



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

### National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

#### 1. Name of Property

historic name Houk Manufacturing Company (Houk Wire Wheel Corporation)

other names/site number: Wire Wheel Corporation of America; Superior Motor Company; McCue Factory

#### 2. Location

street & number 300-320 Grote Street; 1686-1700 Elmwood Avenue [ ] not for publication

city or town Buffalo [ ] vicinity

state New York code NY county Erie code 029 zip code 14222

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination [ ] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [ ] nationally [ ] statewide  locally. ([ ] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Rudolph Pierpont DBHPO  
Signature of certifying official/Title

12/23/13  
Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([ ] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register  
[ ] see continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register  
[ ] see continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
date of action

Edson H. Beall

2.14.14

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

- [X] private
[ ] public-local
[ ] public-State
[ ] public-Federal

- [X] building(s)
[ ] district
[ ] site
[ ] structure
[ ] object

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, and TOTAL. Values: Contributing 2, Noncontributing 1.

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

Historic Resources of the Black Rock Planning Neighborhood N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(enter categories from instructions)

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

INDUSTRY/PROCESSING/EXTRACTION
manufacturing facility

WORK IN PROGRESS

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

No Style

foundation stone
walls brick
roof asphalt
other wood/metal/glass

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- [X] A Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
[ ] B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
[X] C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
[ ] D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- [ ] A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
[ ] B removed from its original location
[ ] C a birthplace or grave
[ ] D a cemetery
[ ] E a reconstructed building, object, or structure
[ ] F a commemorative property
[ ] G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

- Architecture
Transportation

Period of Significance:

1910-1928

Significant Dates:

1910; 1913; 1917; 1919

Significant Person:

N/A

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect/Builder:

R. J. Reidpath; E. H. Waterbury

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- [X] preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
[ ] previously listed in the National Register
[ ] previously determined eligible by the National Register
[ ] designated a National Historic Landmark
[ ] recorded by historic American Building Survey #
[ ] recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- [ ] State Historic Preservation Office
[ ] Other State agency
[ ] Federal Agency
[ ] Local Government
[ ] University
[ ] Other repository:



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## NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

In 2010, an extensive survey of the Black Rock neighborhood was completed with the support of the City of Buffalo Office of Strategic Planning, the Baird Foundation, the John R. Oishei Foundation, the Preservation League of New York State, and the Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency. This survey resulted in the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form (MDPF), Historic Resources of the Black Rock Planning Neighborhood. The purpose of this document is to streamline the designation of the neighborhood's rare and dwindling stock of National Register eligible properties. The role of the Black Rock neighborhood in the historical development of the city of Buffalo is covered extensively in the MPDF. For individual nominations to be added to the MPDF, the registration requirements state: *Architecture which retains significant historical associations and/or architectural distinction and which retains integrity of architecture, construction, form, materials and detailing satisfies the requirements for individual listing.*

### Summary

The former Houk Manufacturing Company / Wire Wheel Corporation of America factory, located in the City of Buffalo, Erie County, New York, is a large industrial facility built in the early twentieth century that is mostly intact today.<sup>1</sup> Constructed in stages between 1910 and 1930, the complex retains a significant amount of its as-built appearance, consisting of rectangular and acute angled one-and-two-story brick factory buildings on a roughly L-shaped plan. The principal elevations are east, facing Elmwood Avenue, south, facing Grote Street, and west, which is angled to reflect the curving right of way of a spur of the former New York Central Belt Line that runs along this boundary. Most of the original exterior of the northern section of the complex, which is sheathed in brown, windowless corrugated metal panels, consists of additions that post-date the period of significance. Architectural embellishment is limited to an Ionic portico entrance in the center of the facade of the office building that faces Elmwood Avenue, a principal public thoroughfare that passes the complex. The factory complex is built of brick pier construction, with load-bearing brick piers around the exterior. The space between the piers was originally filled with metal windows, many of which have been replaced with concrete block. The interiors of the factory complex and the office areas are largely intact, retaining the original open floor plan and other features such as stairways, elevators, fire doors and flooring. In some areas of the interior, steel posts and beams support reinforced concrete floors and ceilings; in others, wood posts and beams support wood floors and ceilings. Comparison with original blueprints and Sanborn maps indicates that the present day complex largely retains the appearance of a manufacturing facility of wire automobile wheels that operated here between 1913 and 1930.

### Setting

The former Houk Manufacturing Company / Wire Wheel Corporation of America factory is located in North Buffalo on the west side of Elmwood Avenue and the north side of Grote Street. The site is south of a CSX railroad corridor, which was the former New York Central Belt Line. Elmwood Avenue is a major north-south thoroughfare connecting North Buffalo with downtown, some four miles distant; the immediate vicinity is industrial in character. Directly across Elmwood Avenue is the former plant of the Pierce-Arrow Motor

<sup>1</sup> The historic name of the building and the company's owners appears both as 'HOUCK' and 'HOUK' in historic records, with the latter appearing with more frequency. For the purposes of consistency, the HOUK spelling is used throughout this nomination.

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Company (NR listed); to the north, across the railroad line is the former Taylor Signal Company / General Railway Signal Company. The buildings in this complex have been determined eligible for listing in the National Register. There are small industrial buildings to the west, on the opposite side of the former railroad right-of-way, and to the south on the opposite side of Grote Street. Several small frame residential and commercial buildings stand at the northwest corner of Elmwood Avenue and Grote Street, which is residential in character west of the railroad right-of-way. To the east and west of Elmwood are neighborhoods of predominantly middle class single-family frame houses, interspersed with "flats," two story domestic buildings with apartments for individual tenants on each level. Three blocks to the south is the intersection with Amherst Street, an important residential street running east-west through North Buffalo. The nominated property and that of the surrounding area is level, with the exception of the underpass just north of the site on Elmwood Avenue. It allows automobile and pedestrian traffic to pass under the railroad that runs alongside the property.

**The Development of the Factory Complex**

This large manufacturing facility developed over a twenty-year period. The original portion was constructed in 1910 for the Superior Motor Vehicle Company as an L-shaped factory of four distinct sections. Three of the four original components were designated on the blueprints as A, B and C (Fig. 1); the administrative building in the original complex has been designated AA on the sketch plan of the nomination. Additional letters have been added in chronological order to clarify the evolution of the complex, but these letters are not historic designations. The original factory complex of 1910 consists of a two-story office building fronting on Elmwood Avenue (AA) with a one-story machine shop (A) directly behind it (extending westward to the former New York Central Railroad spur), a one-story warehouse (B) (extending south from the westernmost end of the machine shop), and a two-story forge shop (C) that is located at the south end of the warehouse and fronting on Grote Street (Figs. 1 & 2). Along the north side of the machine shop is a one-story space used as a testing room, with a free-standing power house to the north.

By early 1911 the firm had become the Superior Axle & Forge Company and by the following summer, the business had become the McCue Company. Both firms specialized in making automotive axles. McCue soon expanded the complex, building a detached brick garage (D) to the south of the office block (AA) in 1911. In 1913 McCue added a second story to the machine shop (A) and the testing room. A second story was also added to the warehouse (B) c. 1915. This last addition may have been added by McCue, or by the Houk Manufacturing Company, which purchased the complex in the fall of 1915 for the production of wire automotive wheels. The appearance of the complex in 1914 can be seen in Fig. 1. By 1916, an addition connected the power house to the machine shop. A two-story section (E) was added in 1916 to the west side of the forge shop (C). A second addition (F) in 1917, also two stories, extended the complex westward to the railroad spur.

By early 1917 the Houk Manufacturing Company was merged into the Wire Wheel Corporation of America. In 1919 the firm built a freestanding, two-story building with one-story wings (G) to the east of the forge shop (C). Also in 1919, it constructed another addition (H) to the north of the recently erected western sections (E and F). The westernmost additions created an irregular northwest façade of the complex; this elevation was regularized

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in 1922 with a small addition (I) built out to the railroad spur. Portions of the section (J) immediately to the east of the power house may pre-date the end of wire wheel production at this facility, c. 1930.

After the early 1930s, successors to the Wire Wheel Corporation of America made small additions to the west of the garage (D) in 1956 and 1966 (K). Around 1982 large steel and concrete block additions (L) were built on the north sides of the 1910 machine shop (A). These additions were sheathed in corrugated metal panels, which were also applied to most of the brick exteriors of the northern part of the complex. These post-1930 structures are considered non-contributing.

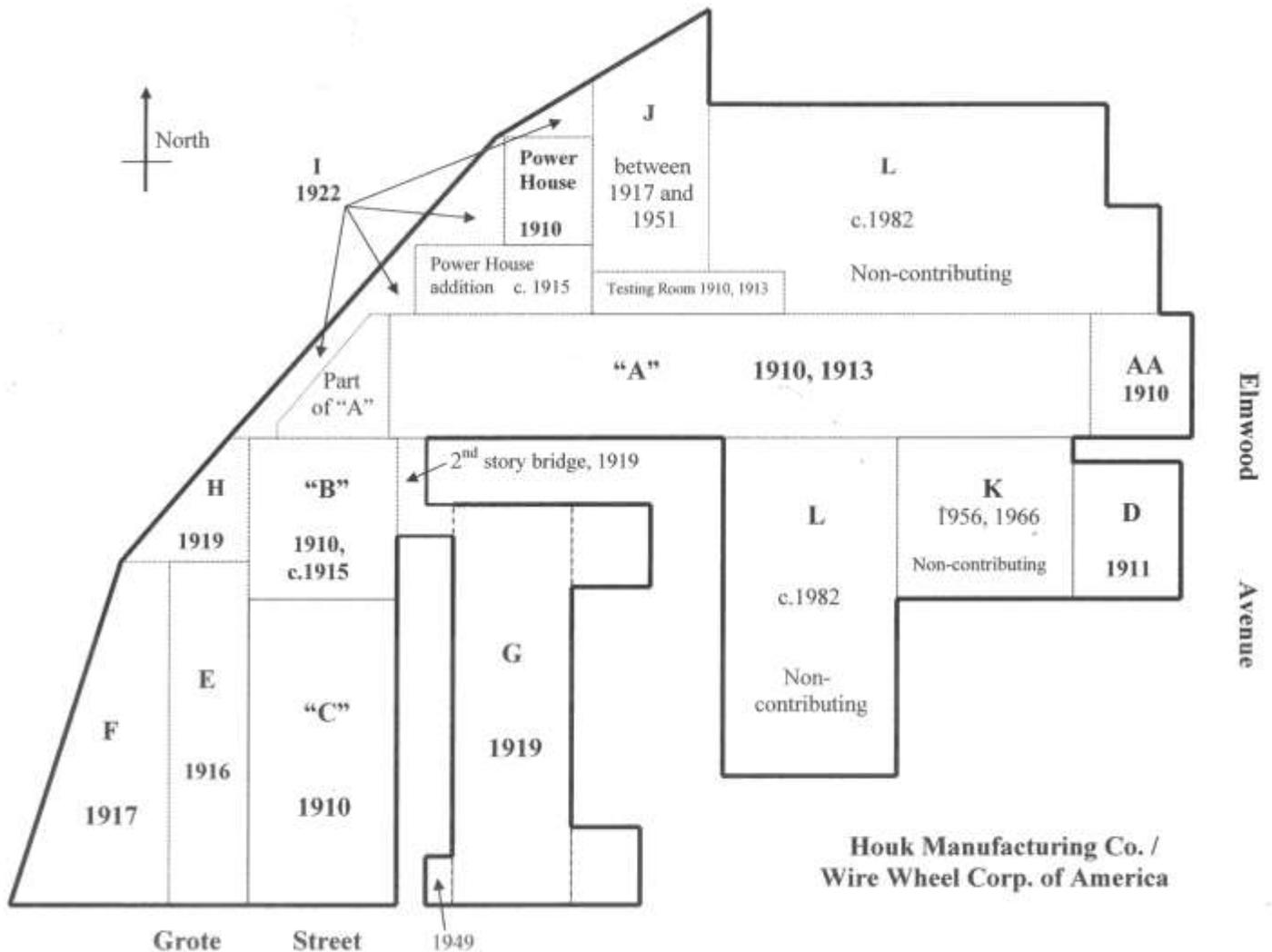


Fig. 1 – Houk Plan

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**Building AA, Office Building (1910)**

The 1910 brick office building (AA) is a square two-story building with a flat roof. It faces east onto Elmwood Avenue (Fig. 3) and has three exterior facades. The principal elevation of the office building is three bays wide and has recessed windows between the brick piers which become corbeled just beneath the roof parapet (Fig. 7). Windows extend the width of each bay and have stone sills and brick lintels. Modern fenestration has replaced the original window materials. The roof is flat, with a flat parapet and stone coping. The main entrance is in the center of the western elevation. It is in the Classical style. A projecting one-story stone portico, with a pair of smooth Ionic columns supporting a curved entablature frames the doorway which is flanked by narrow side lights. The entrance portico are the only significant decorative detail in the entire factory complex. The south façade of the office building is three bays wide, with recessed window bays between the brick piers which are corbeled outward beneath the parapet. The north façade has one bay visible, the other bays being hidden behind the large 1980s non-contributing addition. The interior of the office building retains little of its original features, having been reconstructed several times in recent decades.

**Building A, Machine Shop (1910-1913)**

The brick machine shop (A) extends westward from the office building (AA). It is a two-story, trapezoidal building with angled western wall and flat roof. It is the same width as the office building, but the roof rises above the office building. The original exterior of this section (Fig. 1) featured large regularly spaced rectangular windows in 24 bays on the south elevation and 22 bays on the north elevation. Slightly projecting piers articulate the first story, which was built in 1910; there are no piers on the second story, which was built in 1913. This exterior is now completely covered by windowless vertical metal panels made of corrugated Corten steel sheets that have mellowed to a warm reddish brown patina. Sections of the brick exterior walls of the machine shop remain visible inside, and indicate the appearance of the walls behind metal panels (Fig. 8). The original window openings have been blocked in, with some opened up for doorways. Two large additions (L) project to the north (one and three stories) and to the south (one and two stories) of the machine shop. The southern addition is joined to the garage building (D). These additions (L) were put up around 1982 and are of metal and concrete block construction.

The interior of machine shop (A) largely preserves the appearance it had when constructed in 1910. It consists of freestanding riveted steel columns and supporting beams of a reinforced concrete ceiling (Fig. 9). The columns are more closely spaced on the western end, where the angled west wall had additional structural requirements (Fig. 10). On the second floor of the machine shop, constructed in 1913, wood columns and framing were used. This space also retains most of its integrity (Fig. 11).

On the north side of the machine shop is the former powerhouse of 1910. Originally it was freestanding, but an addition connected the powerhouse to the rest of the complex by 1916. Testing rooms, also dating from 1910, extended along part of the north wall of the machine shop. A second story was added to the testing room section in 1913. (These sections are visible behind building A beneath the smokestack in the center distance of Fig. 1.) The original exteriors are completely covered by later additions and Corten metal sheathing. The interior spaces, however, retain a high degree of integrity. They consist of brick, concrete and steel construction with clerestories beneath the roofs (Fig. 12).

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**Building B, Warehouse (1910-1915)**

The warehouse (B) extends southward from the three westernmost bays of the machine shop (A). It is a two-story brick building, five bays long with a flat roof behind a parapet with tile coping. The first story was built in 1910 (visible in Fig. 1); the second story was added c. 1915. The eastern elevation (the only elevation visible on the exterior) of the first story features smooth exterior wall without projecting piers and rectangular windows similar to those once installed in the machine shop. And like those openings, these are now filled with masonry block (Fig. 15, in center distance). The northern three bays of the second story are covered by a steel frame passageway connecting the original complex with building (G). The western elevation is hidden behind later additions. The interior features steel post and beam construction similar to that of the machine shop.

**Building C, Forge Shop (1910)**

The 1910 forge shop (C), architecturally the most distinctive in the complex, extends southward from the warehouse (B). Its principal elevation faces south. It is five bays wide and features a tall stepped gable that fronts on Grote Street. This single story brick building also has a long clerestory (Fig. 13). The only other elevation visible on the exterior of the complex is the nine-bay eastern elevation. Both the southern and eastern elevations have recessed window bays between brick piers, which are corbeled outward beneath the flat parapet. The fenestration on both elevations features metal-capped brick sills and steel lintels. The former openings are presently filled on both stories by concrete block, except in the clerestory, which still has multi-pane metal windows. The interior is devoted to unobstructed work space that is spanned by a sizeable metal roof truss and lit by the large windows in the clerestory.

**Building D, Garage (1913)**

A freestanding brick garage (D) was constructed to the south of Building AA in 1913. It is a one-story building with a flat roof surrounded by a low parapet (Fig. 3). The original exterior, which is now sheathed in reddish brown windowless metal panels, was originally four bays wide and had recessed fenestration between slightly projecting piers (Fig. 1). Non-contributing additions (K) were built on the west side in 1956 and 1966 and connect the former garage with the rest of the complex.

**Buildings E (1916) and F (1917)**

Abutting the west side of the forge shop (C) are the additions of 1916 (E) and 1917 (F). Building E is a rectangular brick building, two stories high with flat roof and one exterior, two bay elevation facing south along Grote Street. Building F is a trapezoidal brick building, two stories high with flat roof and two exterior elevations. One of these faces south along Grote Street. It is four bays wide (the westernmost bay is narrower than the others). The western elevation of this building is nine bays wide. The south-facing elevations (Grote Street) of buildings E and F both have recessed window bays between the brick piers which are corbeled at the level of the roof parapet. Fenestration treatment consists on the first story of openings with brick sills and steel lintels; those on the second story have stone or cement sills and brick lintels. The openings are presently filled with concrete block on the first story and glass block on the second.

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The western elevation of Buildings E and F is the southernmost section of the complex. It faces the curving former railroad right-of-way (Fig. 5, right side). This elevation is nine bays wide and consists of a planar brick wall in which the fenestration is cut. The window openings have stone or concrete sills and metal lintels and are filled with concrete or glass block. A large square brick chimney rises from the northern part of this section. The interiors of buildings E and F feature exposed steel columns and beams supporting reinforced concrete ceilings.

**Building G (1919)**

This 1919 freestanding brick addition (Building G) is the only building in the complex that has exterior elevations on all sides (Fig. 4). The two story main section has recessed window bays between the brick piers, which are corbeled outward beneath the roof parapet. This structural feature is repeated on all the elevations of this building. On the first story of the two-story section, the piers are deeper at the first story and begin to taper at the beginning of the second story. The roof is flat, and the parapet has tile coping.

The southern one story wing also has recessed window bays between the brick piers, which are corbeled outward beneath the roof parapet; there is a tall square brick chimney in the southwest corner of the wing roof. This wing's roof is side gabled, with a step gable on the eastern elevation where there is a pair of doors at ground level. This wing is balanced by a similar wing that projects from the north end of the east elevation. These wings form a court in front of the main east elevation, which is eight bays between the wings (Fig. 14). The fourth bay from the north wing on the east elevation is the elevator bay and features a third story above the parapet. This bay and the one to the south are sheltered on the first story by a metal frame porch. There is also a metal porch over two of the three south-facing bays of the north wing, which has a monitor roof. The window openings on the east and north elevations of this wing are bricked in.

The north elevation of building (G) is a mirror image of the south, with a four-bay two story section and a three-bay wing (Fig. 15; the south façade of Building A is visible on the right). A second story bridge projects from the last bay of the west elevation, connecting this building with the original buildings (A and B) of the complex. This bridge has a steel superstructure now covered in vinyl siding.

The western elevation of Building G is twelve bays wide. The southernmost bay is fronted by a 1949 brick addition housing a stairwell. Window openings have stone or concrete sills with brick lintels. The first floor fenestration is covered in wood paneling, while the second floor fenestration has multi-pane steel industrial windows all around, except on the south façade, where wood paneling covers the fenestration on both stories.

The interior is reflective of earlier construction techniques, with a wooden structural system within load-bearing brick walls. The system of wood columns supporting wood beams beneath wood ceilings on the first floor (Fig. 16) is repeated on the second floor (Fig. 17). This second floor space, with its large windows remaining, is an excellent example of an unobstructed daylight factory interior interpreted in brick and wood instead of the usual brick and steel. The wood beams rest in metal shoes atop the square wood columns with beveled edges (Fig. 18). Some of the original fire doors still remain in the building, such as the unusual double swing door / track door combination that separates the building from the second story bridge to the main factory (Fig. 19).

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**Building H (1919)**

Abutting the 1917 addition (F) immediately to the north is the two-story brick 1919 addition (H), a triangular brick building, two stories high with flat a roof and one exterior elevation facing west (Fig. 5, center). This elevation is five bays wide and features recessed window bays between the brick piers, which are corbeled outward beneath the flat parapet. The window openings have brick lintels on both stories; sills are brick or metal capped on the first story and stone or concrete on the second. The fenestration is largely filled with concrete block. The interior is of steel post and beam construction.

**Building I (1922)**

This portion of the complex was built to enclose four small triangular voids along the northwest side of the complex abutting the curving right-of-way of the railroad. These areas were filled in with workspaces and connected behind a single exterior elevation eleven bays long (Fig. 6). Though mostly covered with metal panels, seven bays of the original wall are partly or completely visible. They feature recessed window bays between the brick piers. The fenestration has also been filled in on this section. Elements of earlier portions of the factory complex rise above beyond the flat roof of the 1922 addition, while a pair of three-story towers, sheathed in metal, stand at the northern edge of the complex. The remainder of the northern elevation, east of the towers, is also covered in metal sheathing.

**Buildings J (after 1916), K (1956; 1966) ) and L (1982)**

Building J are additions built north of Building A and east of the original power house after 1916 and before 1951; components of this section that predate 1930 would be of contributing significance. All exteriors are sheathed in windowless corrugated metal panels. Building K consists of additions built in 1956 and 1966. It is connected to the west side of Building D and to the south side of Building A. Buildings K and L, which was erected c. 1982, form what appears to the naked eye as a single large addition to the north and south sides of Building A. Buildings K and L, which are also sheathed in windowless corrugated metal, are non-contributing elements.

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**Statement of Significance**

Buildings of the Houk Manufacturing Company in Buffalo, New York, are eligible for the National Register under criterion A in the area of transportation because they were the first site in America for the large scale production of wire wheels for automobiles. The buildings are also eligible under criterion C in the area of architecture because they are well preserved examples of the shed type of brick-pier construction that was common for factory buildings in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the adoption of reinforced concrete for such buildings and the popularity of the so-called daylight factory. One of the buildings was erected by R. J. Reidpath, a Buffalo engineer who, for other clients, notably the Larkin Company (1907) in Buffalo and the Alling and Cory Warehouse (1911; NR listed 2010) would be an important builder of reinforced concrete factory buildings.

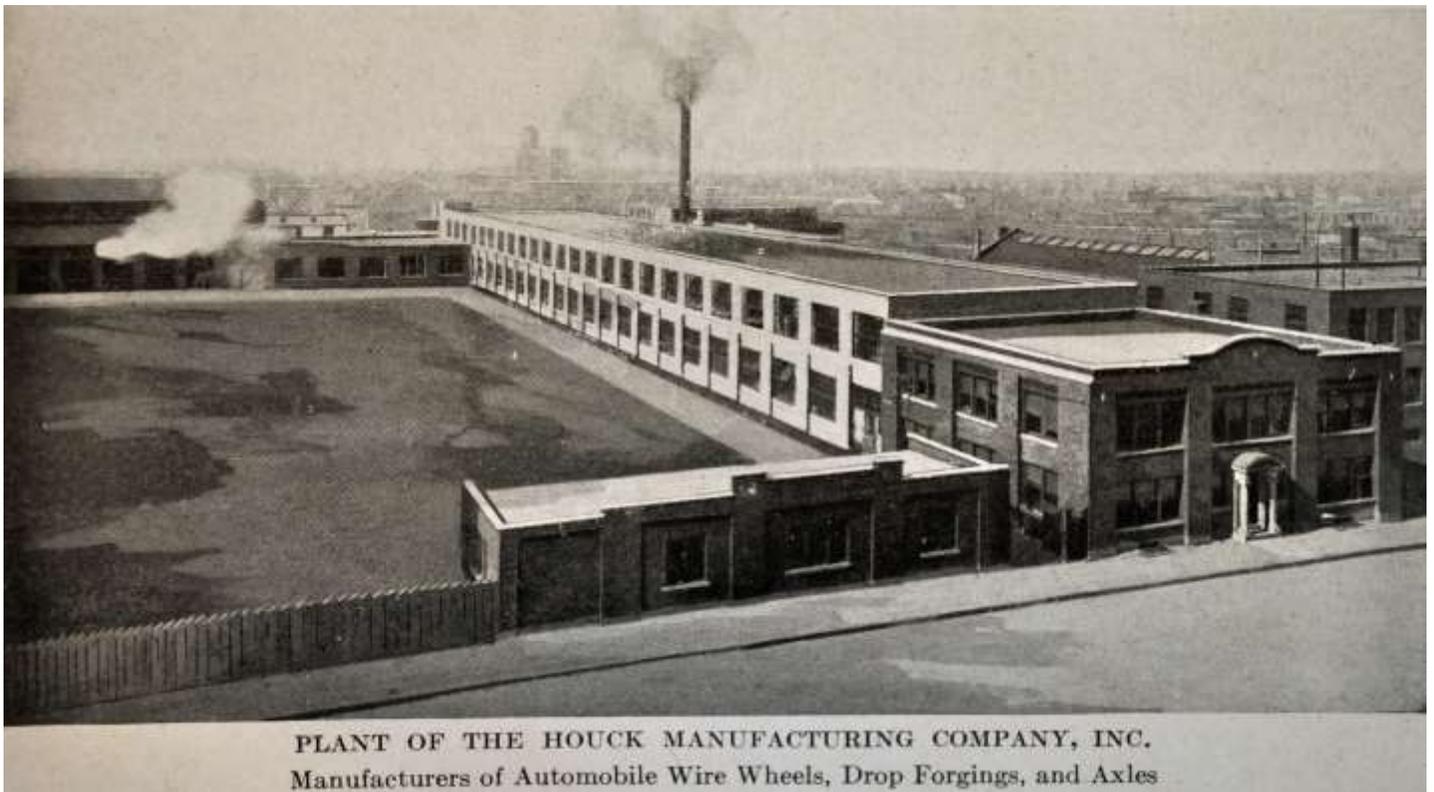


Fig. 2 – Houk Manufacturing Company

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**Black Rock: A Brief History**

*(Much of the information provided in this brief history of Black Rock has been summarized and paraphrased from the more thorough historical background presented in the related MPDF. For a detailed history of the Black Rock neighborhood, please refer to the multiple property documentation form Historic Resources of the Black Rock Planning Neighborhood, Buffalo, Erie County, NY.)*

The strategic location of the Black Rock neighborhood has largely contributed to its historical role in the region. Its proximity to the Niagara River and the Canadian border played an important role in the early history of its settlement, when the neighborhood served as an essential location in the Seven Years' War, the War of 1812, and the Canadian Rebellion of 1837. When the construction of the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, the neighborhood became the crossroads for major transportation lines. Because roads during this time were unreliable and subject to hazardous weather, waterways were essential for effective transportation. As a result, the Niagara corridor between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario was utilized heavily by the portage industry. The Erie Canal was a major gateway to the West, bringing thousands of settlers through Buffalo and a time of economic prosperity for the region.

Industry played a central role in the development of the Black Rock neighborhood. With the arrival of increasingly efficient rail lines in the nineteenth century, as well as the transportation provided by the Erie Canal, the area became heavily industrialized. Many transportation companies and industrial factories settled in Black Rock, and these factories drew workers into the community who often resided close by, as was common at the time. By providing housing for their workers, companies not only ensured that their laborers would be conveniently close to their employment but also created a legacy of nineteenth century housing stock, which can still be seen in Black Rock today. In this way, Black Rock was populated by a largely working class population, along with the factory owners who facilitated their settlement in the neighborhood. The economic success and population boom continued in the Black Rock neighborhood and the Buffalo region well into the twentieth century. The Belt Line railroad, as well as electric streetcars, continued to connect Black Rock to the center of Buffalo, which continued to attract new businesses and residents to the area. This period in time was a shining moment for Black Rock, and the success was evident in the continual construction of homes, commercial storefronts and factories in the neighborhood. This history has contributed to the individual sense of place that remains in Black Rock today. Although Black Rock was annexed by the City of Buffalo in 1853, the neighborhood has maintained its own distinctive character to this day.

However, like many communities throughout Buffalo, Black Rock faced difficult times in the later half of the twentieth century. The city's significance as a transportation crossroads dissipated due to the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, which effectively rendered the Erie Canal and the city's rail lines obsolete. Due to these changing transportation lines and evolving technologies, Buffalo faced a severe economic downturn in the 1970s and 80s. Neighborhoods with strong industrial bases, such as Black Rock, were especially hard hit during this time. Many of the factories and businesses that had once drawn residents to the area in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were closed, leaving many people unemployed. Because of this, many of the city's traditional residential and commercial neighborhoods declined, causing the neglect, decay and demolition of

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many of the area's historic buildings. Recently, however, the Black Rock community has seen some positive developments, indicating a rebound for the neighborhood in the future. Local community members have been active in reclaiming a sense of place in the neighborhood and have been involved in organizing the rebirth of the area. In this way, the historic character of Black Rock can contribute to a renewed sense of place and pride in the neighborhood.

**George W. Houk (1865-1917), "father of the wire wheel in America."**

The nominated buildings are intimately associated with the American entrepreneur George W. Houk, whose career, stated one obituary, "was filled with action and the romance and endeavor."<sup>2</sup> Born in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, in 1865, Houk began his adult life in Elmira, New York, as a salesman of the *Eclipse* racing bicycle made famous by the English cyclist John Thompson Keen. In 1892, Houk, who was a persuasive salesman, moved to London. There over a period of twelve years he became wealthy selling this speedy early racing bicycle to many British customers. During this period, he also became interested in the new automobile, and when he returned to America in 1909, having lost his fortune, he first became associated with the Oldsmobile car. In 1913, while living in Philadelphia, he introduced the British Rudge-Whitworth detachable wire wheel to the nascent American auto industry. Earlier in England, the shrewd businessman had secured rights to market and manufacture this novel wheel design in the United States. Heretofore the wooden wheel had been standard equipment on automobiles, as it had been on horse-drawn carriages for ages prior. Meeting with success and seeing a golden opportunity, the always impulsive Houk left Philadelphia and, with the help of willing investors, established his own business making wire wheels in Buffalo. Purchasing the factory at 1700 Elmwood Avenue that had been the local home of the defunct McCue automobile company of Hartford, Connecticut, Houk became the first person in America to manufacture wire wheels. The L-shaped building, which had brick walls with an inside exposed steel frame as well as wooden post-and-beam floor and roof supports and which extended south to Grote Street, had originally been erected in 1910 by R. J. Reidpath for the Superior Motor Vehicle Company. Houk's business prospered as automobile producers soon recognized the advantages of metal and wire wheels over older wooden spokes and rims. The Houk Manufacturing Company soon was selling its product as an accessory to many car companies in Buffalo and elsewhere. In 1916, a company advertisement in a New York City newspaper declared that "[Houk] Quick Change Wire Wheels are now standard equipment on the oldest, best equipped, and most influential of the Great American Automobile Manufacturers."<sup>3</sup>

Wire wheels possessed many advantages over old fashioned wooden wheels. "Statistics prove that use of these wheels effects a savings of at least 15 per cent in tire expense and as this then is the most important in automobile up keep the economic value of the wire wheel is self-evident," stated the *Buffalo Express* in a long article on the subject. The wire wheel was light weight, and thus increased gas mileage while at the same time it dispensed with "sledge hammer" jolts crested when wooden wheels encountered a bump. Wire wheels also kept tires much cooler than wooden wheels because the metal rims and spokes transferred heat away from the rubber tires as they turned. "The difference in temperature is important," pointed out the *Express*, "as heat destroys the

<sup>2</sup> "George W. Houk, *Automobile Topics*, 47(October 13, 1917), 1062.

<sup>3</sup> *The Evening Telegram* (New York), January 1, 1916.

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durability of the tire."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, wire wheels were much stronger than wooden rims. "The spokes are so arranged," explained the *Express*, "that the wheel will not only support the weight of the car, but will likewise withstand the severest side strains resulting from the side sway or skidding of the automobile." Houk wheels, asserted the *Express*, were "practically unbreakable."<sup>5</sup>

Houk's company grew so quickly that when failing health induced him to sell the business to the Wire Wheel Corporation of America in 1916, he did so for a million and a half dollars, a fabulous sum at the time. The merger was effected in early 1917.<sup>6</sup> After that the peripatetic Houk left Buffalo for California where he purchased the 1000-acre Red Mountain Ranch near San Diego. Still active despite the setback of stroke, he became head of the local chamber of commerce and sought to create a park from part of his holdings. Unfortunately, Houk did not live long after that, succumbing to another seizure in October 1917. "There is something tragic in his being taken away so shortly after the fruits of a lifetime of work had come into his hands," lamented an admirer.<sup>7</sup> "To automobile industry, particularly some of the oldest and most prominent men in it, it was a source of grief" to have learned of the death of this flamboyant pioneer of an accessory that had significantly transformed the look and performance of the American car.<sup>8</sup> A movement by his friends to name the present Live Oak County Park near Fallbrook, California, in his honor came to nothing, but the natural landscape of mature live oak trees was preserved as he had wished.<sup>9</sup>

**The Houk Manufacturing Company's Elmwood Avenue-Grote Street Factory: the first American factory to make wire wheels.**

The factory Houk purchased in 1913 had been built only three years before, as the Superior Motor Vehicle Company. It was designed by the prominent local architect Robert J. Reidpath, best known for industrial work. A very well-built facility, it was of semi-fireproof construction, with brick piers and exposed metal posts supporting reinforced concrete floors. Unfortunately, the company that built it was not as sound. By January 1911 it had reorganized as the Superior Axle & Forge Co., reflecting a more limited scope of production; in the summer of 1911, it consolidated with another axle concern, the McCue Company of Hartford, Ct., under the later name. The Buffalo factory was then described as one of the best and most modern axel plants in the world.<sup>10</sup> Immediately after acquiring the facility, McCue added a one-story brick auto garage to the south of the office building, designed by local architect Joseph J. Geigand. In 1913, McCue placed a second story on the original one-story machine shop, designed by Franklin G. Slagel, a local architect & civil engineer; unlike the first story, the addition featured frame construction within the outer brick walls. Soon thereafter the plant was sold to Houk.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The quotes are from "Buffalo's Great Wire Wheel Factory," *Buffalo Morning Express*, June 28, 1914.

<sup>6</sup> "Houk Interests Merged." *Motor Age* (March 29, 1917): 11.

<sup>7</sup> "George W. Houk," loc.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Velma Hindorff Sierras, *Early Memories of the Fallbrook Area*. 2001. Online at: <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~hindorff/FallbrookMemories.htm>

<sup>10</sup> *Carriage Monthly* (August, 1911): 38

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When George Houk purchased the former McCue factory complex that bore the address 1700 Elmwood Avenue in 1913 he quickly transformed the structures that had originally been built to make automobile axles into the world's largest manufactory of wire wheels. A description of the operation published the following year stated that it covered 90,000 square feet of space and employed 500 workmen who turned out 5000 wire wheels daily.<sup>11</sup> The writer also provided a thorough description of the careful organization of the work that went on inside the busy factory:

When the rims are received from the largest rim manufacturer in the United States they are sent to the inspection department where each rim is carefully examined. After passing the scrutiny of experts, the rim passes into the so-called nipple-hole drawing department Here the rim is placed in the specially constructed machine . . . This machine at one operation makes three depressions in the rim, each depression being bored out later to admit a spoke. One of the Interesting features of the machine is the index mechanism by means of which it can be adjusted to fit any size rim.

After the rim has been thus treated it is passed along to the next department, where the depressions which have been made are drilled out. . . . A large battery of drilling machines is constantly at work . . . Meanwhile, the outer hub has likewise been bored, this work being done one specially designed multiple drilling machines, each of which operates on five separate hubs at the same time In each hub is drilled a series of holes bearing the proper relation to those which have been drilled in the rim.

When the outer huh is completely bored it goes to the assembling and tensioning department, to which the perforated rim has by this time likewise been transferred. The work of assembling the wheel now begins. The arrangement here is particularly noteworthy. Each operator is provided with a bench and assembling block. On each side of him are stored the parts which he is to use. Back of the block are the perforated rims, on one side the hubs and spokes, on the side the nipples. Thus the assembler does not have to move from his position at the bench. He first takes a rim and places it on the block. Next he puts the proper hub in its place The spokes are then laced first through the perforations in the hub and then through the corresponding perforations in the outer rim; whereupon the nipples are screwed in place on the rim. When the lacing has been completed the wheel may be loosely assembled, and it is then transferred to the tensioning machines . . . Here the rim is mounted so that the hub and rim are exactly in their proper positions . . .

**Wire Wheel Corporation of America**

After the Houk Manufacturing Company was acquired by the Wire Wheel Corporation of America, the business at the Elmwood Avenue-Grote Street plant continued to grow and prosper, and the facility was expanded to meet demand. In 1916 Houk had added a two-story brick warehouse to the west of the original forge shop (two bays facing Grote St.); in 1917 this was expanded west (four bays) to the railway spur, just as the merger took effect. The Wire Wheel Corp. made further additions on the west in 1919 and 1922, and also added to the north side of the facility. In 1919, the company also built a second two-story brick machine shop facing Grote Street,

<sup>11</sup> "Buffalo's Great Wire Wheel Factory," loc. cit.

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east of and parallel to the south wing of the original L-shaped building, free-standing but connected to the rest of the plant by a second story bridge. The architect for the 1919 additions was Edwin H. Waterbury of Torrington, Ct., likely selected because the head of the company (John F. Alvord) lived in Torrington. In 1928, with a contract from General Motors in hand, the company once more planned to expand its physical operations at the site. "It is understood that the Wire Wheel Corporation has designed an interchangeable wheel which will fit three or more of the automobiles manufactured by the General Motors Corporation and that the order from General Motors for next year will be one of the largest that Wire Wheel ever has been called upon to fill," reported a local newspaper.<sup>12</sup> The optimistic firm, whose stock had risen sharply on the news, purchased adjacent land and announced that it would erect a new building to house machinery and operations.

On the eve of the Great Depression, this proposed expansion of the Elmwood Avenue-Grote Street facilities--no records exist to indicate that it ever took place--proved to be the swan song of the great wire wheel enterprise. National economic conditions and changing tastes and standards in automobile design conspired to relegate the wire wheel business to the sidelines of the American automobile industry. By 1931, the Wire Wheel Corporation was no longer in business and the Elmwood Avenue-Grote Street buildings were listed as vacant on city records. By 1935 some of the space was being occupied by a variety of businesses, including Sherman-Williams Paint Company, Visco Meter Company, and a general contractor. Fortunately, all later occupants of the structures did little internally to change them.

**The Architecture of the Houk Manufacturing Company: A Brick Pier Factory**

The buildings of the Houk Manufacturing Company were built using the brick pier method of construction that was common for such structures in the late nineteenth century. Peter Reyner Banham, the first scholar to seriously study American factory architecture, and particularly Buffalo's industrial buildings, explained in his famous book *A Concrete Atlantis*, that in such buildings the solid wall was "replaced by a system of separate brick columns, connected by thinner membranes of brickwork containing windows that went almost from pier to pier. In this way the weight of the brickwork that had to be supported by the arch or beam that spanned each opening could be reduced to the minimum required for decent weather proofing, but the stability of the wall as a whole was guaranteed by the thickness of the piers."<sup>13</sup> The openings could be spanned by a variety of methods. Internally, the brick piers were reinforced with steel. In the Houk Manufacturing Company factory spaces steel beams were used on the ground floor to support the ceiling, while wooden posts were used on the second floor to support the roof. At this time, timber framing was often still used for interior columns, beams and secondary joists observed Banham, because they "charred or burned slowly and often retained their structural strength long enough for the building to be emptied of goods and workers, naked steel construction would begin to twist, distort and pull the building to pieces even before it melted."<sup>14</sup> So-called daylight factories, which were developed between 1902 and 1906 would dispense with wood interiors in favor of metal and concrete supports and floors.

<sup>12</sup> Former Lockportian Heads Buffalo Wire Wheel Corporation," *Lockport Union-Sun and Journal*, October 18, 1928.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Reyner Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture, 1900-1925*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

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Banham called the all such early twentieth-century structures models of "puritanically stern, rectangular discipline." For this reason, many avant-garde European architects drew inspiration from them as an alternative to the conservative historicism that was especially identified with the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.. Knowledge of these American industrial buildings and grain elevators showed the modernists a way to functional, non-historic design.

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"Wire Wheel Corporation Expands Buffalo Plant," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 10, 1928.

Plans are on file in Buffalo City Hall for the Wire Wheel Corporation of America, Buffalo, NY  
Factory Building Com. #213, June 1919; revised July 1919; stamped Aug. 29, 1919, E. H. Waterbury, architect,  
Torrington, CN. Specs for masonry, carpentry & painting; Edwin H. Waterbury, Chamber of Commerce  
Building, C&P 12.

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Boundary Description

Sited on a 4.67 acre parcel, the Houk Manufactory Company is located at the northwest corner of Elmwood Avenue and Grote Street in the city of Buffalo, NY. The lot is curved on its western boundary to correspond to adjacent rail tracks, with entries to the principal elevations located on Grote Street & Elmwood Avenue. A square parcel at the site's southeast is carved out of the boundary due to its lack of association with the complex.

Boundary Justification

The boundary has been drawn to include those building that are associated with the nominated resource's 1910 to 1928 period of significance and is indicated on the enclosed mapping.

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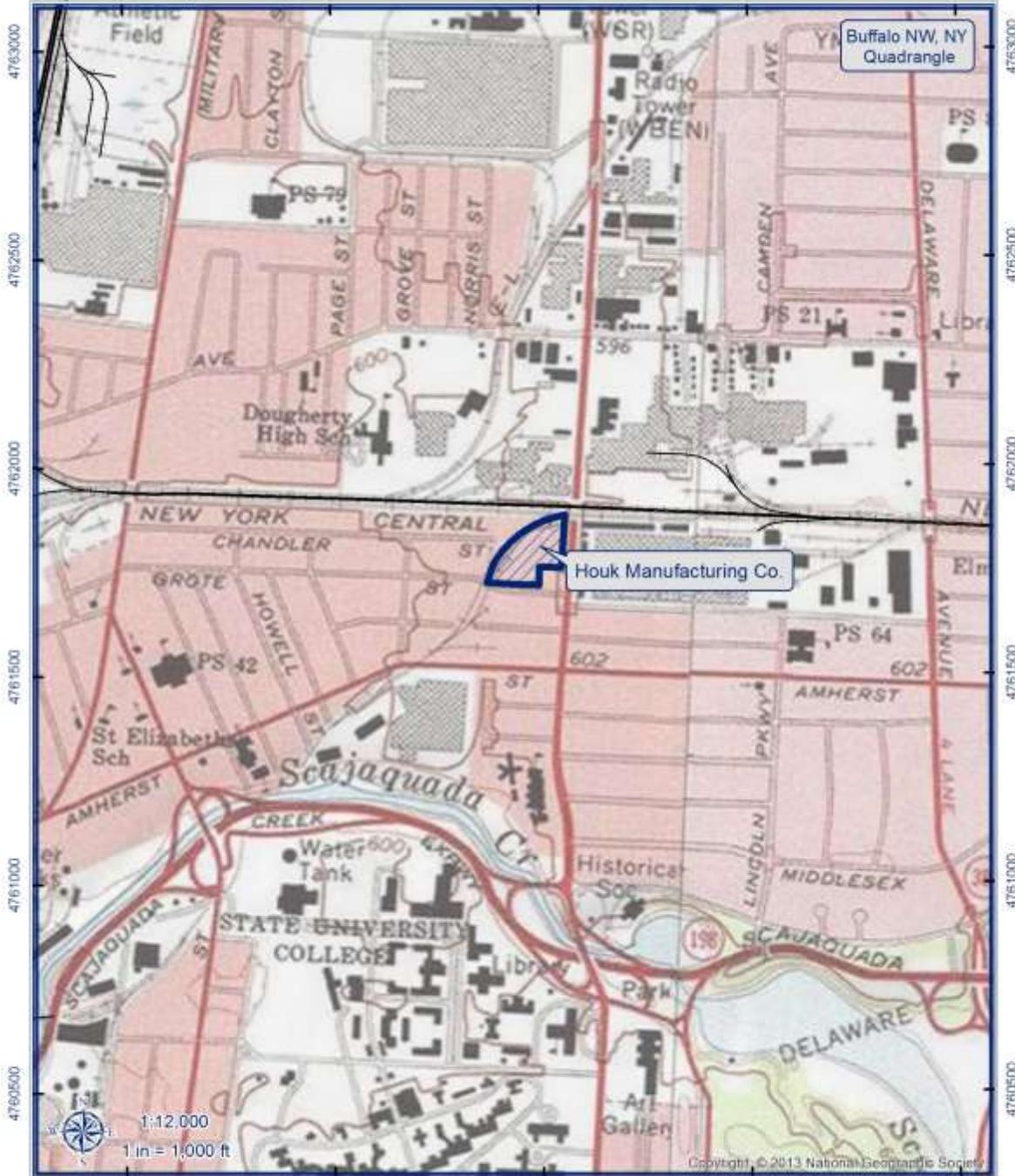
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Houk Manufacturing Company  
City of Buffalo, Erie Co., NY

1687-1700 Elmwood Avenue  
Buffalo, NY 14207



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N  
Projection: Transverse Mercator  
Datum: North American 1983  
Units: Meter



Houk Manufacturing  
 Railroad Line

Tax Parcel Data:  
Erie Co. RPS  
[gis1.erie.gov/GC/ErieCountyNY](http://gis1.erie.gov/GC/ErieCountyNY)



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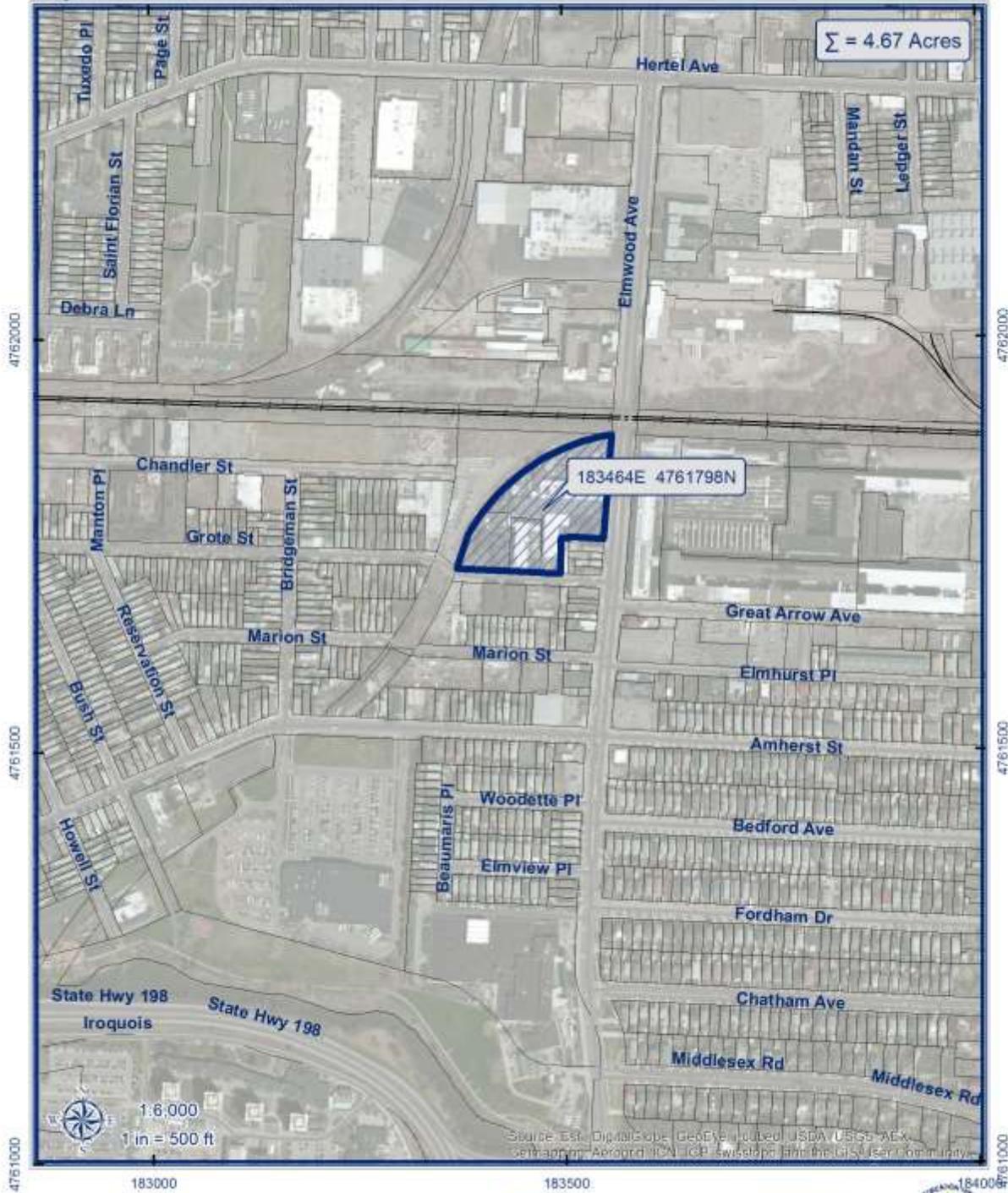
Erie County, New York

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Houk Manufacturing Company  
City of Buffalo, Erie Co., NY

1687-1700 Elmwood Avenue  
Buffalo, NY 14207



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N  
 Projection: Transverse Mercator  
 Datum: North American 1983  
 Units: Meter



Houk Manufacturing  
 — Railroad Line

Tax Parcel Data:  
 Erie Co. RPS  
[gis1.erie.gov/GC/ErieCountyNY](http://gis1.erie.gov/GC/ErieCountyNY)



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Additional Information

Photos:

List of Photographs (All photographs by M. Wachadlo, November 2012)

1. Grote Street elevations from the southeast
2. Office Building (1910) on Elmwood Avenue from the east
3. Western elevation, southern section.
4. Western elevation, northern section.
5. 1910 forge shop, exterior from Grote Street.
6. 1919 machine shop, detail of courtyard
7. View to west behind 1919 machine shop.
8. Elmwood Streetscape
9. 1910 machine shop, second floor
10. Testing room interior.
11. 1919 machine shop, second floor
12. 1919 machine shop, second floor, fire door, post rehabilitation
13. Typical apartment unit post-rehabilitation

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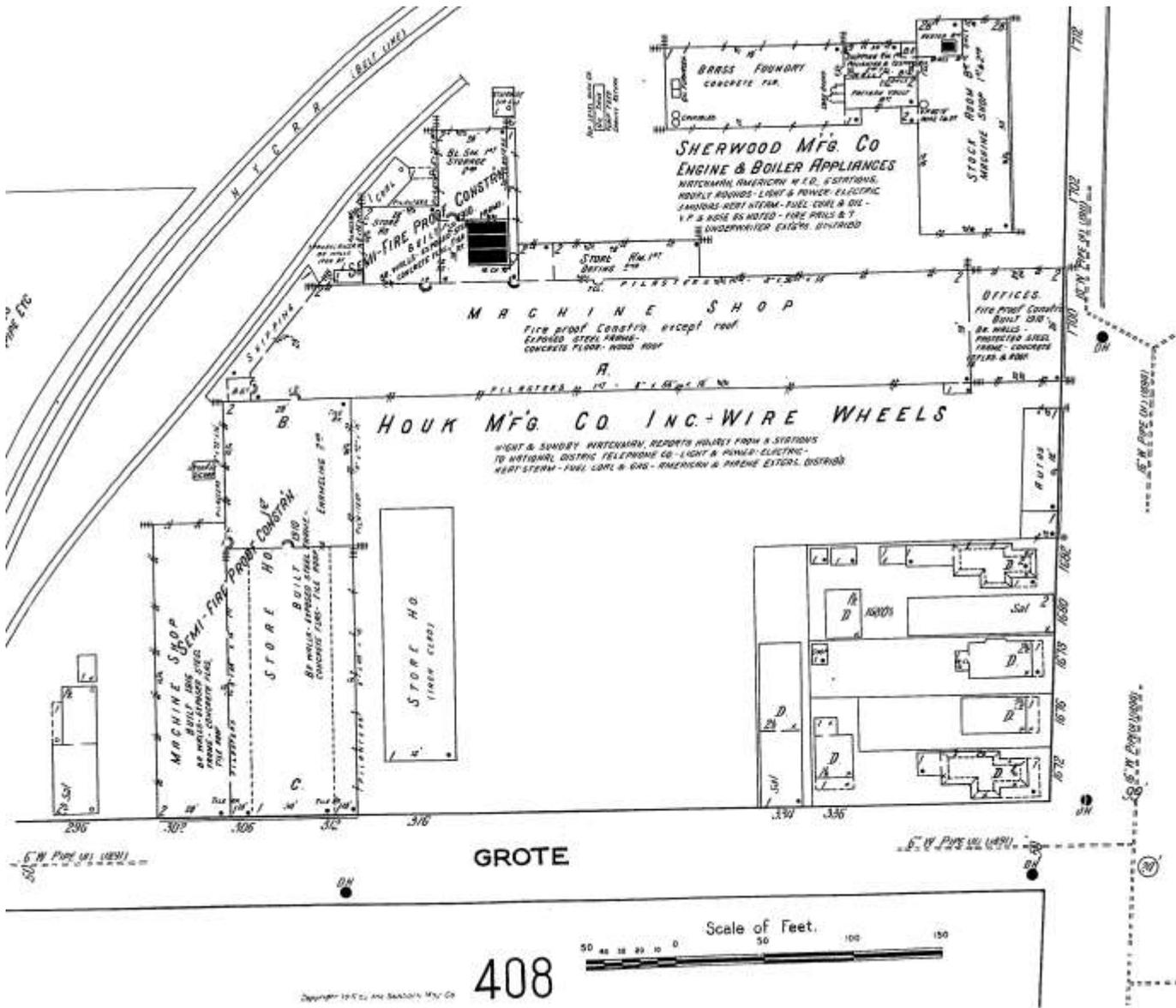
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Sanborn Map, 1916

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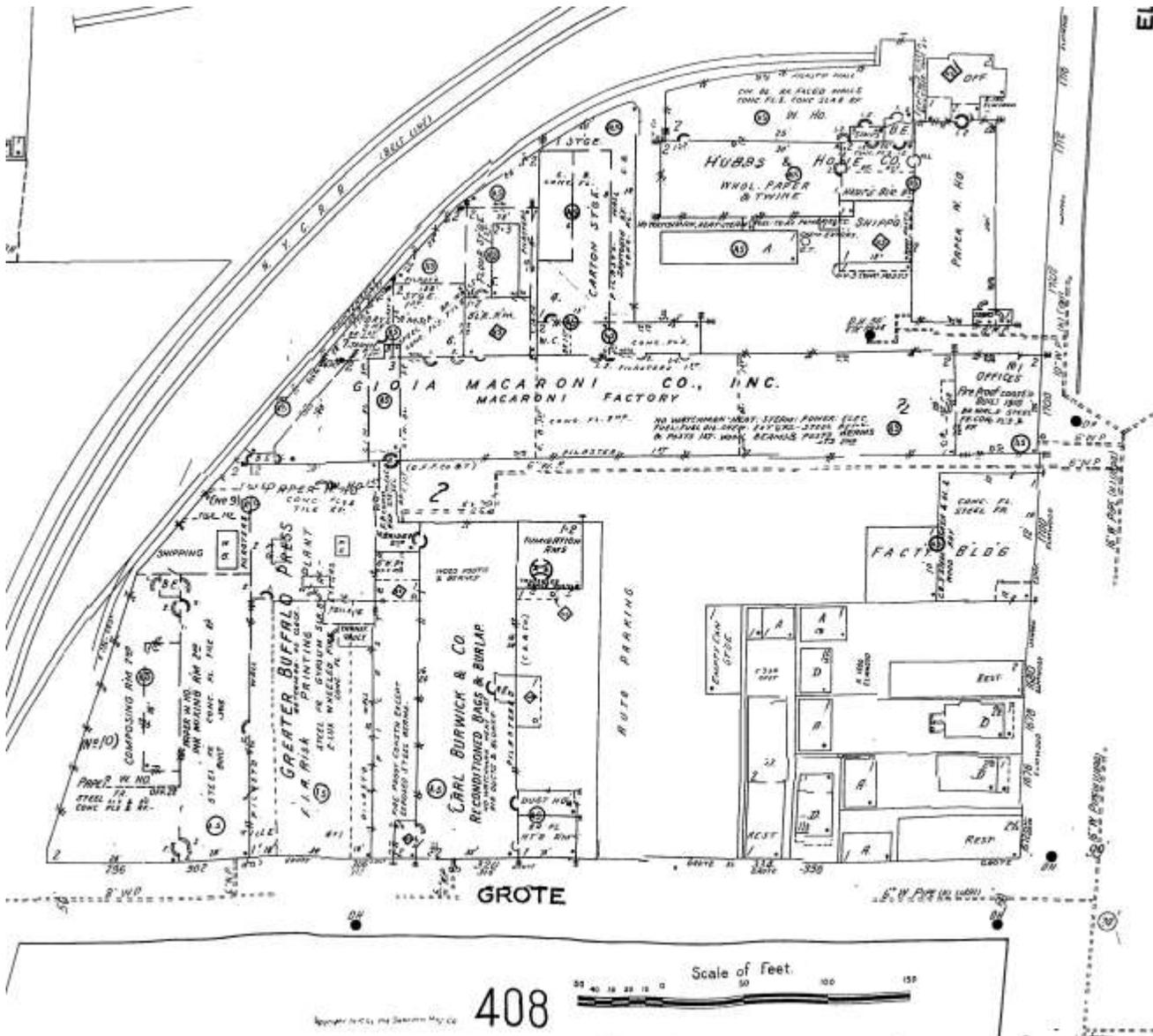
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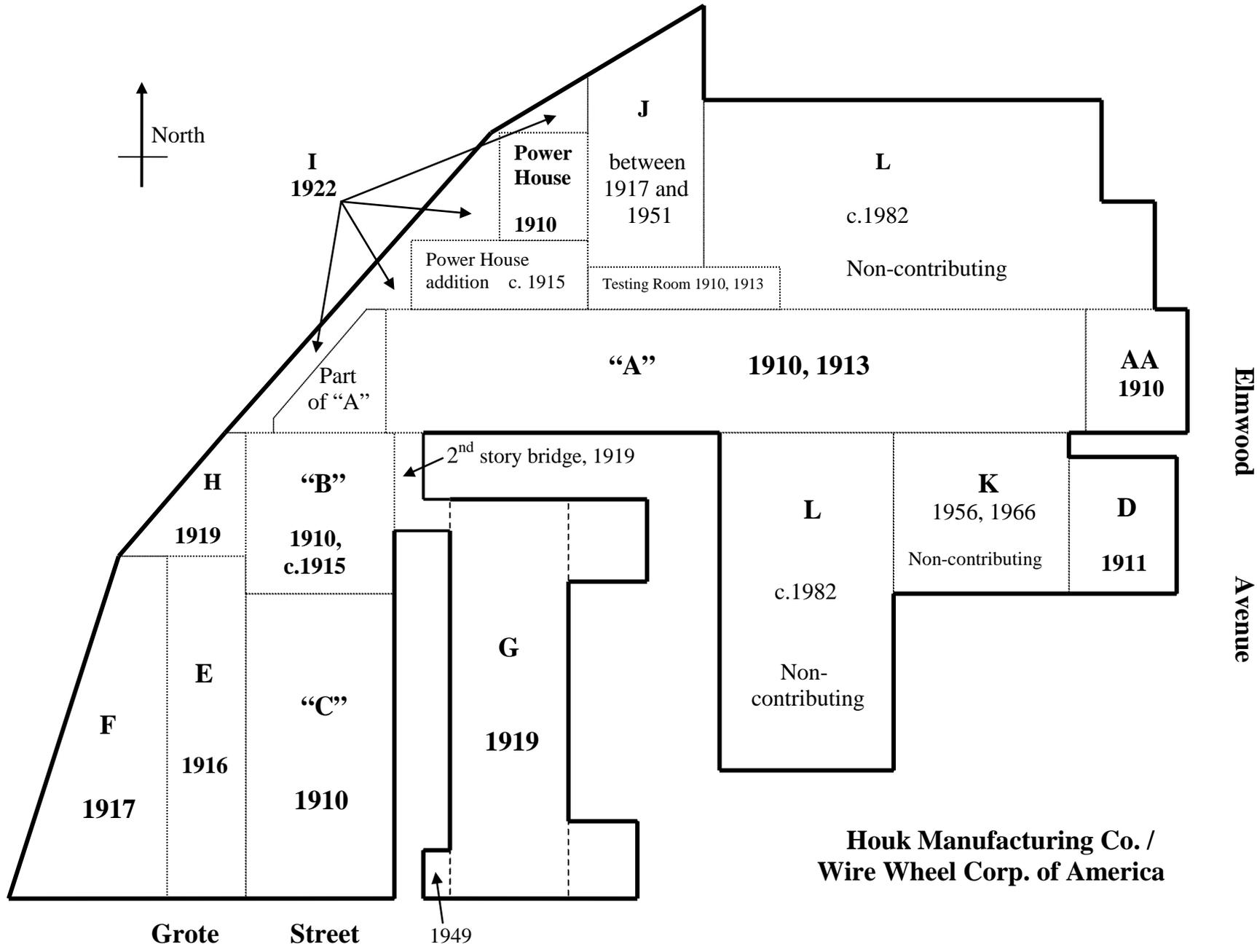
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Sanborn Map, 1916, updated to 1951





Ridgewood  
CUSTOM BPC CABINETRY

**FOR SALE**  
852-7500  
PRICED TO SELL  
BROKERAGE  
CASH OFFER

**FOR SALE**  
852-7500  
PRICED TO SELL  
BROKERAGE  
CASH OFFER





Hadley Exhibits Inc  
1700

1700

Hadley Exhibits Inc  
1700  
HUMAN SERVICES  
FOR DEVELOPMENT











ABSOLUTELY  
NO  
SMOKING





BUFFALO  
FILTER 6

BUFFALO  
FILTER 3

SPORTSERVICE  
13

H295  
HADLEY ECKHART INC.  
1700 ELMWOOD AVE.  
BUFFALO NY 14207

ALWAYS UP ALWAYS  
BAILLIE LUMBER 104

er 9

1

HE 701

HE742

HE 108

E21

E22

E12

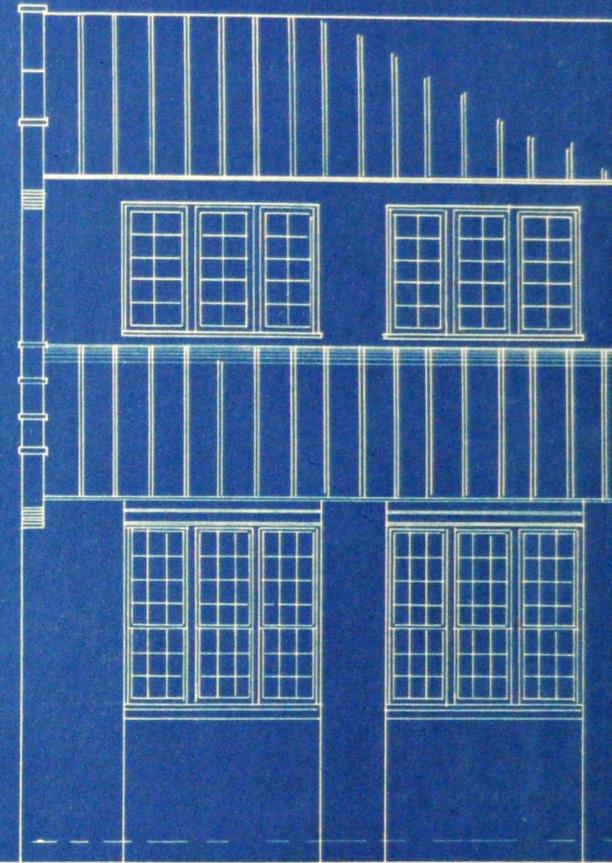
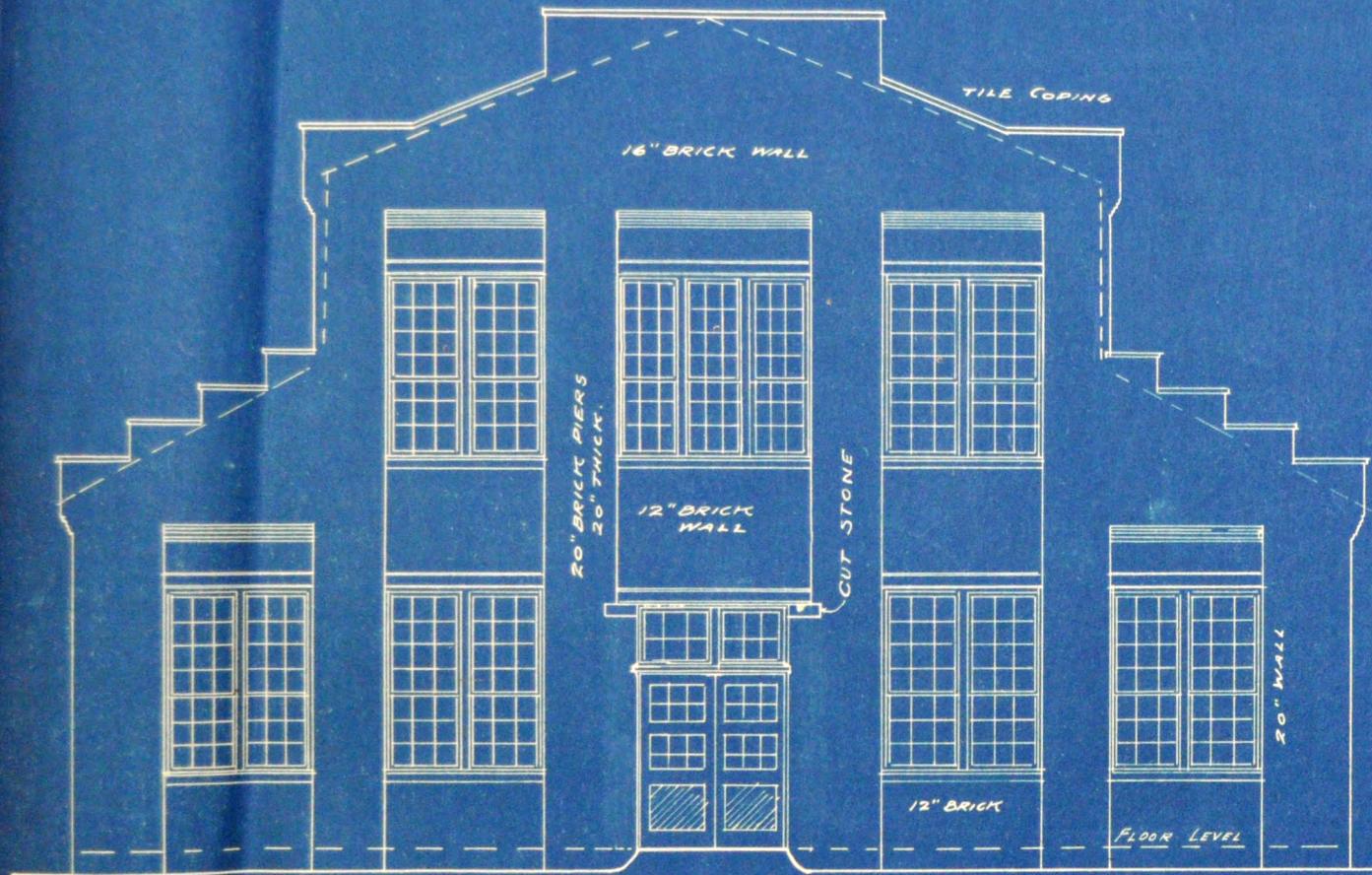
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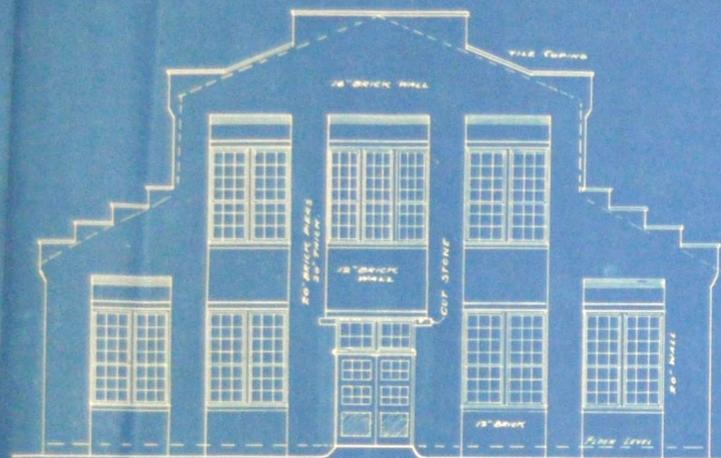




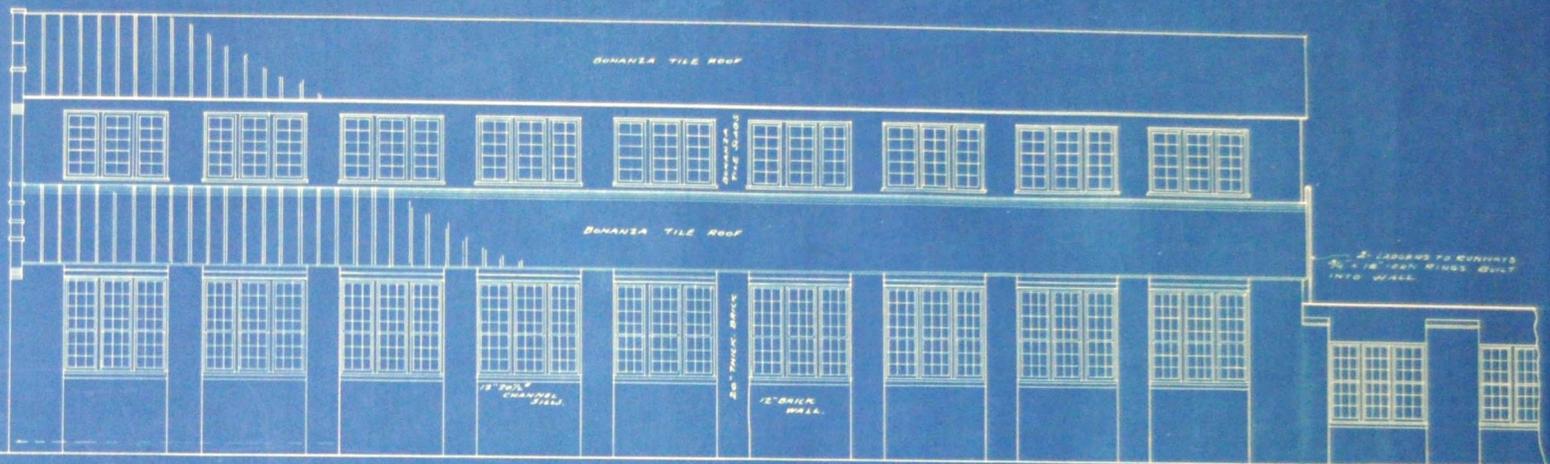




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· SOUTH · ELEVATION ·

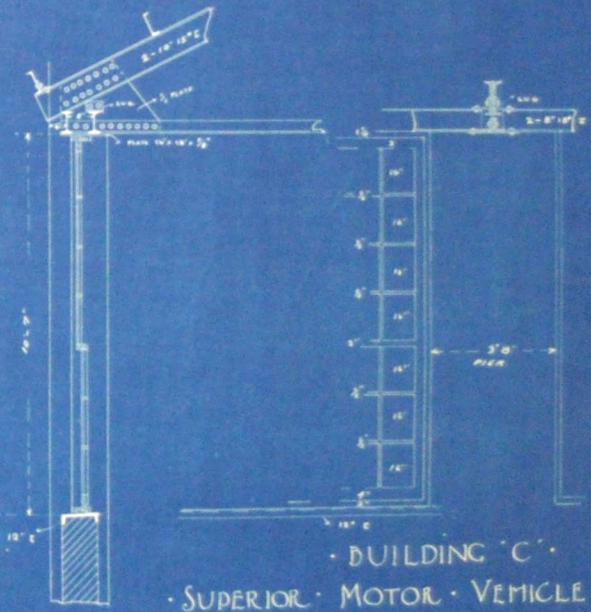
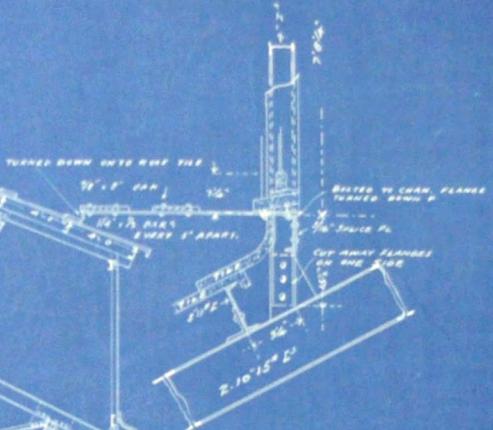
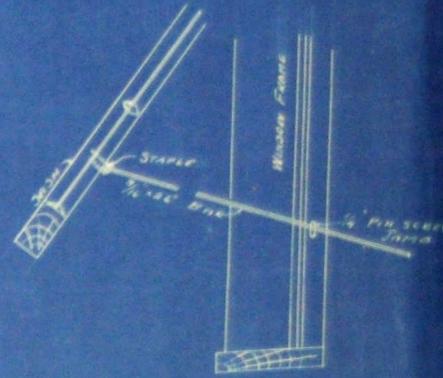
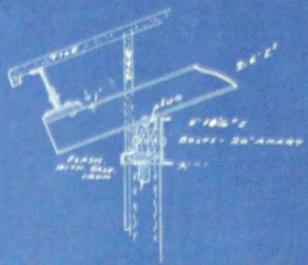
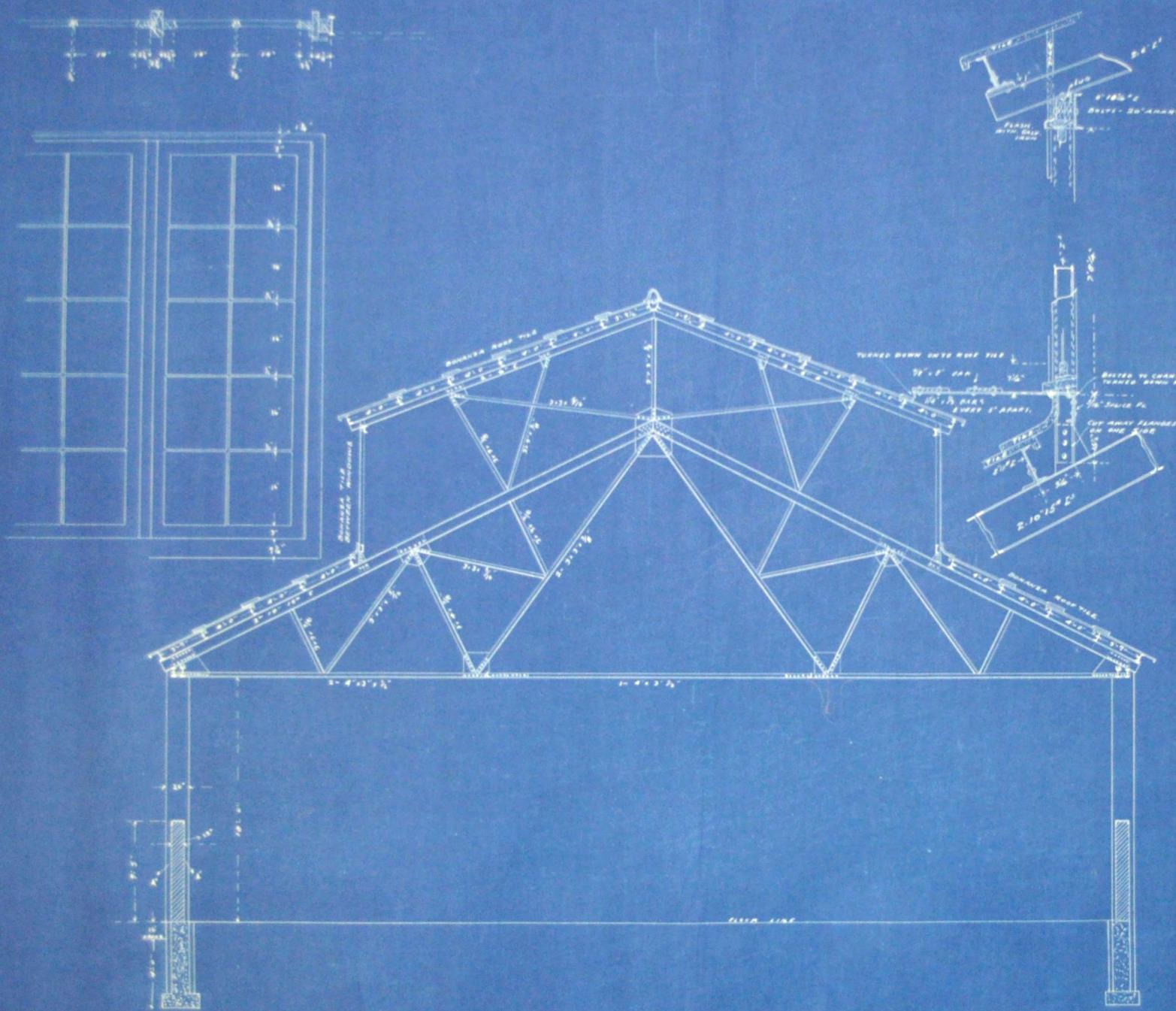


· EAST · ELEVATION ·

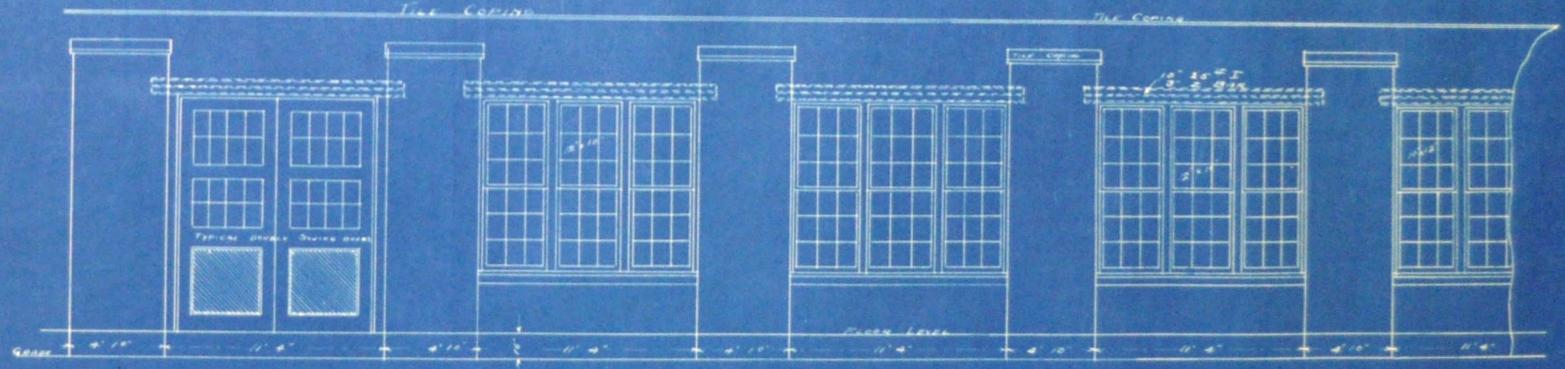
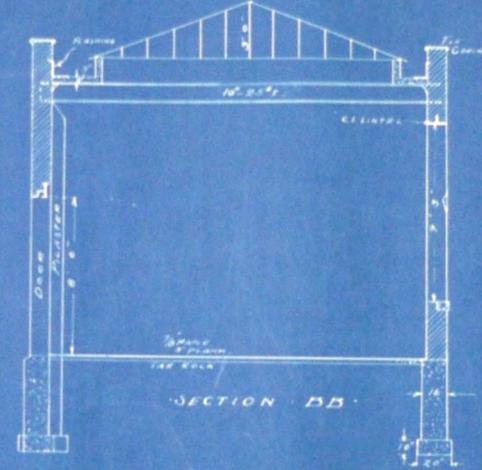
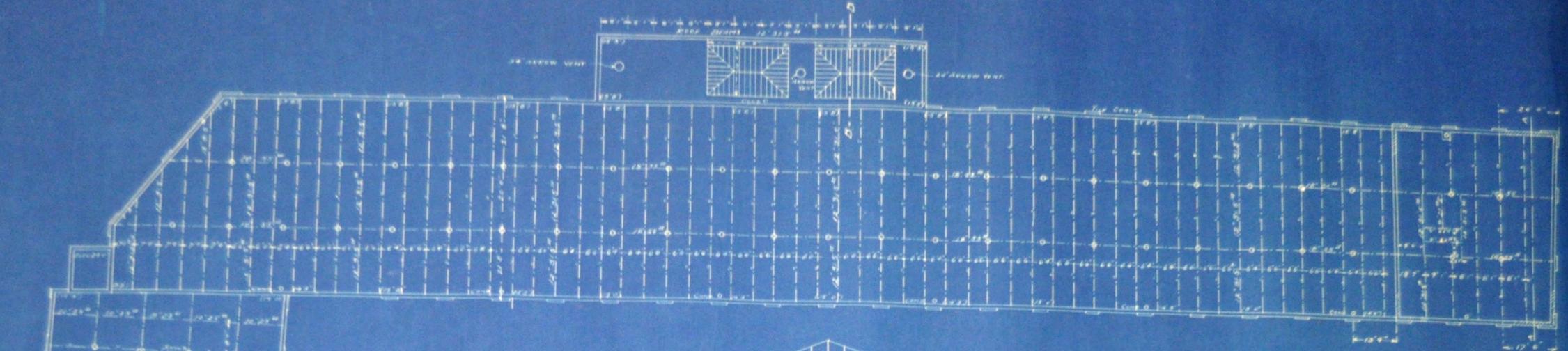
· BUILDING 'C' ·  
 · SUPERIOR · MOTOR · VEHICLE · COMPANY ·  
 ELMWOOD AVENUE & GROVE ST. BUFFALO, N.Y.

M. J. REIDPATH & SON, ARCHTS.  
 30 BUILDERS EXCH. BUILDING, N.Y.

668789  
 SHEET # 10  
 MARCH 24, 1910.



• BUILDING 'C' •  
 • SUPERIOR • MOTOR • VEHICLE • COMPANY •  
 ELMWOOD AVENUE & GROVE ST. DUFFALO, N.Y.



TYPICAL OF SIDE ELEVATION

SUPERIOR MOTOR VEHICLE CO.  
 ELMWOOD AVE. & GROVE ST. BUFFALO, N. Y.

R. J. REIDPATH & SON  
 30 BUILDERS EXCH. BUFFALO, N. Y.

JOB # 313  
 JUN 27 '10  
 MARCH 13, 1910.



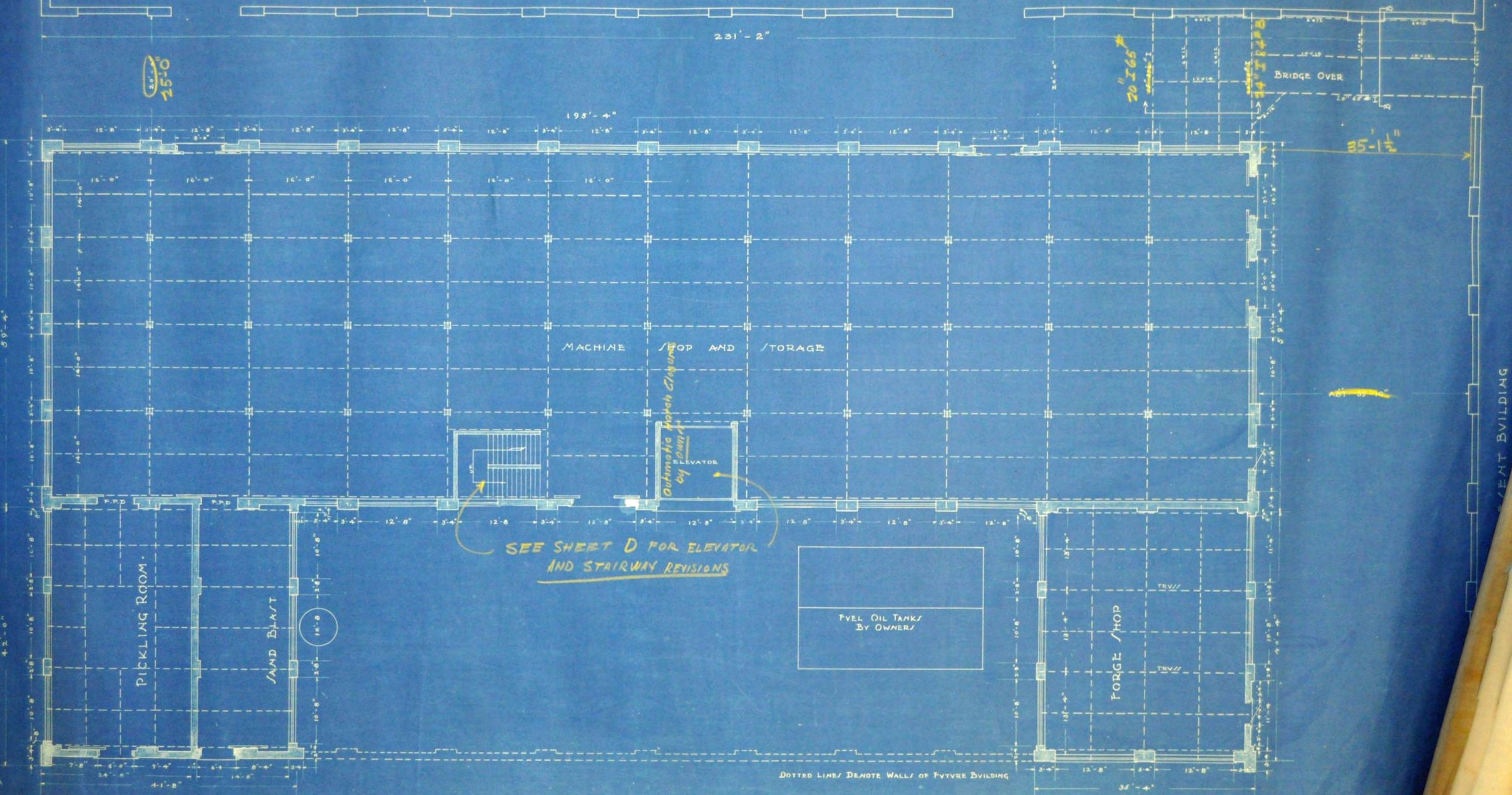
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SECTION SIDE WALLS

REVISED JULY 1919

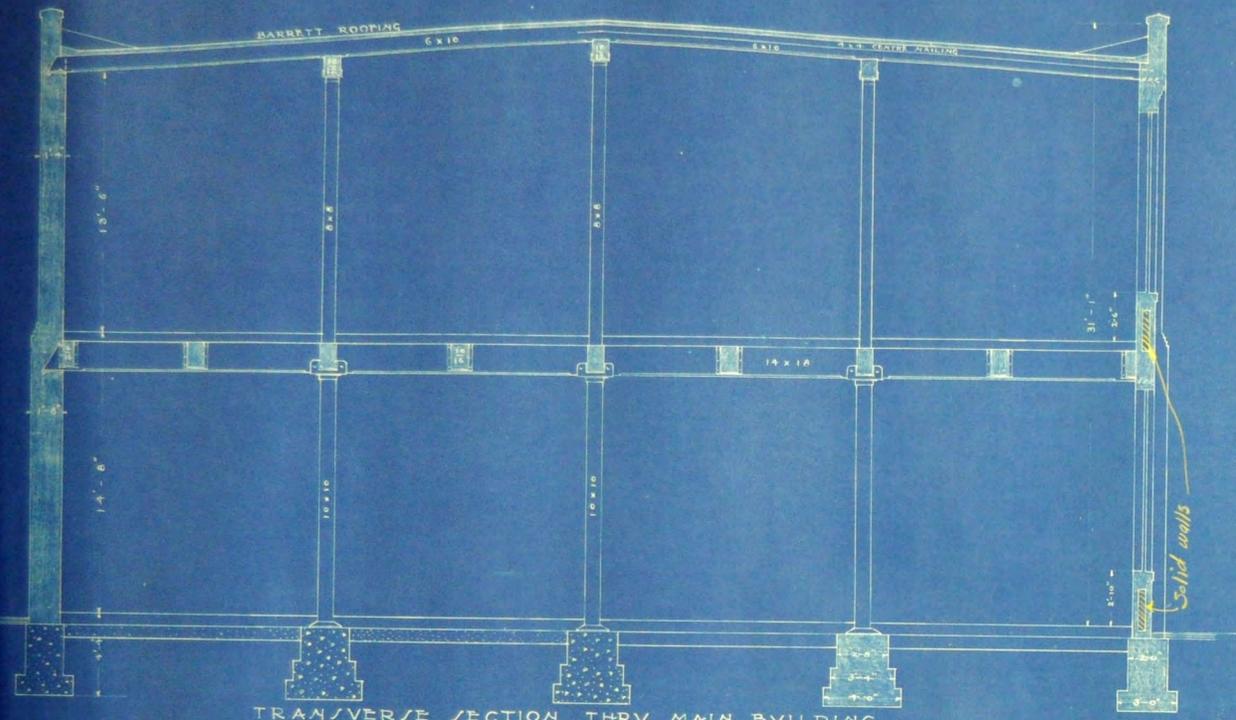
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BUFFALO, N.Y.		JUNE
COMMISSION NUMBER 213	FACTORY BUILDING	
SCALE 1/8 INCH = 1 FOOT	E. H. WATERBURY ARCHITECT	
TORRINGTON CONN.		

PRESENT BUILDING



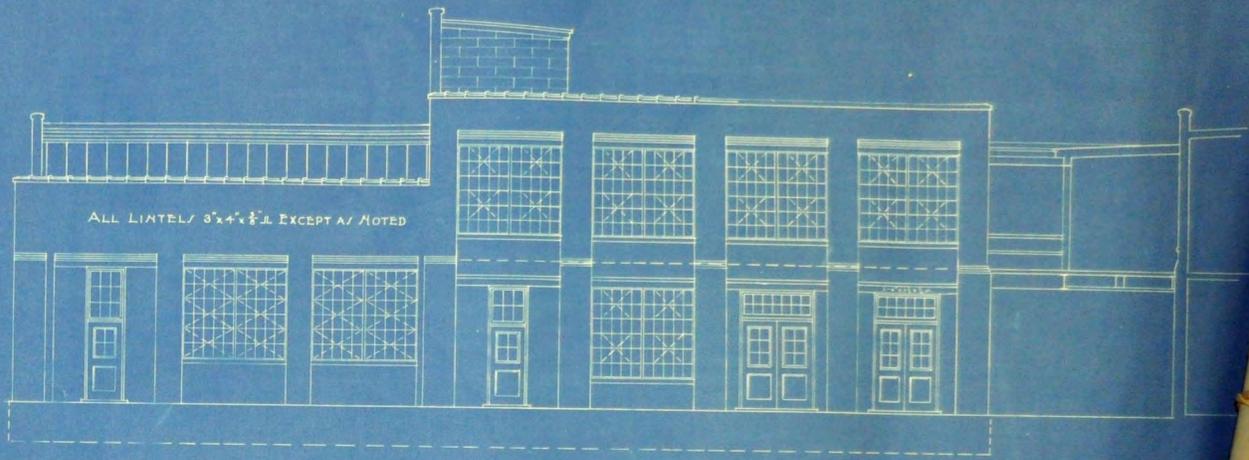
FIRST FLOOR PLAN

REVISED JULY 1919	WIRE WHEEL CORPORATION OF AMERICA		
	COMMISSION NUMBER 213	BUFFALO N.Y.	SHEET NUMBER 4
	SCALE 1/4" = 1 FOOT	FACTORY BUILDING	
	E. H. WATERBURY ARCHITECT		TORRINGTON CONN.

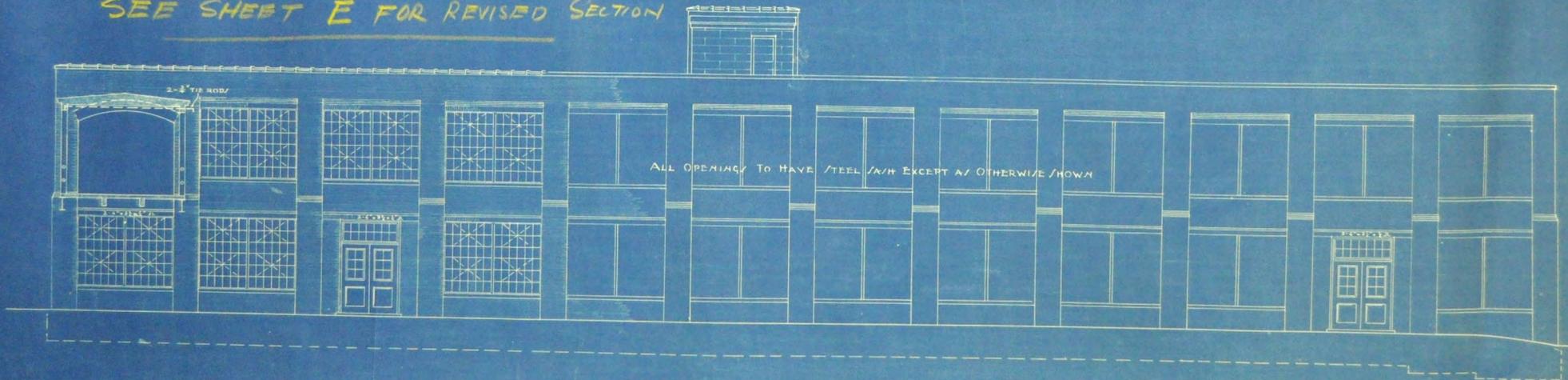


TRANSVERSE SECTION THRU MAIN BUILDING

SEE SHEET E FOR REVISED SECTION

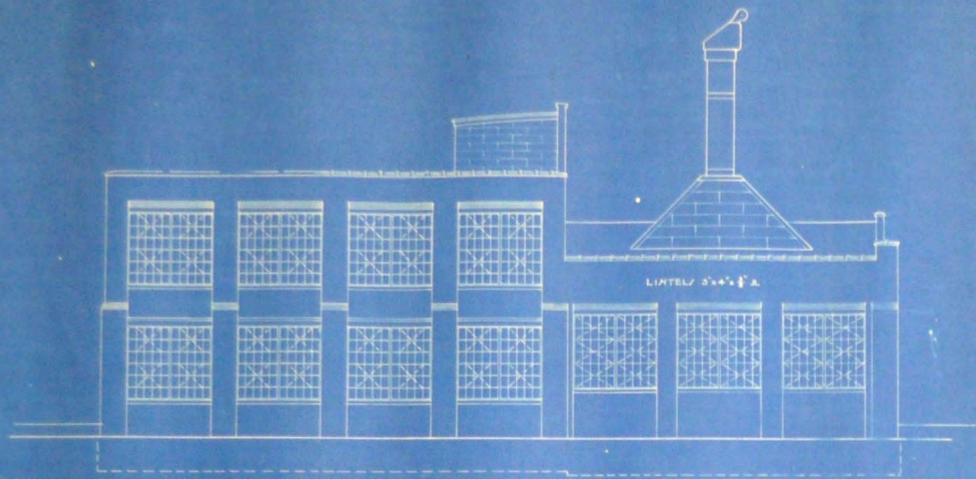


NORTH ELEVATION

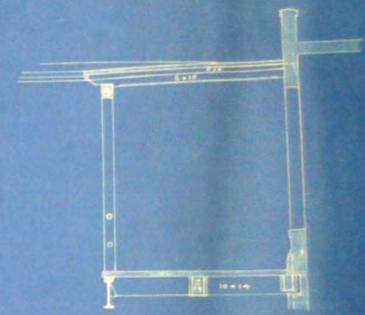
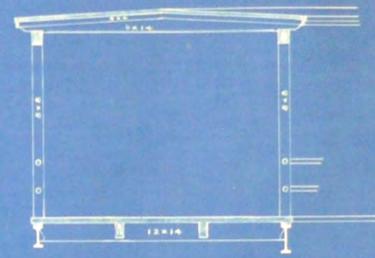
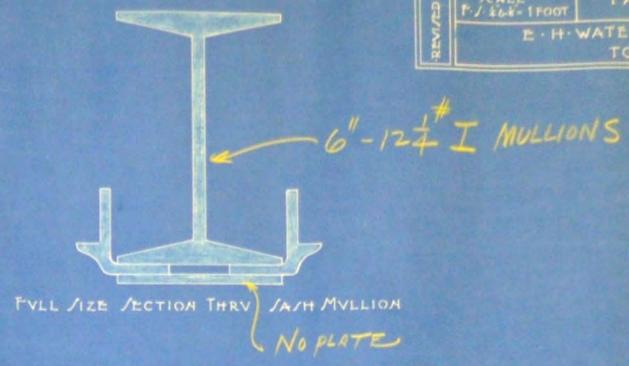


WEST ELEVATION

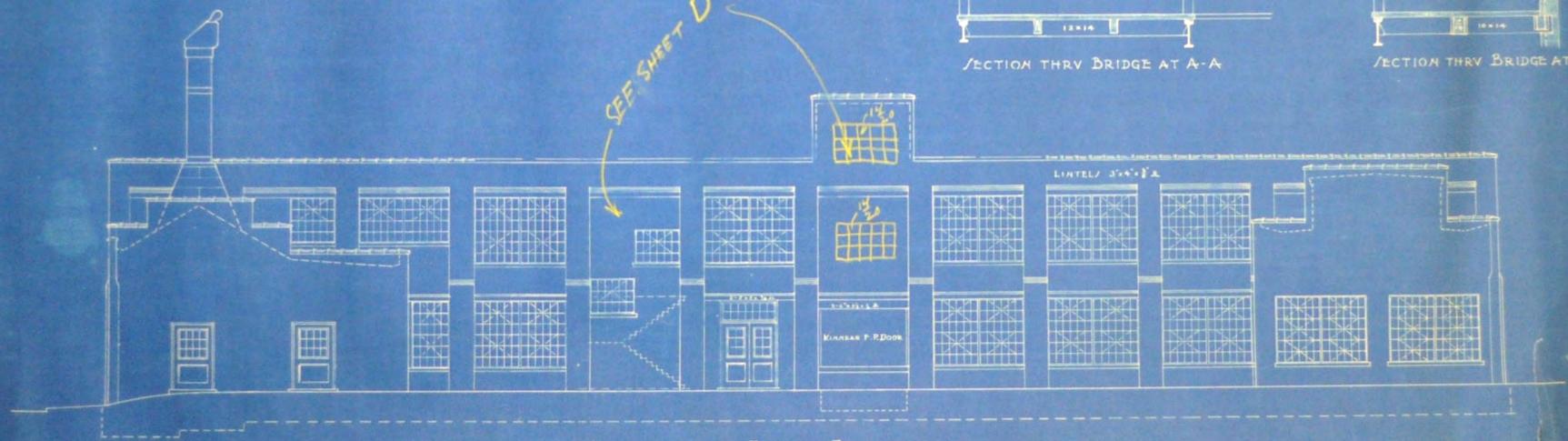
REVISED JULY 1918  
 WIRE WHEEL CORPORATION OF A  
 BUFFALO, N.Y.  
 COMMISSION NUMBER 213  
 FACTORY BUILDING/  
 SCALE  
 F. / 1/4" = 1 FOOT  
 E. H. WATERBURY ARCHT  
 TORRINGTON CONN



SOUTH ELEVATION



SEE SHEET D



EAST ELEVATION

· WIRE WHEEL CORPORATION OF AMERICA ·

COMMISSION  
NUMBER 212

· BUFFALO, N.Y. ·

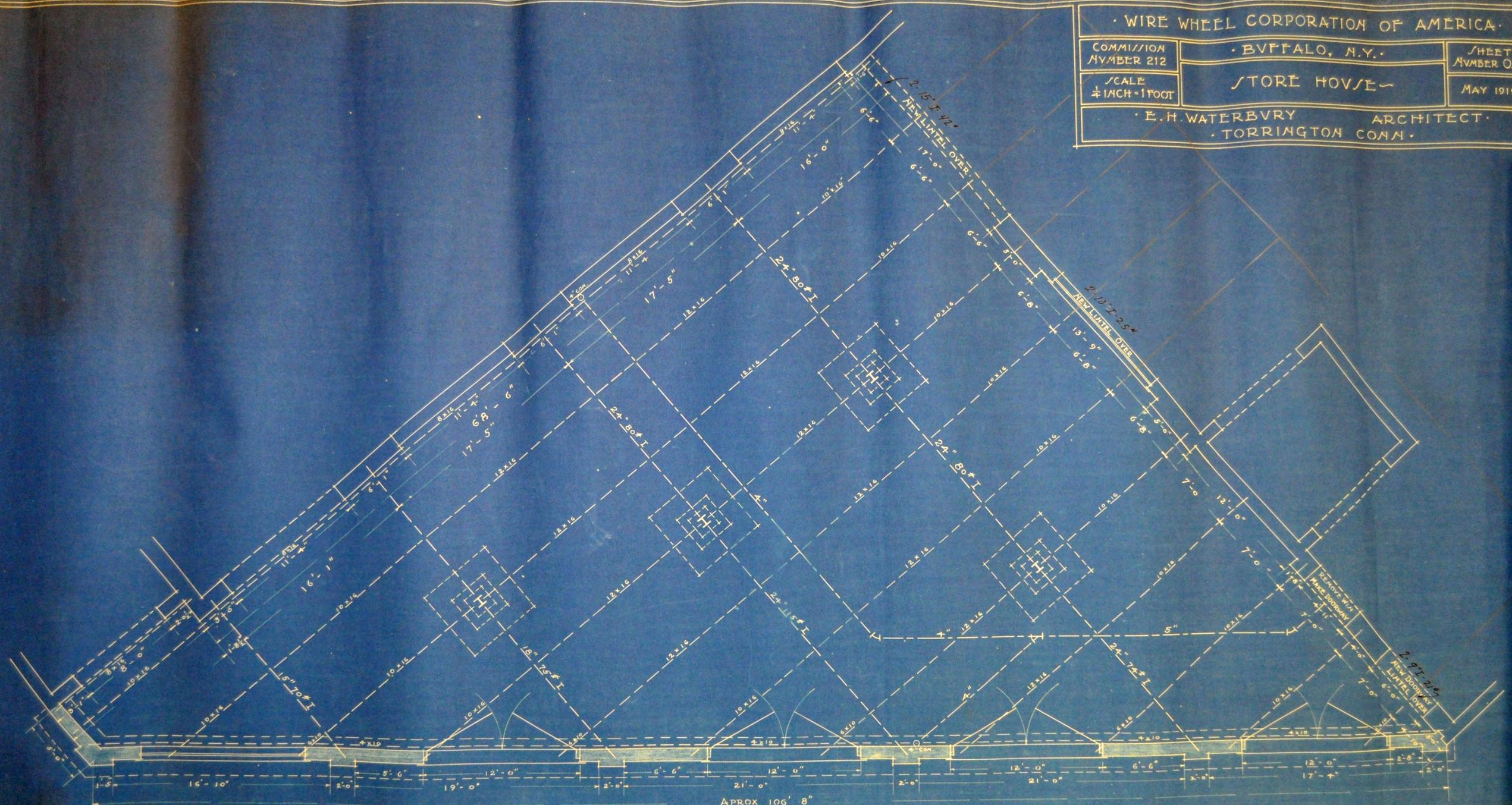
SHEET  
NUMBER 01

SCALE  
1/4" INCH = 1 FOOT

STORE HOUSE -

MAY 1919

· E. H. WATERBURY ARCHITECT ·  
· TORRINGTON CONN. ·



APROX 106' 8"

· FIRST FLOOR PLAN ·

· WIRE WHEEL CORPORATION OF AMERICA ·

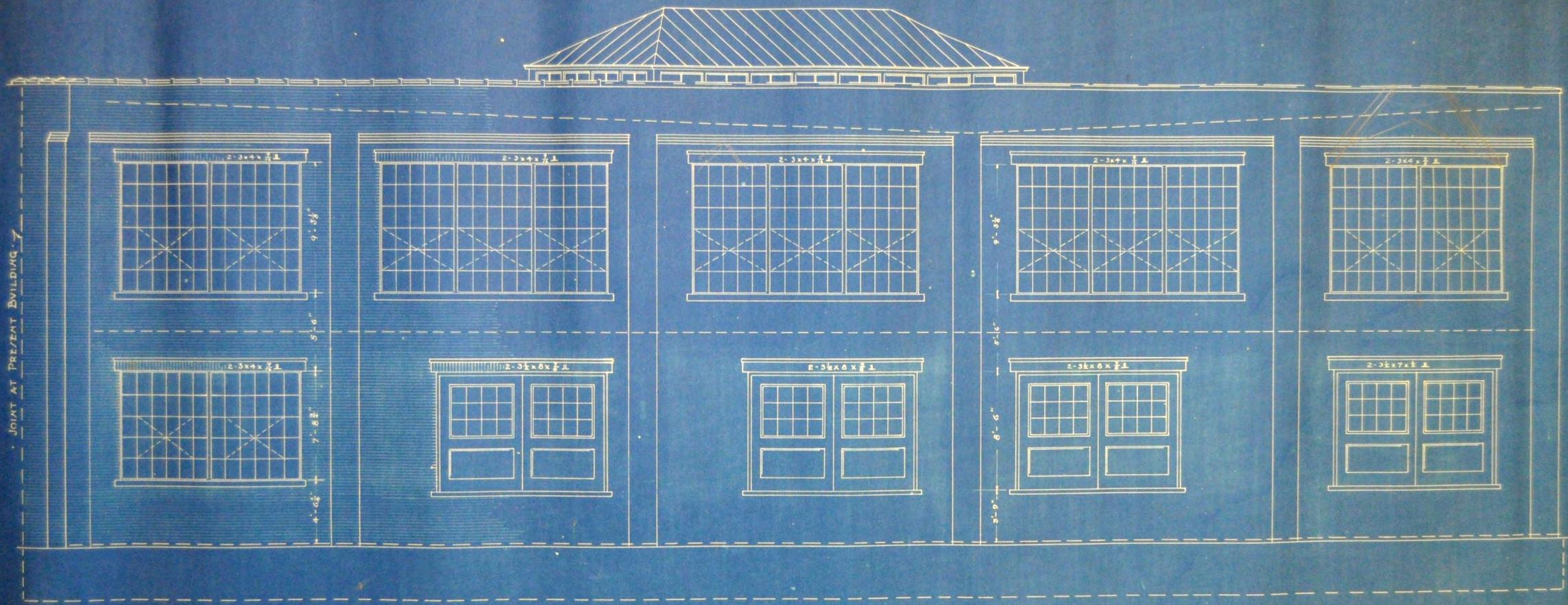
COMMISSION  
NUMBER 212

· BUFFALO, N.Y. ·

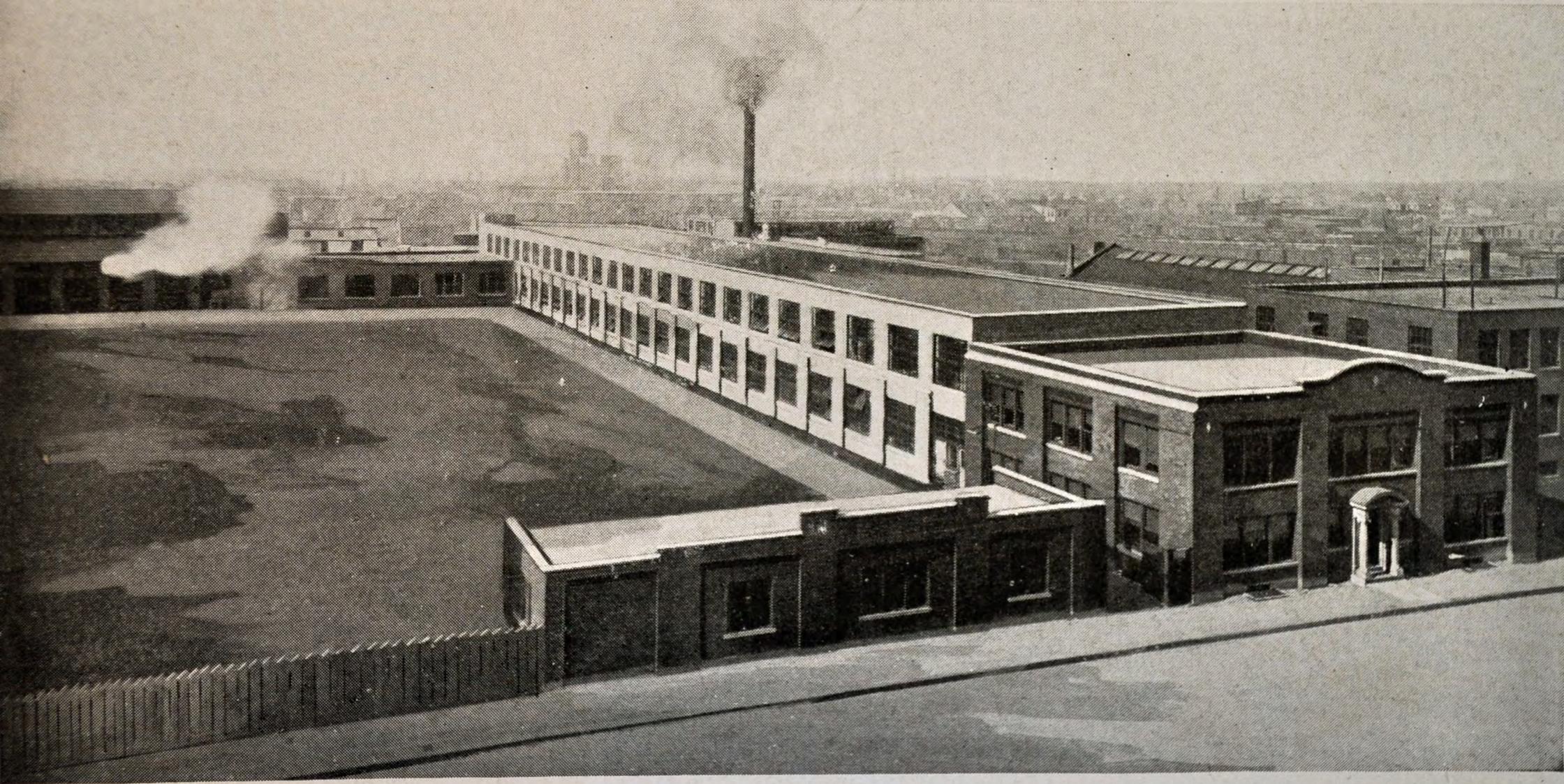
SCALE  
1/4" INCH = 1 FOOT

STORE HOUSE

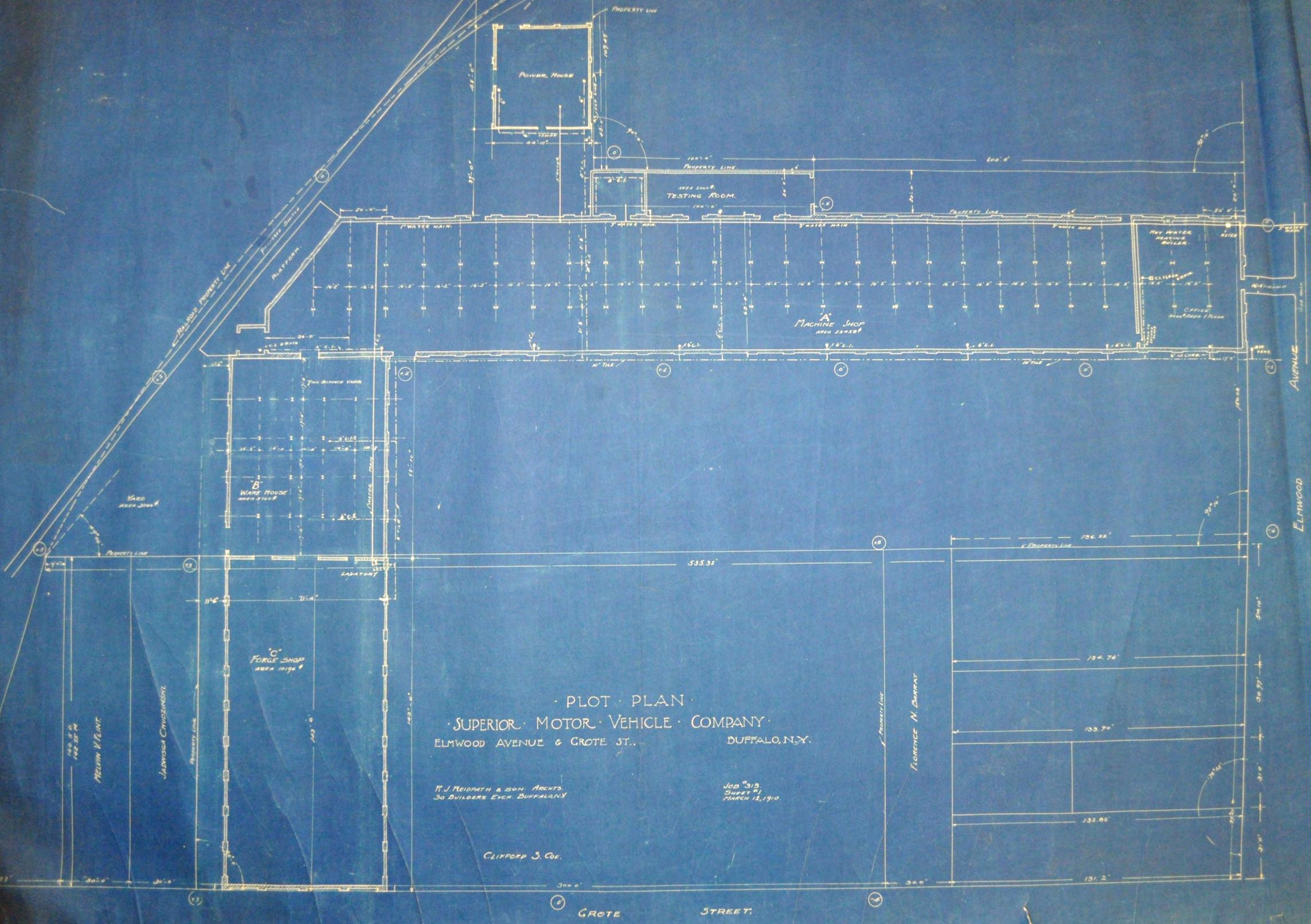
· E. H. WATERBURY ARCHITECT ·  
· TORRINGTON CONN. ·



· ELEVATION ·



PLANT OF THE HOUCK MANUFACTURING COMPANY, INC.  
Manufacturers of Automobile Wire Wheels, Drop Forgings, and Axles



· PLOT · PLAN ·  
 · SUPERIOR · MOTOR · VEHICLE · COMPANY ·  
 ELMWOOD AVENUE & GROTE ST., DUFFALO, N.Y.

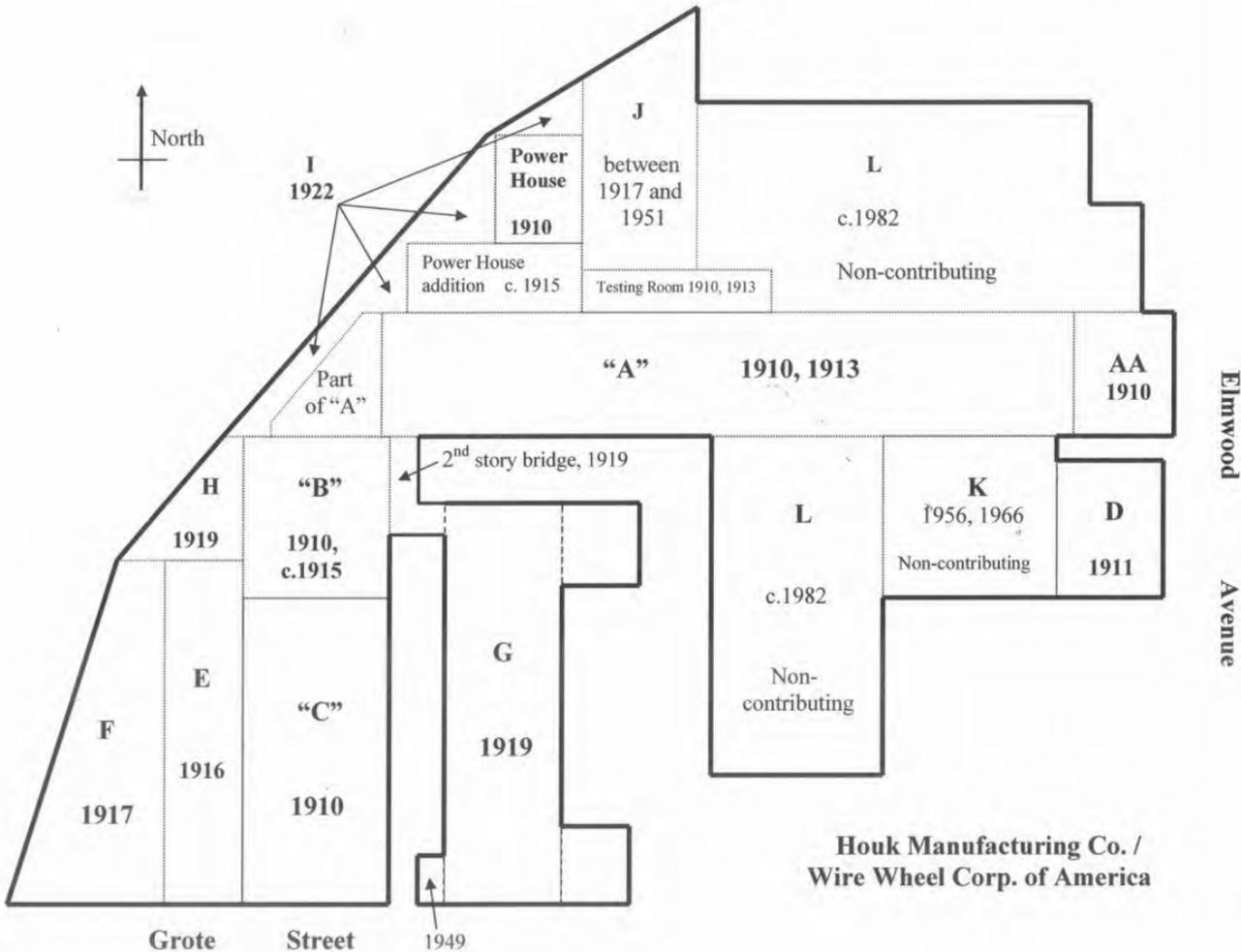
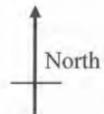
H. J. REIDPATH & SON, ARCHTS.  
 30 BUILDERS EXCH. DUFFALO, N.Y.

JOB # 313,  
 SHEET # 1,  
 MARCH 12, 1910

CLIFFORD S. COE.

Florence N. Durran

GROTE STREET.



**Houk Manufacturing Co. /  
Wire Wheel Corp. of America**