

1084

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 any 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 NORMAN FILM STUDIOS

other names/site number Eagle Film Studios FMSF#DU11509

2. Location

street & number 6337 Arlington Road N/A not for publication

city or town Jacksonville vicinity

state Florida code FL county Duval code 031 zip code 32211

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 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.)

Robert F. Boudous 10/24/14
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, Bureau of 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 See continuation sheet.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain) _____

Signature of the Keeper
Jim Stewart

Date of Action
12:29:2014

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- buildings
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include any previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
4	1	buildings
0	0	sites
1	0	structures
0	0	objects
5	1	total

Name of related multiple property listings

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

"N/A"

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

INDUSTRY: manufacturing facility

RECREATION/CULTURE: theater

EDUCATION: school

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION/CULTURE: museum

RELIGION: religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: Frame Vernacular

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK, pier and continuous

walls WOOD

roof various;composition shingle, metal

other

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.)

- A** Property is 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.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or 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 the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- 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

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):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 36) 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 Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

INDUSTRY: Entertainment

ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black

Period of Significance

1915-1917

1922-1952

Significant Dates

1915

Significant Person

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

BUILDER: Eagle Film Corporation

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of Repository

Norman Film Studios
Name of Property

Duval Co., FL
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.82

UTM References

(Place additional references on a continuation sheet.)

1	1	7	9	0	8	2	9	0	3	5	4	6	5	8	7
	Zone		Easting						Northing						
2															

3															
	Zone		Easting						Northing						
4															

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title City of Jacksonville/Historic Preservation Staff; State Historic Preservation Office/National Register staff

organization City of Jacksonville; Bureau of Historic Preservation (main contact) date October 2014

street & number 500 South Bronough Street telephone 850-245-6333

city or town Tallahassee state FL zip code 32399-0250

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name City of Jacksonville/City Real Estate Division; (Circle of Faith Ministries owns the adjacent lot/Bldg. #5)

street & number 214 N Hogan Street, 10th Floor telephone

city or town Jacksonville state Florida zip code 32202

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and amend listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7 Page 1

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

SUMMARY

The Norman Film Studios, located at 6337 Arlington Road, is a complex of five Frame Vernacular buildings historically associated with the operation of the Norman Film Manufacturing Company. Owned and operated by Richard E. Norman, this complex served to stage and produce several nationally-recognized 'race films' during the 1920s. Four out of the five original buildings contribute to the district. It is one of the best preserved studio complexes from the silent film era in the country. The property consists of a production building, generator building, small cottage for visiting actors, and a prop shed. The City of Jacksonville acquired the property in 2002. The fifth building, designed for staging sets, is currently owned by a church.

SETTING

The Norman Film Studios is located in the Arlington community of Jacksonville, Florida. Jacksonville is located in northeast Florida near the mouth of the St. Johns River in an area known as the First Coast. The city has an unusual arrangement in that all of Duval County outside of the beaches communities and Baldwin were formally incorporated into the city limits of Jacksonville. The Arlington community is located along the south side of the St. Johns River near where it meets the Trout River. The surrounding area is a mixture of commercial, office, institutional and recreational uses. The main building of the complex fronts Arlington Road which has over the years widened to include much of the property's front right of way.

DESCRIPTION

The Norman Film Studios consists of five buildings, one of which (Building 5) is noncontributing due to non-historic alterations. All five buildings are non-ornamental frame vernacular buildings with hipped roofs and brick pier foundations. The complex was constructed to handle all aspects of film production and each building served a specific purpose in achieving this objective.

Building One: Exterior

Building One (Photo 1), which predates the rest of complex and was originally built as a cigar factory in 1913, served as the headquarters for both the Eagle Film City and Norman Studios. This building fronts Arlington Road and is two stories in height with a hipped roof, overhanging eaves, and exposed rafters. The building is set on a brick pier foundation with wood latticework infill. A small brick chimney pierces the west slope of the roof.

On the main (south) facade, a centrally-placed wooden double door entrance opens into a small entry porch covered by a shed roof. Square wood posts support the single story flat roof extension with exposed rafter detail similar in style to the main roof. Brick and concrete steps lead up to the porch entry. The wood double doors are partially glazed with one-light glass panels and are topped by a one-light transom window. On the main facade

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7 Page 2

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

are thirteen 6/6 double hung sash windows, with six on the first story and seven on the second, all symmetrically arranged. Two large “Norman Laboratories” signs consistent in appearance to the original signs have been placed just above the roofline on the main and east elevations.

Building One: Interior

The layout of the 1st and 2nd floors reflect a space dedicated to film processing, film editing, and film storage. On the first floor (Figure 1), the main entrance directly opens into a lobby and office area, and provides access to a stairwell leading to storage, and the west editing room. A second, smaller editing room is located east of the office and opens into a small corridor that provides access to the film transfer room and two separate developing rooms on opposite sides. The smaller of the two developing rooms is centrally located, and abuts the brick vault and chimney to the west. From here the developed films were moved into the editing rooms, located adjacent to the front entry. The largest rooms on this floor are along the east and north (rear) elevations, and were dedicated to film processing. The east developing room spans almost the entire length of the façade, except for a small room in the southeast corner reserved for still photo development. Here, the film company produced publicity photographs. The other large room, for drying films, abuts the east developing room and spans the rear (north) façade, connecting to north-south hallway along the west elevation which passes the film vault and connects to the front editing room. Unlike the rest of the building, the vault’s walls were made of brick and as a result, it is one of the best-preserved original interior elements of the building. It retains the original metal vault door made by the Franz Safe and Lock Company from Jacksonville, Florida.

The second floor of the building accommodated two separate functions: one, as a residence for the family and visiting guests, and secondly, as a film preview space (Figure 2). In the late 1930s, the second floor also held classes for his wife’s dance studio before Richard E. Norman constructed a specific space for the her students in Building Five. The second floor is accessed via a stairwell placed near the southwest corner. From here, a second bedroom, living room, kitchen, and dining room are arranged along the west elevation. The kitchen, which is located on the northwest corner of the building, served both the private needs of the Norman family and also served as a commissary for the studio while films were in production. The eastern portion of the building is divided into three distinct spaces, all accessed from the stairwell hall. The master bedroom and adjoining bathroom are along the north elevation, with a centrally-located film preview room and adjoining projection room in the middle, and equipment storage and repair rooms along the south elevation. All completed films were screened prior to release in the preview room.

The first and second floor interior spaces lack integrity of original materials and workmanship. Some of the original floor boards remain through both levels; however, interior wall treatments are mostly removed to make structural repairs. Wall partitions and framing still exist to indicate the original circulation of the space, and once restoration work is complete, original features will be returned following the Secretary of the Interiors Standards.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7 Page 3

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

As the general layout of the rooms and corridors is still visible, the building retains enough integrity to reflect its historic usage as a film production studio.

Building Two: Exterior and Interior

Building Two (Photo 2) is an unadorned wood frame building designed to house the electric generator that powered the studio. Like the main building, this building has 6/6 double hung sash windows on all four elevations as well as a hipped roof, overhanging eaves, and exposed rafters. The building is set on a brick pier foundation with wood latticework infill. The main entrance has a wood paneled door topped by a one-light transom window. The interior of this building is a single open space with open rafters (Photo 3). The building still houses the original electrical equipment, including the generator and the control switch (Photos 4-5).

Building Three: Exterior and Interior

Building Three (Photo 6), like the rest of the complex, is a wood frame building set on a brick pier foundation with a hipped roof, with overhanging eaves and exposed rafters. It historically served as the dressing room and prop house for the studio. The fenestration of this building is markedly different from the other buildings. The windows are paired 6-light sliding windows, arranged to form a continuous band of windows around the perimeter. The main entrance, located off-center on the south elevation, is a simple wood paneled door topped with a one-light transom window. There is also a rear entrance on the north elevation similar in design. The interior reflects a single open space with exposed rafters, wood flooring, and wood framed walls (Photo 7).

Building Four: Exterior and Interior

Building Four (Photo 8) served as a garage and storage facility for the studio. It also housed a second power generator, which was used for the water tower until its removal in the 1970s. This building has a hipped roof with overhanging eaves and exposed rafters. Fenestration consists of 6/6 double hung sash windows along all four elevations, similar in appearance to the other buildings found on the complex. The building is set on a continuous brick foundation. The main facade of the building features a large bay door flanked by two 6/6 double hung sash windows, and set at the corners, two wood paneled doors topped by one-light transoms. The interior is a single open space with exposed beams, wood floors, and unfinished wood walls (Photo 9). Many framing members have been replaced or are supported by additional wood beams. The generator is still extant (Photo 10).

Recent Restoration Efforts

In 2002, the City of Jacksonville acquired four out of the five buildings within the former Norman Studios complex. These buildings were long-neglected and needed structural repairs that necessitated exterior renovation and replacement of missing historic elements. Exterior work was completed in 2007, and interior renovations are

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7 Page 4

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

on-going. Although the materials and workmanship from the original materials is lost on most of the buildings, they still retain integrity of location, design, setting, feeling, and association to convey their use as the facilities for a working film production complex. Key features, including the film vault, projection equipment, generators, and electrical components, are still intact. These features, combined with the restoration work based on archival images, help re-establish the former function and visual appearance of the Norman Film Studios complex.

Alterations to the Complex

Two prominent original features of the studio complex, the outdoor pool and the water tower, are no longer visible. The water tower, which was located adjacent to Building Four, has been demolished but the foundations are still visible. The pool, located roughly in the stretch of land between Building Five and Arlington Road, was an in-ground pool that was filled in the 1970s by the owner at that time. Given that the pool structure is still extant underground, and bears importance to the site as the primary filming location for water scenes, it is considered a contributing structure to the district.

Non-Contributing

Building Five

Building Five (Photos 11-13) served as the residence for visiting actors and actresses and an indoor studio and later as the dance studio for the Gloria Norman School of Dance. It is owned by the Circle of Faith Ministries and has been repurposed into a church. On the rear elevation, the building once had windows that allowed for natural sunlight to come in during production. These features may still exist, but are now concealed under siding.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 1

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

SUMMARY

The Norman Film Studios is being proposed for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A at the state level in the areas of Entertainment and Recreation, and Ethnic Heritage: Black. The studio complex, originally developed in 1915 by the Eagle Film Company on the site of a cigar factory, served as the headquarters of the Norman Film Manufacturing Company from 1922 to 1928. At its height, the Norman Film Manufacturing Company was one of the most prominent independent makers of race films in the country, with a national distribution network. "Race films" was a colloquial term to describe movies specifically made for African American audiences. Some of the more notable Norman films shot at the studio include Regeneration, A Debtor to the Law, and The Flying Ace. The studio created a stir in the early 1920s by hiring the legendary rodeo performer Bill Pickett to star in two all-black feature length westerns, which were filmed in Oklahoma. The Norman Film Studios is the last complex from the silent film era located in Jacksonville and is one of the few preserved race film studios in the country.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

Arlington Community

One of the earliest settlements in Arlington was Strawberry Mills, located where Arlington Road now crosses Strawberry or Mill Creek. Francis Richard, who received a land grant in 1817 for 16,000 acres north of the Pottsburg Creek, developed lumber and grist mills utilizing the abundant local water sources. Several other plantations devoted to the raising of cotton, sugar cane, and corn dotted the riverfront, but it was not until after the Civil War that the Arlington area became more widely populated. Religious colonies with membership largely from New Jersey were established at Clifton in the 1870's and Egleston Heights in the 1880's. The other nearby villages of Chaseville, Gilmore, and Floral Bluff began to develop at that time, all of which were gradually absorbed into the Arlington community.¹

In the mid-1880s, there was extensive orange cultivation taking place in Arlington, and developed into the principle enterprise for the area. The village of Gilmore had a large orange packinghouse located along the river to load onto boats coming to and from Jacksonville. Most of the groves were largely wiped out in 1895 by a severe freeze accompanied by two inches of snow. Afterwards, the citrus industry moved farther south.²

In 1913, Arlington received new impetus for growth when the Alderman Realty Company purchased 1,100 acres of the old Francis Richard Grant and subdivided it for home sites. The company also established a ferry service

¹ Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission. Eagle Film City (Norman Film Studios) Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission Designation Application for Landmark or Landmark Site, March 26, 2014, 6.

² Ibid.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 2

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

between Arlington and downtown Jacksonville with landings respectively at St. Johns Street (now Arlington Road) and East Beaver Street. The citizens of the greater Arlington area established a viable community complete with schools, a library, fire department, community club, and numerous churches. The first shopping center was built at the foot of Arlington Road in 1914. There were two stores, a post office, and the ferry landing. Paul Reid built the first filling station in 1920 at the crossroads of Arlington and Chaseville (University Boulevard). Expansive growth in Arlington came slowly until the Mathews Bridge opened in 1953, providing a direct connection between the Arlington community and downtown Jacksonville. From 1959 to 1970, the Arlington area was the fastest growing part of Duval County. It officially became part of the city of Jacksonville in 1968, when the whole county outside the beaches communities and Baldwin voted for incorporation into the city.³

Race Films as a Genre

The first black film company was formed by William Foster from Chicago from 1909 to 1913. Foster was the first to produce all black cast film shorts. He successfully completed two films: The Pullman Porter (1910) and The Railroad Porter (1912). Foster's difficulties with the distribution of his films were cited as the cause for the final curtain on his film making career and the end of his business. Ironically, the movie credited as being the catalyst for the resurgence of black film making in America was the notoriously disturbing 1915 film produced by D. W. Griffith "Birth of a Nation". White actors in "black face" depicted blacks during the Reconstruction Era in an extremely unflattering manner as caricatures of greed and buffoonery. "Actually titled The Clansman for its first month of release, the film provides a highly subjective history of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Studied today as a masterpiece of political propaganda, Birth of a Nation caused riots in several cities and was banned in others but was seen by millions".⁴

To counteract this offensive and inaccurate depiction of black life, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, started by Noble Johnson produced one of the first positive image feature films. "Race films", as they were called, were films produced with all black casts especially for black audiences that were positive manifestations of character. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company was the first of these companies and it started on May 24, 1916. Noble Johnson was an actor as well as the company's President. The first production by Lincoln was The Realization of a Negro's Ambition, which was released in mid-1916. It was a two reel film and dealt with the theme of drama, love and adventure. The second of Lincoln's films was a three-reeled movie titled A Trooper of Troop K (released January, 1919), which was about the massacre of black troops in the Army's 10th Calvary with a cast of over 300 extras. Johnson had hoped to play to a wide audience with the film. The company was able to secure costumes and props from the more established Hollywood studios. Unfortunately, the film had a limited distribution and was shown at churches, schools, and the few "Colored Only" theatres. By 1920 the Lincoln Company had completed five films; two pictorial and three dramatic subjects, including a five-reel feature

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 3

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

titled A Man's Duty (released September, 1919). By Right of Birth (released October, 1921) was the company's final movie. As a six-reel drama, Johnson arranged to have the film open at the Trinity Auditorium in the Embassy Hotel at 9th Street and Grand Avenue in Los Angeles as a Hollywood premier in June, 1921. According to Johnson, the entire event was a success. Unfortunately, the commercial prospects for the film were still limited because of there were few venues for black audiences and the white audience did not materialize.⁵

In 1917, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company contacted a young black novelist about making his book, "The Homesteader," into a movie. The novelist's request to help direct the film and receive certain budget allocations was refused by the movie executives. Undaunted, the young novelist, Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) converted his publishing company into the Micheaux Film and Book Company and would become the most "prolific writer, director, and producer of race films in the history of motion pictures". Micheaux, over the course of a 30 year career, would produce more than 40 films from his Chicago-based studio in Sioux City. He is credited with producing a response to Griffith's Birth of a Nation with his film, Within Our Gates (1920). This film more accurately portrayed contemporary race relations and the prevalence of violence between the two groups. In 1948, Micheaux's last film, Betrayal, was the first African-American produced film to open in white theaters.⁶

The 1920s were the boom years for race films. Shortly after World War I, there were over 600 black theaters throughout the country. With this increased demand for race films came an influx of independent studio operators hoping to capitalize on this nascent market. While there were a number of black-owned and operated film studios in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Kansas City, the majority of studios producing race films were owned by whites. These films tended to mirror the themes of white pictures and were often beset by poor production quality and distribution problems. By the mid to late 1920s, there was a decline in the industry, as smaller studios began to close and black audiences started to turn away from the lower quality productions in favor of Hollywood features. The Great Depression and the advent of the "talkies", which brought on more expense to incorporate sound, forced the bankruptcy of many black independent film companies. The only black film company to survive the talkie era was the Micheaux Film Company.⁷

Film Industry in Jacksonville

The film industry in Florida began in Jacksonville. The first regular use of Jacksonville locations in motion picture work began with the Kalem Company, producers of A Florida Feud; Or Love In The Everglades (1908), who leased facilities in Jacksonville for the 1908-1909 winter season and returned regularly in the following years. The winter of 1908 was particularly severe in the Northeast and hampered production at a time when the primitive

⁵ Ibid., 11-12.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 4

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

studio facilities in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago were becoming inadequate. Cold weather and the continuing problem of static electricity above the "frost line" irreparably smeared film as it was exposed. The need for scenic variety with abundant sunlight, and Jacksonville serving as the leading commercial and transportation city in Florida, were factors that prompted a number of producing firms to establish studios in the city. Kalem's success further encouraged other companies to seek out Jacksonville. By 1912, the area attracted so many movie troupes that Jacksonville became known as the "World's Winter Film Capital." From 1908 to 1922, Jacksonville was home to more than thirty silent motion picture studios. Oliver Hardy, who would later go on to international fame as a comedic actor, made his film debut in Jacksonville in Outwitting Dad (1913). By 1917 however, the entire movie industry in and around the city began a rapid decline.⁸

Many factors are attributed to the demise of the industry. California outdistanced Jacksonville in superiority of production equipment and personnel. Public opinion would turn against the industry as the mob sequences and chase scenes filmed in Jacksonville's public areas got out of control and destroyed city property. Furthermore, Mayor J.E.T. Bowden, Jacksonville's major "movie booster," was voted out of office in the 1916 election, sending "a cinematic chill" over the once warm climate. Coupled by merchants price gouging and banks hesitant to lend financial support, the war taxes and coal shortages imposed by World War I also limited production.⁹

Race Film Industry in Florida

The first films with all-black casts made in Florida were from the Kalem Company in Jacksonville in 1908. The films, directed by white filmmakers such as Gene Gauntier, were hardly considered race films, however, due largely to the pro-slavery and paternalistic overtones. Gauntier opened her own production studio, Gene Gauntier Feature Players, which also made films starring all-black casts but in a similar vein to her films for Kalem. Kalem also produced a series of all-black comedy shorts, which featured degrading stereotypical portrayals of black people. Florida served as a backdrop for jungle pictures, which usually included a black cast. These films included Lost in the Jungle, which was made by the Selig Polyscope Company in 1911, and The Wizard of the Jungle produced in Tampa by the World's Best Film Company in 1913. These films, far from empowering black people, instead helped further propagate the stereotypes made famous by more well-known films such as Birth of a Nation.¹⁰

In response to the overwhelming negative black reaction to Birth of a Nation and realizing the potential movie market of black theater goers, several enterprising people went into race film production. One of the first truly ambitious race film projects made in the United States was Birth of a Race, made in Tampa in 1918. Intended to be a direct answer to Birth of a Nation, the project was funded through publicly sold stocks in a company set up

⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 392-401.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 5

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

exclusively for the production of the movie. The lack of a quality black production company and continued production delays and budget overruns proved disastrous for the endeavor. Universal Studios originally planned on producing the film but due to a lack of matching funds dropped the project. Emmett Scott, a personal secretary of Booker T. Washington, signed a conditional deal with the Advance Motion Picture Company in Chicago, who created the Birth of a Race Photoplay Corporation to fund the movie. The contract however allowed for Advance to sell the production rights of a movie to a third party not bound by the stipulations laid forth by Scott. Advance sold the production rights to the Selig Polyscope Company. After the takeover by Selig, the script was greatly altered to better fit the moods of World War I and resulted in a finished product far removed from the original idea of the movie. The film, while a disappointment, was one of the first big budget race films made in the United States.¹¹

The rise of race films coincided with the exodus of film studios leaving Florida for California. During the period of large scale decline of the moviemaking industry in Florida starting in the late 1910s, a few production studios arose in Jacksonville and other parts of Florida specializing in films with all black-casts depicting African-Americans in a positive manner. The number of abandoned studio complexes provided ample opportunity for small independent film makers to start their own studios, which included race film makers. While the precise number of race film studios operating in Florida is not known, there were over 100 studios opened nationally specializing in the genre. Among the race film studios operating at this time in Florida were the Tropical Photoplay Company in Miami, which only one feature length film in 1923 before closing. Mark Dintenfass produced several all-black short films in Jacksonville during the 1910s. It would be the Norman Film Manufacturing Company however that emerged as the most successful during this period.¹²

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

Eagle Film City

The main building for what would become Eagle Film City and later Norman Studios was actually constructed as a cigar factory in 1913 by R.K. Shaw and H.M. Lott, two tobacco growers from Quincy, Florida. Although the building was completed, the factory plan was unsuccessful. By 1915, it was made available for the Eagle Film Company.¹³

Late in 1915, The Florida Times Union produced headlines promising the suburb community of Jacksonville that an ambitious motion picture project was developing, modeled on the successful example of Universal City in California. Headlines read: "Motion Picture City for Arlington is the Aim of Eagle Film Manufacturing

¹¹ Richard Alan Nelson, "Florida and the American Motion Picture Industry," PhD. diss., Florida State University, 1980, 417-431.

¹² Ibid., 431-433.

¹³ Blair Miller, Almost Hollywood: The Forgotten Story of Jacksonville, Florida (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2013), 69.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 6

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

Company"; "Eagle Film Manufacturing Company Has Decided to Build a Big Studio in City." The completed project was not quite as grand as the proposed Universal City; nonetheless, it was large scale and according to a January 14, 1916 article in The Florida Times Union it was "one of the most modern and complete plants in the country for the production and development of pictures." Eagle Film Manufacturing and Producing Company of Chicago purchased lots at Arlington Heights from Alderman Realty Company. After closing the deal, construction quickly began under the direction of Eagle's general manager William J. Dunn and superintendent H. A. Kelly. Construction of the silent film studio was near completion just under five weeks. Some 60 men worked at assembling both indoor and outdoor stages, erecting buildings, and improving the 1.65 acre site. The former cigar factory, measuring 60 x 40 feet in diameter and 2 1/2 stories in height, was converted into an office, property room, developing and drying room, storage vault and projecting room. A large garage that accommodated twenty-five automobiles was constructed in addition to lounging pavilions, a building containing the dressing rooms and artists quarters, and directors' bungalows. Together with the wood-framed buildings and two glass and steel buildings that housed stages measuring 55 x 85 feet, Eagle City maintained a landscape with an outdoor swimming pool (used for filming ocean or river scenes), lush gardens, and rustic bridges and pergolas. In an effort to maintain self-sufficiency, the studio constructed its own electric and water plant. The January 21, 1916 issue of The Florida Times Union, reported superintendent Kelly stating that Eagle Film had spent the sum of \$48,000 since coming to the city to locate a plant and studio. Differing from many of the studios in Jacksonville at the time, the Eagle Film City developed its own film rather than sending it to northern cities for processing.

Despite the creation of this complete plant, Eagle City never fulfilled its promise of being a nationally prominent studio. Its most notable productions filmed in Jacksonville were a series of short comedies produced between July and December 1916 starring noted Spanish comedic actor Marcel Perez and Italian actress Nilde Baracchi (billed as Fernandez and Babette Perez) as Tweedledee and Tweedledum. These films shot at the studio met with limited success. When Eagle's independent national releasing agency, the Unity Sales Corporation, went out of business, the studio was left without an adequate outlet for its pictures. By the spring of 1917, Eagle Film City went bankrupt.¹⁴

Except for the brief ownership and acquisition of Eagle Film assets by the Superb Film Corporation, the studio facility sat abandoned until it was purchased in 1922 at a bargain price by the film producer, director, and writer Richard E. Norman Sr. Since the Norman Laboratories was the last studio operation to open in the Jacksonville area, there was no competition for the purchase of the fully-equipped studio. The staging, laboratories, kleig lighting system (used both for interiors and later afternoon exteriors), and on-site power plant were all in excellent working order. The Norman Film Manufacturing Company thus controlled one of the best studio complexes in the city.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission. Eagle Film City (Norman Film Studios) Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission Designation Application for Landmark or Landmark Site, 8; Miller, Almost Hollywood: The Forgotten Story of Jacksonville, 71-73.

¹⁵ Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission. Eagle Film City (Norman Film Studios) Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission Designation Application for Landmark or Landmark Site, 8.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 7

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

Norman Film Studios

At a time when most filmmakers were leaving Jacksonville and moving to Hollywood, Richard E. Norman Sr. went against the trend by relocating to Jacksonville. Born in Middleburg, Florida in 1891, Norman acquired an interest in chemistry and motion pictures while attending college in Tampa. He began his filmmaking career while traveling extensively throughout the Midwest and Northeast sections of the country, writing scenes and filming as he went. With headquarters in Des Moines, Iowa, Norman ventured from city to city, setting up shop, obtaining local financing, using local actors and crew, and then shooting the movie. He would develop and edit the picture at cost in his Iowa lab and return back to the city with the completed version.

It was while working in Jacksonville in 1920 on one of his "city" pictures that Norman decide to return to Florida permanently. Norman established a base in the city realizing that the exodus away from Jacksonville by the major companies meant that reasonably priced studio space was available for a smaller independent company. Once in Jacksonville, Norman also recognized the commercial potential of making black-cast pictures. In a 1978 interview, Norman's son Richard E. Norman, Jr. said his father was "deeply concerned about prejudice." He believed his father had an underlying desire to do something constructive to better race relations while allowing black actors to show what they were capable of as performers and human beings. By the 1920s, Norman emerged as one of the most prolific producers and distributors of all-colored pictures in the country.¹⁶

From 1920 to 1928, Norman produced an average of one feature picture a year, plus additional comedy shorts, such as The Love Bug (1920). The first movies produced by the Norman Film Manufacturing Company were The Green-Eyed Monster (1920), a story of rival railroad companies starring Jack "Buddy" Austin; and The Crimson Skull (1921) and The Bull-Dogger (1921), two of the first westerns to celebrate the contributions made by black cowboys in the West. Both westerns featured the legendary rodeo performer Bill Pickett. The initial success of these pictures encouraged Norman to purchase the old Eagle Film studio in Arlington in 1922. Most of Norman's films after these Westerns would be shot on location in Jacksonville, where many Arlington residents were used for characters in certain movie scenes. All the post production work was done at the Arlington studio. In time, Richard Norman proved to be one of the more successful independents supplying ethnic theaters nationwide. Other notable feature films include: Regeneration (1923), a romantic tale of treasure hunting in the South Seas; A Debtor to the Law (1924); The Flying Ace (1926), an aerial drama featuring Lawrence Criner and Kathryn Boyd; and The Black Gold (1928), a Western that re-teamed Criner and Boyd in an Oklahoma oil adventure shot on location.¹⁷

The end of movie production at the Norman Studio, as with the demise of the industry in the city proper, is the culmination of several events. Most notable is Norman's damaging financial investment into the manufacturing

¹⁶ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 8

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
DESCRIPTION

of his patented invention, a practical synchronization device for talkies that accurately wedded picture and voice. Norman poured all of his savings into is this invention that was intended to coordinate screen lip movement to a disk sound system. He sold more than a dozen units to theater owners at cost of \$6,000 each. Just as Norman seemed on his way to making a fortune, Western Electric came out with a photoelectric sound-on-film system which made his mechanical apparatus obsolete. Bankruptcy followed, and Norman was forced to abandon theatrical production and confined his production to industrial films. Despite the success of Western Electric's product, Norman is credited as being one of the first to synchronize sound and motion on the theater screen.¹⁸

After he stopped making race films in the late 1920s, Norman continued to make industrial films for commercial enterprises and entered into film distribution. He would also operate a movie theater. The contacts that he established amongst black theater owners served him well as a distributor, as he began distributing films regionally. He organized traveling roadshows of films aimed at black audiences, including Joe Louis fight films and films made by his former rival Oscar Micheaux, splitting revenues with venue owners. The Norman Studio complex served as the headquarters for this venture. Norman also continued to use the complex for film production. Most of his industrial film work was for the Pure Oil Company.

Gloria Norman School of Dance

As a way of providing supplemental income after the end of Norman Studios, Norman's wife Gloria opened up the Gloria Norman School of Dance in 1935. She held dance classes on the second floor of the main building (Building One) before a dance floor was installed in Building 5 and the classes were moved there. The dance school was very successful, at one time having over 200 students enrolled. After Norman retired in 1952, his wife Gloria continued to use the facility as a dance studio where she instructed work in ballet, acrobatic, tap, and ball room dancing until 1975. Shortly after the last dance lessons, Gloria Norman put the property up for sale.¹⁹

Preservation efforts of the complex began in the mid-1990s, when local Arlington residents founded Old Arlington, Inc. in an effort to promote and preserve the history of the Norman Studios property. In 1995, Building Five was purchased by the Circle of Faith Ministries and repurposed into a church building - a function it still serves. In 2002, the City of Jacksonville purchased four of the five Norman property buildings and in 2007, completed work on structural repairs and exterior renovations that restored its historic appearance.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Norman Studios Film Museum, Inc., "Gloria Norman," (<http://www.normanstudios.org/norman-films-stars/norman-players/gloria-norman/>); Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission. Eagle Film City (Norman Film Studios) Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission Designation Application for Landmark or Landmark Site, 8.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 9 Page 1

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
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BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

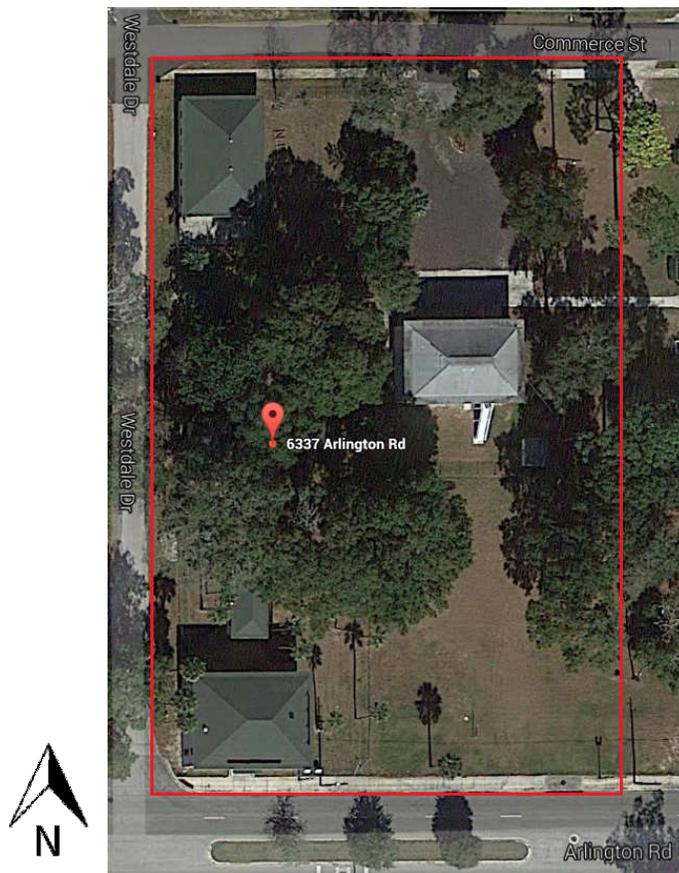
**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 10 Page 1

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Verbal Boundary Description

Legal Description: ARLINGTON HEIGHTS LOTS 1-18, BLK 47



Boundary Justification

The boundary (outlined in red above) reflects the entire property historically associated with the Norman Film Studios. The western portion is owned by the City of Jacksonville and contains the main two-story building and three other ancillary units (Buildings 2-4). Building 5 and the former swimming pool are located on the eastern parcels, both owned by the Circle of Faith Ministries. Jacksonville is in the process of acquiring this land.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number _____ Photos _____ Page 1

NORMAN FILM STUDIOS
JACKSONVILLE, DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA
PHOTOGRAPH LIST

1. Norman Film Studios
2. Jacksonville, Duval County, Florida
3. Andrew Waber
4. July 2012
5. 500 South Bronough Street, Tallahassee, Florida
6. View of main (south) facade of Building One, facing north
7. Photo 1 of 12

Items 1-5 are the same for the following photographs except where noted:

6. View of Building Two, facing west
7. Photo 2 of 12

6. View of Building Two interior, facing north
7. Photo 3 of 12

6. View of Building Two electric generator, facing south
7. Photo 4 of 12

6. View of Building Two electric control switch, facing north
7. Photo 5 of 12

6. View of Building Three, facing north
7. Photo 6 of 12

6. View of Building Three interior, facing north
7. Photo 7 of 12

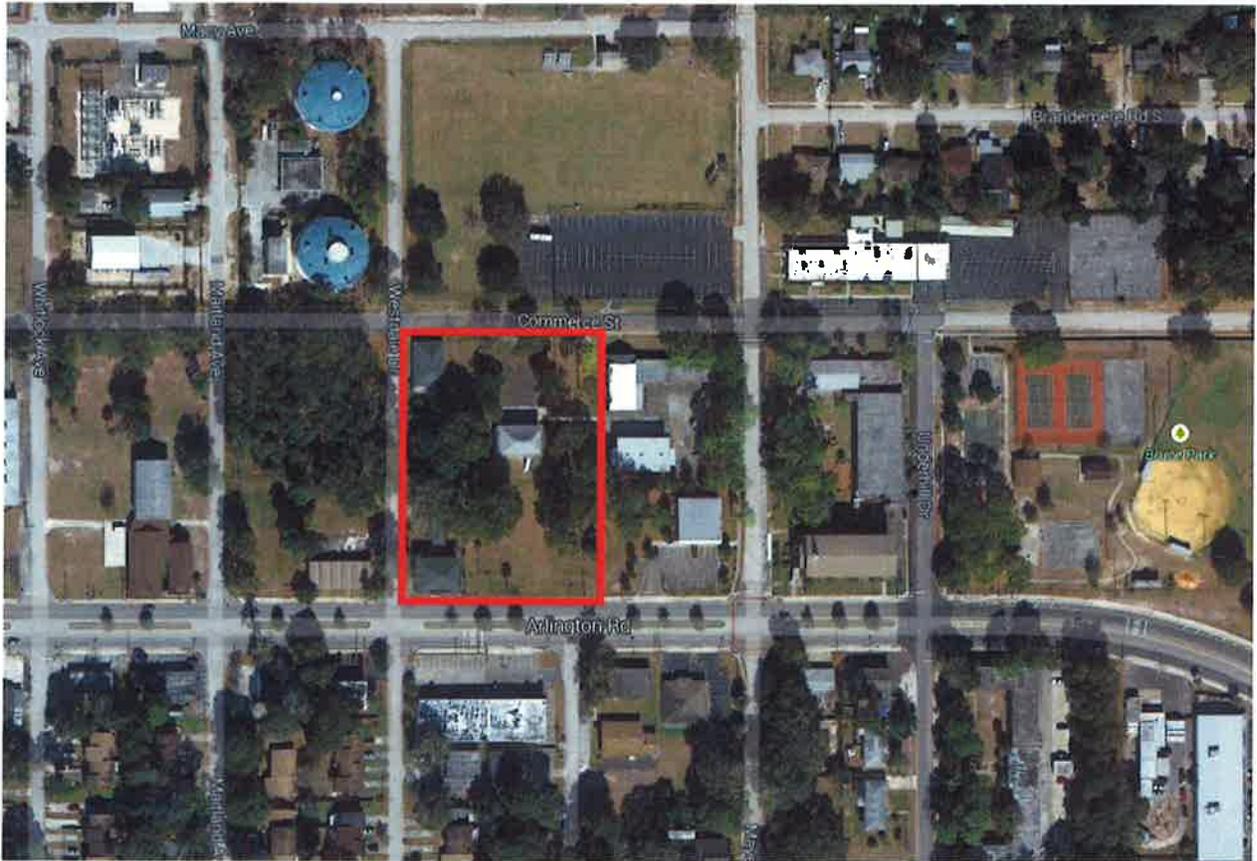
6. View of Building Four, facing north
7. Photo 8 of 12

6. View of Building Four interior, facing north
7. Photo 9 of 12

6. View of Building Four interior, facing east
7. Photo 10 of 12

6. View of Building Five, facing
7. Photo 11 of 12

6. View of Building Five rear (south) elevation, facing east
7. Photo 12 of 12

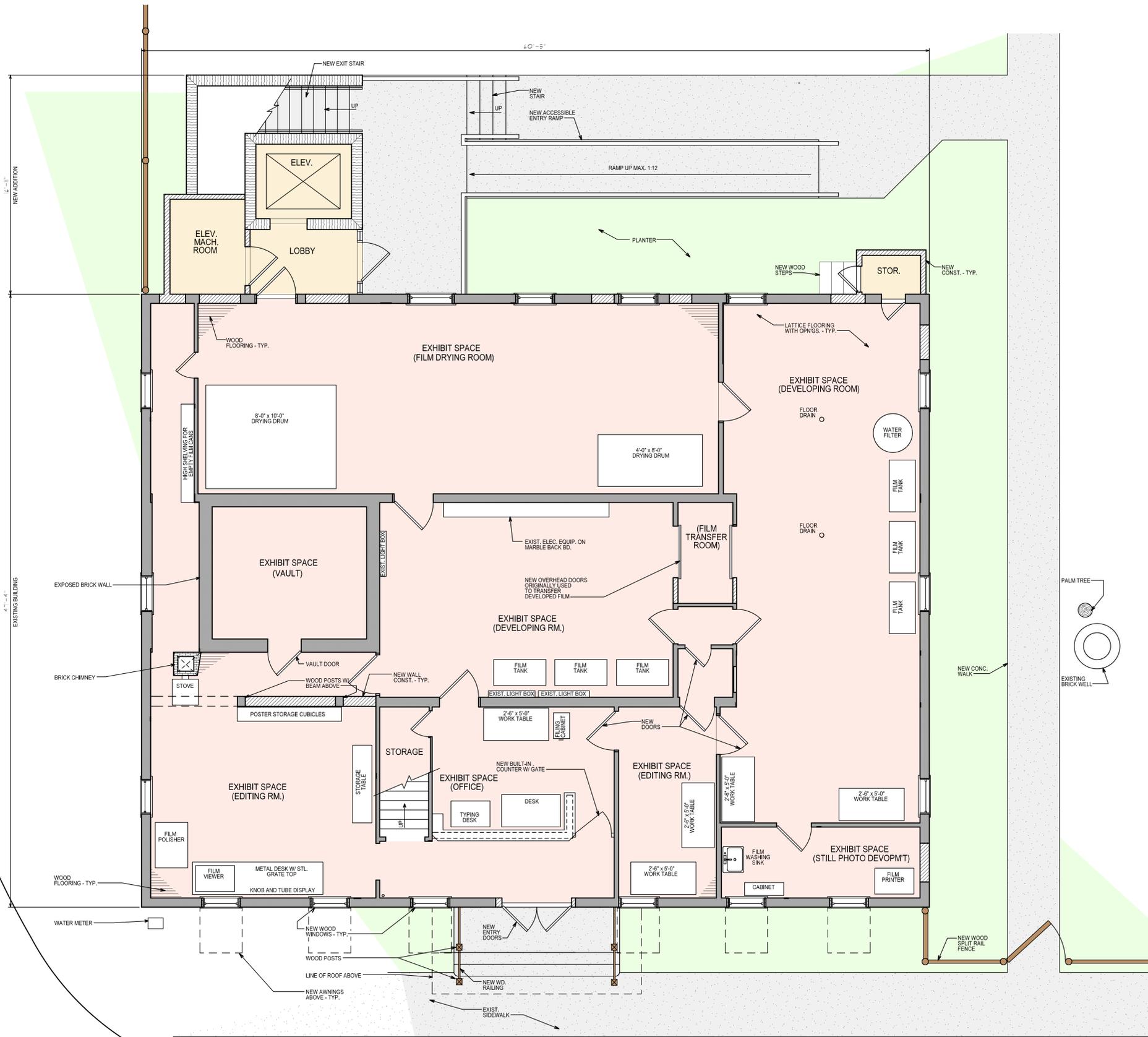


LOCATOR MAP

Norman Film Studios, Arlington, Duval County, Florida 32239
UTM References – 17 908290-3546587

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WESTDALE DRIVE



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

- LEGEND:
- EXISTING CONST. TO REMAIN
 - NEW CONST.
 - - - EXIST. CONST. TO BE REMOVED
 - OFFICE PROPOSED ROOM USE
 - (OFFICE) HISTORIC ROOM USE
 - NEW WOOD SPLIT RAIL FENCING

ARLINGTON ROAD

1/4"=1'-0"

CONCEPTUAL BUILDING DRAWINGS
NORMAN STUDIOS RESTORATIONS FOR THE
CITY OF JACKSONVILLE

MAIN BUILDING
FIRST FLOOR PLAN

DATE: 11-01-05
DRAWN BY: JMK/MTO
CHECKED BY: KRS
JOB NO.: #0418
REVISIONS:
FILENAME: 0418SDPLN.AEC
SHEET NO.:

KENNETH SMITH ARCHITECTS INC.
8301 CYPRESS PLAZA DRIVE SUITE 203
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA 32256 (904) 281-0002

A-1

Norman Laboratories

Arlington 4300





















GLORIA NORMAN
DANCE STUDIO





