

History of the

McKay Tower Dome Light

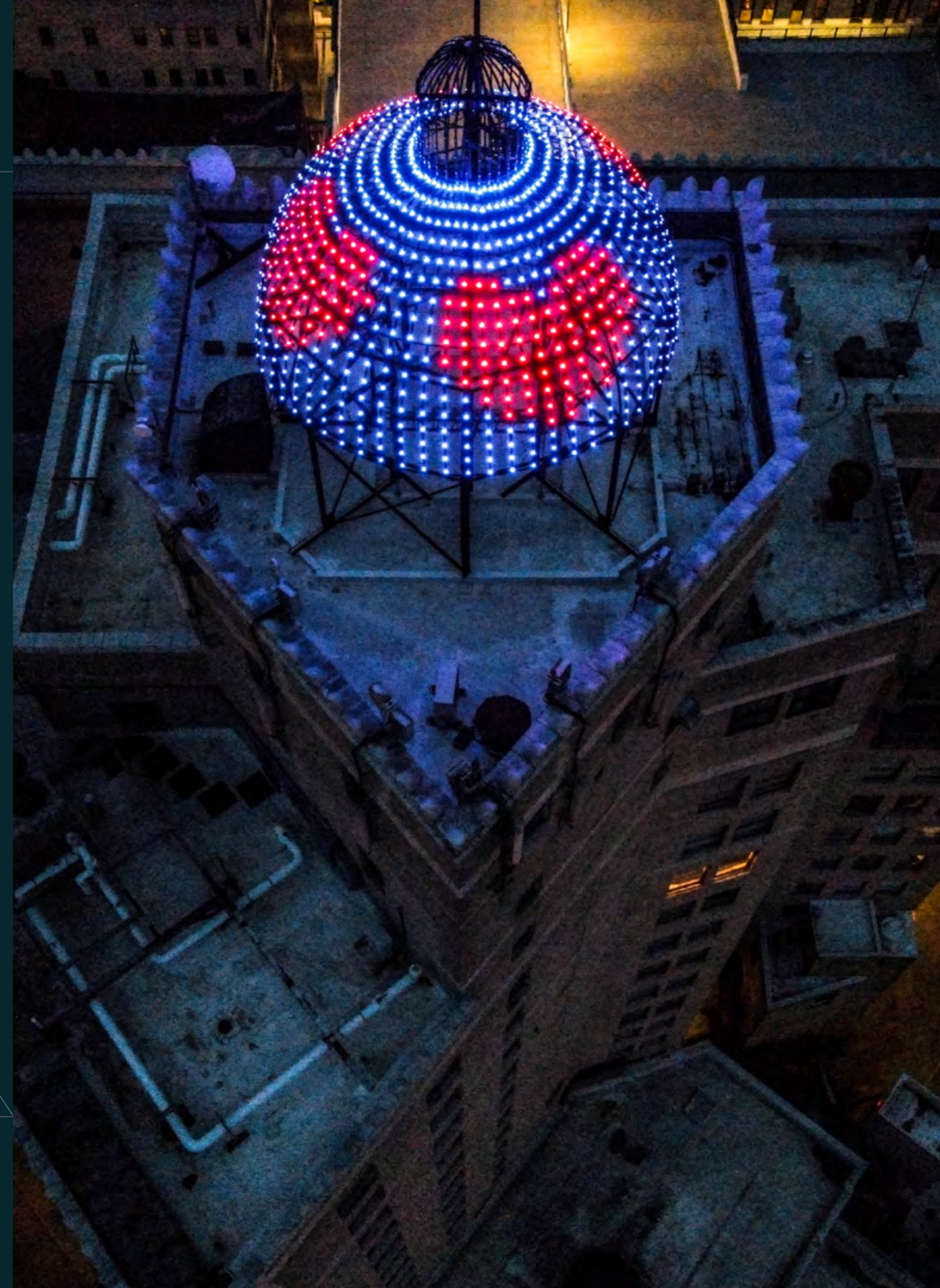


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The beacon was considered the largest air beacon of any kind in the United States, and it was thought that virtually all airmail pilots in the country would know it within a month.

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The mid-1920s through the mid-1930s kicked off an era where building owners placed aerial warning and navigational beacons atop their skyscrapers, not only to serve in a functional capacity but also to boast and draw attention to their magnificent structures.

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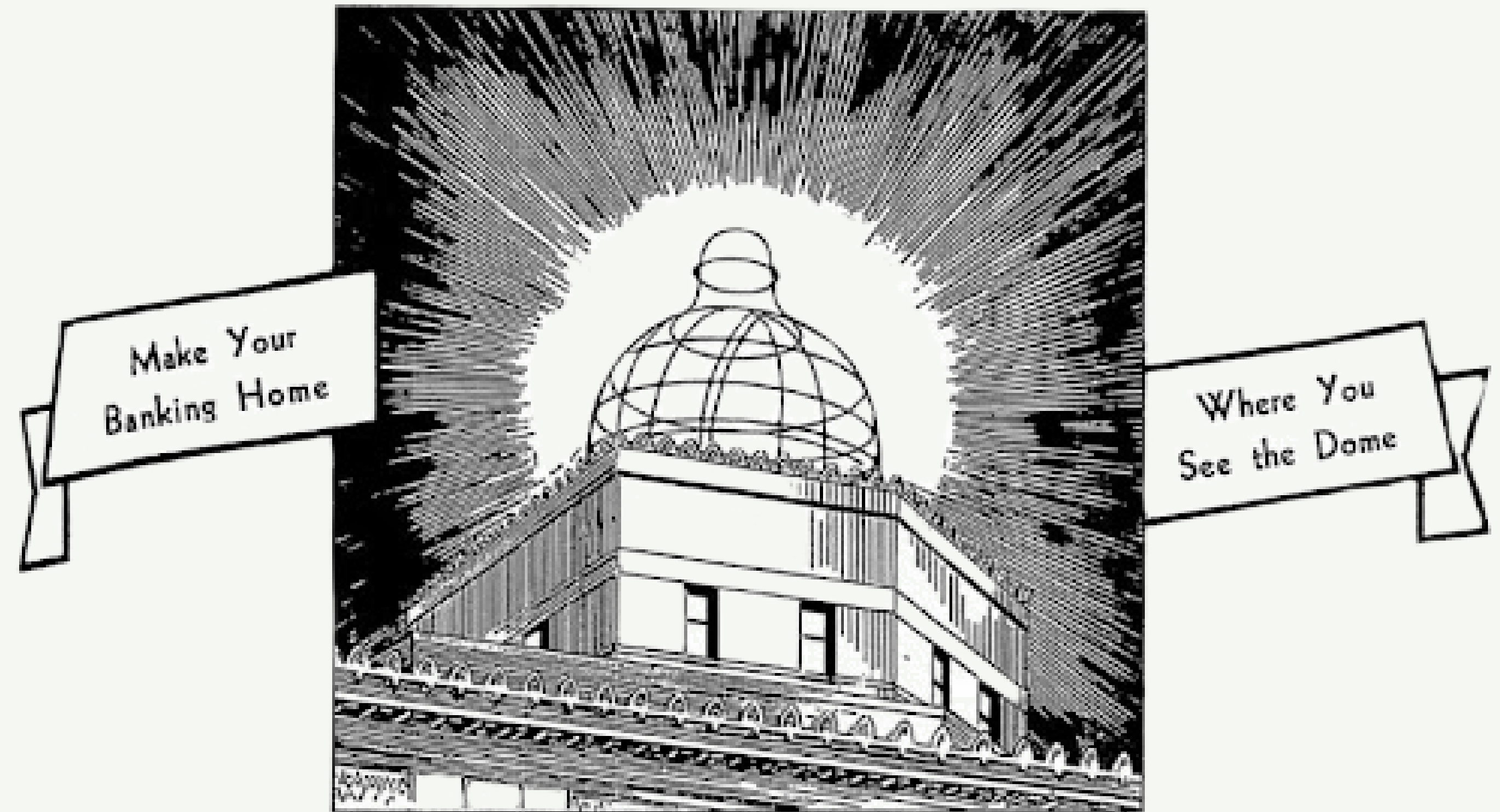
We are proud of McKay Tower’s dome and its celebrated history. We are honored to be stewards of this historical landmark and pledge that it will continue to light up the Grand Rapids skyline, leading the way for generations to come.

Section 01

Installation of the Dome Light

The iconic dome high above McKay Tower has a rich past that we are proud to share with the citizens of West Michigan.

When the Grand Rapids National Bank (GRNB) first installed the light, the team had great hopes and dreams beyond just gracing the night sky with yet another city light; their hope was that this dome would lead the world to Grand Rapids, advertising it as a “beacon of progress.” This beacon would tell the “traveler by rail, by road, by air that the western metropolis of Michigan extends a cordial welcome.”



An ad in the Oct. 21, 1930, edition of the Grand Rapids Press advertises the “crimson dome” high above the Grand Rapids National Bank. The ad highlighted that the dome marked the “home of the oldest and largest NATIONAL bank in western Michigan.”

O1 Installation of the Dome Light

In an April 1930 edition of the Grand Rapids Herald,
an unnamed journalist wrote,

“Visible for approximately 75 miles, a great dome of red light, probably the largest of its kind in the United States, attracted the attention of thousands of people last night [April 19, 1930] when on the throwing of a switch it blazed forth atop the Grand Rapids National Bank building, the tallest structure in the city ...

O1 Installation of the Dome Light

In an April 1930 edition of the Grand Rapids Herald,
an unnamed journalist wrote,

“ While hesitating to state that the neon-lighted beacon is the largest in the United States, officials of the Consumers Power Company and Walker & Co., the Grand Rapids advertising company unit of which installed the lights, know of none of greater magnitude.”

O1 Installation of the Dome Light

The GRNB dome (now known as the McKay Tower dome) is 78 feet in circumference at its base (25 feet in diameter). It is 25 feet high, not including the 10 feet of superstructure supporting the lighted portion of the dome attached to the roof of the 18th Floor penthouse.

When it was activated on April 19, 1930, it had 516 feet of 15-millimeter glass tubing filled with neon gas and weighed 5,450 pounds. The dome's color at night was a deep crimson red.

A 1930 Popular Mechanics article stated that extensive tests at the time showed “the peculiar orange-red cast of the neon-gas tubes [was] one of the most effective colors in penetrating fogs and mists.” The light cost \$18,000 to install and was projected to cost \$55 per month to operate.



Section 02

History of Skyscraper Domes and Beacons



The mid-1920s through the mid-1930s kicked off an era where building owners placed aerial warning and navigational beacons atop their skyscrapers, not only to serve in a functional capacity but also to boast and draw attention to their magnificent structures.

The previously cited Grand Rapids Herald article, while hyping the lighting of the new Grand Rapids dome, reported that it “may have to divide honors with a neon sphere in Brooklyn which [had] a diameter of 20 feet;” however, “the amount of surface of the Brooklyn sphere visible from any given point [was] less than that of the Grand Rapids dome.” This Brooklyn “sphere” was installed high atop the Hotel St. George in 1928. On the sphere was a sizable beacon that produced a 3-foot-wide, slowly revolving beam of light equal to 480-million candlepower that was visible for 50 miles.

02 History of Skyscraper Domes and Beacons



Another well-known beacon of this period was the “Sun-Flash Aircraft Beacon” installed in 1930 on the LaSalle-Wacker building in Chicago.

Similar to the Grand Rapids National Bank dome, the Sun-Flash Aircraft Beacon was fixed and did not rotate. Each of the eight sides (corresponding to the main points of the compass) contained a precisely adjusted curved mirror. These parabolic mirrors would intensify and reflect the sun’s rays during the day. Neon gas tubes were installed in front of each mirror so that an illuminated compass

would appear at night to serve as a beacon and a warning light to keep pilots from flying too close to the building. The previously cited 1930s Popular Mechanics article described an aviator who left Toledo, Ohio, at dark and “saw a peculiar orange-red gleam from an altitude of slightly more than 5,000 feet. He followed it to Chicago and discovered its source atop the LaSalle-Wacker building.”



Section 03

The Dome Evolves into a Landmark

Besides utilizing the dome on the GRNB as a “unique advertising program,” the bank desired to help Grand Rapids become the center of interest for the air transportation business.

By December 1930, some pilots reported seeing the dome from 70 miles away. On the other hand, viewers from the ground had seen it from the sand dunes of Lake Michigan near Saugatuck, approximately 40 miles southwest of Grand Rapids.

W.H. Groverman, the GRNB building superintendent at the time, said the beacon would be lighted nightly from 7:30 p.m. until midnight. The beacon was considered the largest air beacon of any kind in the United States, and it was thought that virtually all airmail pilots in the country would know it within a month.

03 The Dome Evolves into a Landmark

In March 1933, the Grand Rapids National Bank failed because of the Great Depression. It was one of six banks in the city that was forced into reorganization or liquidation. It is unknown whether the dome remained lit post-liquidation.

Still, we do know that during World War II, many of the skyscraper beacons across the United States, including the GRNB dome, were shut off to avoid a possible advantage to the enemy in the event of an air raid. Many of these great domes and beacons were never relit and fell into disrepair; however, the dome high atop the old GRNB was relit sometime after Frank McKay purchased the tower in the early 1940s and renamed the building after himself.

Screw-in incandescent light bulbs eventually replaced the crimson red neon lights. Former McKay Tower maintenance manager of 29 years, Henk Vonk, switched out these standard clear white bulbs for red bulbs every Christmas. He constructed a swing/platform that would allow him to hoist himself up to each level of the dome. Carrying the replacement bulbs in a bucket alongside him, Henk would replace each light bulb as he progressed. This is a routine he followed every Christmas from 1990 to nearly 2010.

03 The Dome Evolves into a Landmark

In 2013, the former owner of McKay Tower contracted with Owen-Ames-Kimball, Co. and Ada Electric (now GR Electric, Inc.) to replace the white bulbs with roughly 1,200 small LEDs (light-emitting diodes) capable of glowing in a variety of colors and patterns as well as producing multiple color-changing effects and animated images.

The new system was activated on Aug. 10, 2013, when a valentine heart scrolled around the dome to celebrate the first wedding reception in the newly remodeled ballroom that evening.



Section 04

Lighting the Way for Generations to Come

The Grand Rapids National Bank built what was known to be the tallest building between Chicago and Detroit, a record that would hold until the Amway Grand was completed in 1983.

They placed the iconic crimson-red dome high atop the 18th Floor, 220 feet above street level, hoping that the world would see it and come to Grand Rapids. Now that this dream is being fulfilled and Grand Rapids is becoming one of the fastest-growing cities in America, this iconic and historical dome continues to light up the Grand Rapids night sky, changing colors and patterns to collectively guide West Michiganders in causes to rally behind as well as to celebrate the holidays and changing seasons.



O4 Lighting the Way for Generations to Come

Just a few examples of the foundations and charities that regularly reach out to McKay Tower to help support their causes are:



Alzheimer's Foundation of America

Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls (MMIW)


Metastatic Breast Cancer Awareness Day

Those impacted by Native American boarding schools

National Childhood Cancer Awareness Month

Domestic Violence Awareness Month

And many more!

An aerial night photograph of the Grand Rapids skyline. The central focus is the McKay Tower, a tall, light-colored building with a distinctive dome illuminated in vibrant red and blue lights. The surrounding area is filled with other city buildings, some with lit windows, and streets with cars. A large, curved, tiered structure, possibly a stadium or amphitheater, is visible in the lower right corner. The overall scene is illuminated by city lights, creating a warm, yellowish glow on the streets and buildings.

We are proud of McKay Tower's dome and its celebrated history. We are honored to be stewards of this historical landmark and pledge that it will continue to light up the Grand Rapids skyline, leading the way for generations to come.

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