moulds and keystones. The three-storey shaft contains flat-headed window openings that are placed individually and in trios with spandrel panels. In the centre of the wall, the windows are framed in terra cotta surrounds. The attic storey displays banded brickwork, with classically-detailed incised panels separating the window openings. The combination of the fenestration and classical motifs is continued on the east elevation facing Simcoe Street and in the south bay of the west wall. A plaque, dating to 1929 and commemorating the history of Upper Canada College, is mounted on the east elevation. On the rear (north) wall facing Pearl Street, a pier with carved initials is a surviving element from earlier construction.<sup>9</sup>

#### iv. CONTEXT

The property at 212 King Street West is located on the northwest corner of Simcoe Street. It anchors the east end of the block between Simcoe Street and Ed Mirvish Way (formerly Duncan Street between King Street West and Pearl Street) where it adjoins the Canadian General Electric Building (1917) at #214 King and the Nicholls Building (1910) at #220 King. The Union

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<sup>6</sup> Maitland, 121

<sup>7</sup> Blumenson, 166

<sup>8</sup> Building Records, City of Toronto, #225057

<sup>9</sup> The location of this pier is shown on the Goad's Atlases for 1912 and 1923 (both revised from 1910) that are included in Section 6

Building at #212 King overlooks St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church (1884) on the southeast corner of King and Simcoe, and faces Roy Thomson Hall (completed 1982) near the southwest corner of the intersection. The latter properties, along with the neighbouring Canadian General Electric Building (1917) at #214 King and the Roy Alexandra Theatre (1907) at #260 King, are designated under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act.

### 3. EVALUATION CHECKLIST

The following evaluation applies Ontario Regulation 9/06 made under the Ontario Heritage Act: Criteria for Determining Cultural Heritage Value or Interest. While the criteria are prescribed for municipal designation under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act, the City of Toronto uses it when assessing properties for inclusion on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties. The evaluation table is marked “N/A” if the criterion is “not applicable” to the property or X if it is applicable, with explanatory text below.

<b>Design or Physical Value</b>	
i. rare, unique, representative or early example of a style, type, expression, material or construction method	<b>X</b>
ii. displays high degree of craftsmanship or artistic merit	<b>X</b>
iii. demonstrates high degree of scientific or technical achievement	<b>NA</b>

**Representative of a Style and Type with a Rare Material that Displays a High Degree of Craftsmanship** – While the Union Building at 212 King Street West is typical of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century warehouses in the King-Spadina neighbourhood in its application of the Edwardian Classical style, it is distinguished by its high degree of craftsmanship. The richly embellished classical detailing, particularly the monumental cornice and distinctive entrance portico, is combined with rare terra cotta finishes. As identified in the book, Terra Cotta: artful deceivers, the Union Building is one of a select number of surviving edifices in Toronto exhibiting terra cotta.<sup>10</sup>

<b>Historical or Associative Value</b>	
i. direct associations with a theme, event, belief, person, activity, organization or institution that is significant to a community	<b>X</b>
ii. yields, or has the potential to yield, information that contributes to an understanding of a community or culture	<b>NA</b>
iii. demonstrates or reflects the work or ideas of an architect, artist, builder, designer or theorist who is significant to a community	<b>X</b>

**Organization and Person** - The Union Building is historically associated with an organization and person of national importance. The warehouse was commissioned by the Canadian General Electric Company, which was founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to manufacture and distribute electrical equipment during the period when electrical power was first generated for commercial and residential use. Canadian General Electric grew in stature as it acquired a number of subsidiaries, and its first general manager, Frederic Nicholls, was appointed to the Canadian

<sup>10</sup> Terra Cotta: artful deceivers, 87

Senate in recognition of his work in Ontario’s early energy sector. The Union Building was originally occupied by the Canada Foundry company, a subsidiary of CGE that produced structural steel products.

**Architect** – The notable Toronto architects Darling and Pearson prepared the plans for the Union Building for the Canadian General Electric Company during their partnership of nearly 30 years. As the designers of many of the city’s landmark buildings, including the Royal Ontario Museum, the Toronto General Hospital’s College Street Wing, and the head offices of the Canadian Bank of Commerce and the Bank of Montreal (in Toronto), Frank Darling was recognized as the first citizen of a British Dominion to receive the Royal Institute of British Architect’s Gold Medal, while his partner, John Pearson, was the inaugural Canadian architect to accept an honorary Doctorate in Architecture from the University of Toronto. The pair’s plans for the Canadian General Electric Company’s head office at #212 King helped set the standard for the classically-embellished warehouses that appeared on King Street West in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<b>Contextual Value</b>	
i. important in defining, maintaining or supporting the character of an area	<b>X</b>
ii. physically, functionally, visually or historically linked to its surroundings	<b>X</b>
iii. landmark	<b>N/A</b>

**Character** – Contextually, the property at 212 King Street West contributes to the historical character of the King-Spadina neighbourhood that emerged as the city’s manufacturing centre after the Great Fire of 1904 destroyed the earlier industrial sector. The Union Building was among the earliest warehouses constructed on Russell Square, the former Upper Canada College campus on King Street, west of Simcoe Street, marking the transition of the area from an institutional setting to an industrial precinct. Following the gradual departure of industries from King-Spadina in the decades after World War II, the Union Building was one of the warehouses converted to commercial uses as this section of King Street West became the heart of the city’s Entertainment District.

**Surroundings** – The Union Building is historically, visually, physically and functionally related to its surroundings in the King-Spadina neighbourhood where it anchors the east end of the group of surviving early 20<sup>th</sup> century warehouses that share a complementary scale and appearance, most often with Edwardian Classical detailing. With its position on the corner of Simcoe Street, the Union Building adjoins two vintage warehouses to the west at #214 and #220 King, which were also developed for the Canadian General Electric Company and its subsidiaries. The Union Building and the neighbouring warehouses on King Street between Simcoe Street and John Street flank the Royal Alexandra Theatre (1907) at #260 King, which is a National Historic Site and a local landmark.

#### 4. SUMMARY

Following research and evaluation according to Regulation 9/06, it has been determined that the property at 212 King Street West is worthy of designation under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act for its cultural heritage value. Anchoring the northwest corner of King Street West and Simcoe Street, the Union Building (1908) is a well-crafted early 20<sup>th</sup> century



warehouse that is distinguished by its Edwardian Classical styling and terra cotta finishes. The property is associated historically with one of Canada's most recognized companies that contributed to the development of the country's energy sector and was led during its formative years by entrepreneur and politician Frederic Nicholls, as well as the notable Toronto architectural firm of Darling and Pearson, which prepared the plans for the building. The Union Building contributes to the character of the King-Spadina neighbourhood as it developed after 1900 as the city's manufacturing centre, and is linked to its surroundings where it anchors the east end of a collection of surviving early 20<sup>th</sup> century warehouse complexes.

## 5. SOURCES

### Archival Sources

Abstract Indices of Deeds, Plan E223, Part Block D  
Assessment Rolls, City of Toronto, 1900 ff.  
Building Permit #12951 (August 4, 1917), 214 King Street West  
Building Records, Toronto and East York, 212 King Street West, 1911-2000  
City of Toronto Directories, 1900 ff.  
Drawing, Canadian General Electric Building, Toronto Historical Board Collection  
Goad's Atlases, 1884-1923  
Photographs, City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1231, Item 2165, and Fonds 124, Item 7365  
Photograph, Library and Archives Canada, Item 25593  
Photograph, Toronto Reference Library, Item B12-34b

### Books

Art in Architecture: Toronto landmarks 1920-1940, City of Toronto Archives, 1987  
Arthur, Eric, Toronto: no mean city, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., revised by Stephen A. Otto, 1986  
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Terra Cotta: artful deceivers, Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, 1990

### Newspapers and Periodicals

"Canadian General Electric Company buys part of old UCC grounds," Toronto Daily Star (April 29, 1902), 9  
"Five storey building to cost \$400,000," Contract Record (10 April 1907), 8  
"General Electric Company's new building," Construction (December 1908), 23 and 57-

“Gets the permit”, Toronto Daily Star (July 24, 1907), 6

“Journalist Frederic Nicholls lived better electrically,” Toronto Star (November 15, 1980), F15

“The Late Frank Darling,” Construction (June 1923), 204-207

#### On-line Sources

“Frank Darling,” entry in Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1850-1950,  
[www.dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org](http://www.dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org)

“Frank Darling,” Entry in Dictionary of Scottish Architects,  
[www.scottisharchitects.org.uk](http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk)

“Frederic Thomas Nicholls,” entry in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. XV,  
[www.biographi.ca](http://www.biographi.ca)

## 6. IMAGES



Principal (south) façade of the Union Building (the sixth floor with the mansard roof is an addition)



Photograph showing the classically-detailed pier that survives at the northwest corner of the building on Pearl Street (the neighbouring Canadian General Electric Building at 214 King Street West is on the right)



This plaque commemorating the site of the original Upper Canada College is located on east wall of the Union Building



Historical photograph of Upper Canada College, showing the main campus (with the buildings facing south toward King Street West) where the Union Building was constructed in 1908 (Source: Toronto Reference Library, Item B12-34b)



Photograph dated circa 1908 showing part of the recently constructed Union Building on the right, where it overlooked Government House on the southwest corner of King Street West and Simcoe Street (Source: Library and Archives Canada, Item 25593)

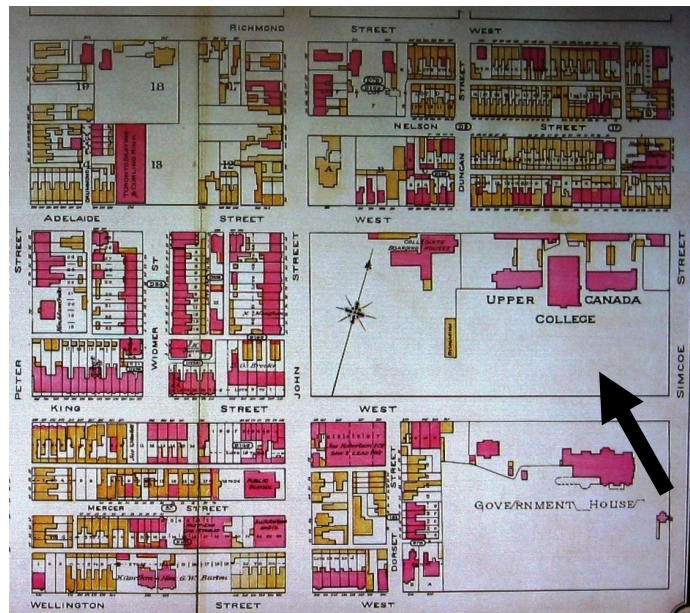


View of King Street West, looking east past Simcoe Street, and showing the entrance to the Union Building at #212 King (left) in April 1930 (Source: City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 7365)

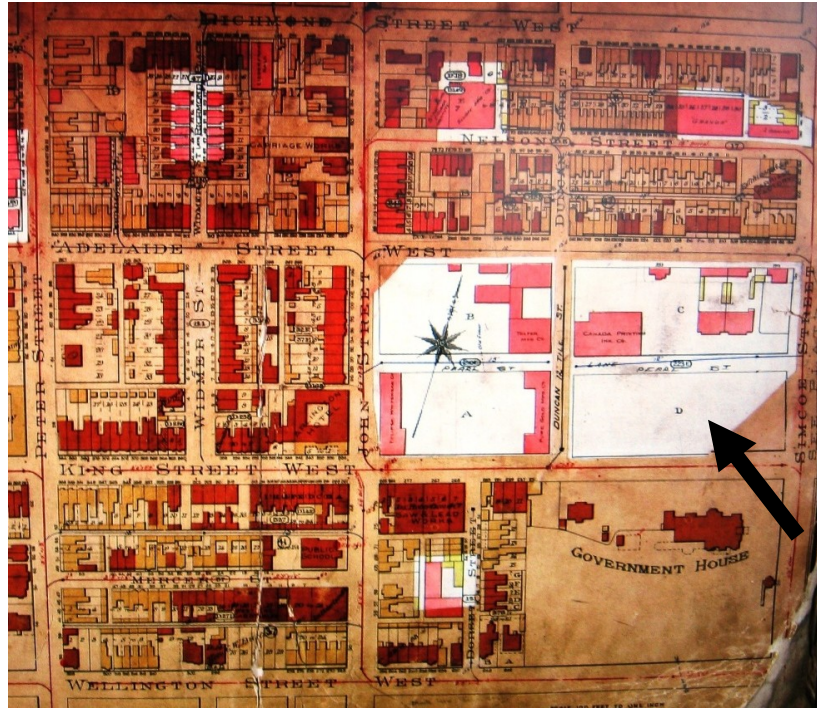




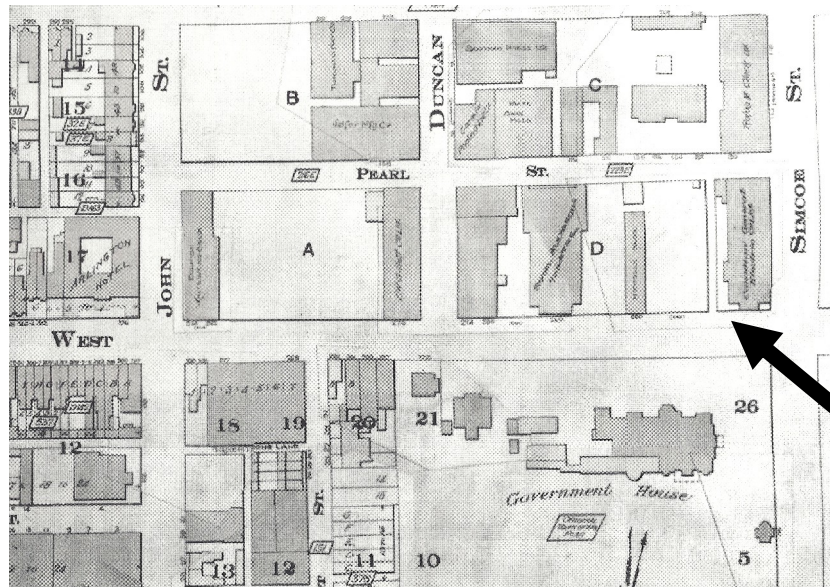
View of King Street West, looking west from Simcoe Street, and showing the entrance to the Canadian General Electric Building at #212 King (right) in July 1927 (Source: City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1231, Item 2165)



Excerpt, Goad's Atlas, 1884, showing King Street West before the relocation of Upper Canada College. The future site of #212 King is marked by the arrow (Source: City of Toronto Archives)



Excerpt, Goad's Atlas, 1903, showing the removal of most of the buildings associated with Upper Canada College, and the introduction of the first warehouses along King Street West. The future site of #212 King is marked by the arrow (Source: City of Toronto Archives)



Excerpt, Goad's Atlas, 1910 revised to 1912, showing the Union Building at #212 King and the development of the adjacent block to date (Source: City of Toronto Archives)





Excerpt, Goad's Atlas, 1910 revised to 1923, showing the King Street West warehouses in place, including the Union Building on the northwest corner of King and Simcoe. The two adjoining buildings to the west (the smaller one is marked "Nicholls Building") were associated with Canadian General Electric (Source: City of Toronto Archives)

**BUILDING PERMIT**  
 Department of City Architect and Superintendent of Building

No. ....

File No. 12951

Toronto, Aug 4 1917

Permission is hereby granted to Mr. Canadian General Electric  
 Address King & Simcoe Sts. to erect Reinforced Concrete  
on North side of King St between  
 near Wellington St. in accordance with terms of application on file in this  
 Department for said building.

Estimated cost 10000.00 Fee 25.50

This permit is granted on the express condition that the said building, etc., shall in all respects conform to the provisions to By Law 6401 of the City of Toronto, regulating the construction of buildings, etc.

This permit lapses on the expiry of six months from the date of issue unless active work under it is sooner commenced.

*[Signature]*  
 City Architect and Supt. of Building

To obtain permission to occupy the street or sidewalk during construction, present this permit at the office of the Commissioner of Works.

There is no permanent sidewalk from the foot of the street grade. Works of the City of Toronto are prohibited from occupying any sidewalk or encroachment past line of street. This Permit does not include any openings in sidewalk or encroachment past line of street.

Building Permit #12951 (August 4, 1917) for the Canadian General Electric Company's second building at #214 King Street West (Source: City of Toronto Archives)