Looking toward downtown Tacoma, Perkins Building (center), circa 1907, photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of Patrick F. Diviney.
The Perkins Building:
Looking Back As We Move Forward
Adapted from Patrick F. Diviney’s “Sam Perkins and His Building”

Folklore is the stuff of both literature and history. It holds images that animate our poems and stories, and it provides clues to our real and imagined histories. As soon as the University of Washington, Tacoma began to occupy space in the Perkins Building at the corner of 11th and A Streets, it began to create a place for itself in the neighborhood folklore. Now that the University has moved a few blocks away, that folklore will change again. Whatever stories we have become a part of will continue to evolve on their own, the truths, half-truths, and non-truths commingling in a process mostly beyond our control. Below, we read of an earlier player in that same process. —Eds.

On November 11, 1905, Sam Perkins, astute businessman and pillar of the Tacoma community, announced the imminent construction at 1101 A Street, Tacoma, of what was to be known as the Perkins Building. At the time, Perkins owned several area publications, including *The Tacoma News* and *The Tacoma Ledger* and the *Olympian* in Olympia. His plan was to erect a building which would not only house his growing publishing enterprises but would reflect his increasingly prominent civic stature.

Ambrose Russell of the architectural firm of Russell and Babcock was awarded the design contract. Russell’s design adhered to the so-called Chicago School of Architecture. The building would have two separately constructed phases of identical structures creating a symmetry when both halves were finally completed. At first, the number of floors it was to have was unclear, but Perkins assured the community that the new building would be up-to-date in every respect. He envisioned it would have no inside rooms; that is, every room would have an outside view.

Before Perkins could begin construction, however, there was the matter of the existing structures. Two houses on the lots would be demolished. Also located on the lots was the Lister Building, built in 1891. It was a three-story brick structure that was home to the Hotel
Hauser and the Dawson Saloon. Rather than tear down the Lister Building, Perkins decided to move it to one of the other lots and make use of it while the Perkins Building was being constructed.

Moving a building the size of the Lister Building had not been done before in Tacoma. The job was entrusted to the firm of Nichols and Handley, Housemovers. To move the building, the workmen placed two layers of large wooden beams under the building with a set of wooden cylinders placed in between acting as rollers. The actual motive power was provided by two horses hitched to a capstan. The move took six hours, with an average speed of eight feet per hour. Foundation excavation for the new building began in January 1906. The dirt removed was used as fill for the 11th Street bridge.

Perkins chose to have the new building constructed of reinforced concrete to make it as fireproof and earthquake resistant as the technology of the day would allow. The W.P. Fuller Company installed the original “float glass” windows, many of which remain in place today. Otis Elevators was contracted to provide two working elevators. In addition, the Perkins Building was designed with its own power plant.

The first phase of the Perkins Building was finished in March 1907. In May 1909, the Lister Building was razed to open up its adjacent lot for the second phase. The completed Perkins Building was ready for tenants in 1910.

Regardless of his personal ideals, Sam Perkins played no favorites with regard to whom he would rent. Office space was rented to a labor union and an assortment of other tenants, including the Roman Catholic Welfare Bureau. Perkins kept an office suite on the fifth floor, where he worked until his death in 1955 at age ninety.

In 1982, the Perkins Building was sold to the Eberharter and Gaunt Corporation. While the building was certainly old enough to qualify for entry in the National Register of Historic Places, this would have restricted the owners from making the modifications which they had planned. Although aged, the Perkins Building was still in remarkably fine shape—a testament to the original designers and builders. Mr. R.L. Eberharter remarked, “Usually in an old building dimensions may be off by as much as a half-inch. Here the tolerance was so close, the windows were within a sixteenth of an inch of being square. It’s been a fun building to work with.”

In 1990, the University of Washington rented the Perkins Building to create the new Tacoma Branch (UWT). The purpose of
the new branch was to provide higher educational opportunities for those place-bound in Tacoma and surrounding areas. UWT eventually occupied floors four through eight, including the former Perkins office suite on the fifth floor, the level used to house the UWT Library. This autumn, UWT left the Perkins Building and the Tacoma Security Building, moving into its new “old” campus of renovated warehouse buildings on Pacific Avenue. But Sam Perkins’ vision, embodied in his building, has left its imprint on UWT: an appreciation for many views, a plan with an eye toward the future, a respect for symmetry and balance—it has been a suitable building in which to start a new history.

Patrick F. Diviney’s research paper, “Sam Perkins and His Building,” is in the special collections file at the University of Washington, Tacoma Library. It was adapted here by Nancy Lamb Horkley and the editors of *Tahoma West*. 

Perkins Building circa 1907, photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of Patrick F. Diviney.