

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

historic name Whiskey Row Historic District (Additional Documentation)
 other names/site number JFCD-2
 Related Multiple Property NA

2. Location

street & number 105 West Main Street

NA
NA

 not for publication
 city or town Louisville vicinity
 state Kentucky code KY county Jefferson code 111 zip code 40202

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 at the following level(s) of significance:
 national statewide X local
 Applicable National Register Criteria:
 A B C D

Signature of certifying official/Title Craig Potts/SHPO Date _____
Kentucky Heritage Council/State Historic Preservation Office
 State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
 Signature of commenting official _____ Date _____
 Title _____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:
 entered in the National Register determined eligible for the National Register
 determined not eligible for the National Register removed from the National Register
 other (explain:) _____
 Signature of the Keeper _____ Date of Action _____

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County and State
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This documentation amends the National Register listing for the Whiskey Row Historic District in Louisville, Kentucky, by demonstrating the property’s significance in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) history. The Whiskey Row Historic District was listed in the National Register in 2010.¹ New research has determined that The Downtowner, a popular gay bar, occupied the building at 105 West Main Street from 1975-89. This documentation recounts the history of The Downtowner and its significance in the history of gay and lesbian life in Louisville in the two decades following the Stonewall uprising of 1969. It extends the period of significance to 1989 to reflect the district’s association with The Downtowner and the bar’s social and cultural significance.

This amendment was prepared under contract with the Fairness Campaign of Louisville, a 501c3 nonprofit organization dedicated to equality for LGBTQ people, using funds awarded by the Kentucky Heritage Council. It is part of the Kentucky LGBTQ Historic Context Study carried out by Dr. Catherine Fosl of the University of Louisville.

Gay and Lesbians in Louisville, Kentucky, 1970 – 1991

Historians generally view the Stonewall uprising during the summer of 1969 as the beginning of the modern gay rights movement. Early on the morning of June 28, 1969, a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, triggered violence and civil unrest. Several nights of public protests followed. Activists soon founded the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance, groups dedicated to securing gay rights. As news of the Stonewall incident spread, activists in communities across the nation established similar organizations. All sought to increase acceptance of same-sex relationships and to end widespread discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ people. By the summer of 1970, at least 1,500 such groups had been formed, and by the second anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, the number had reached 2,500.²

Organizations founded in the wake of the Stonewall uprising adopted new tactics and strategies in their efforts to promote acceptance of gays and lesbians. Previously, “homophile” organizations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis had focused on challenging the prevailing view of gays and lesbians as sick and perverted. Homophile groups fostered greater awareness, sought to humanize gay and lesbians, and challenged discrimination. Their efforts increased visibility and took steps toward creating acceptance of same-sex relationships. Homophile groups, however, also found their efforts thwarted by the conformity of Cold War-era American culture, tendencies to conflate homosexuality with communism, and widespread intolerance. By the end of the 1960s, many activists had grown weary of persistent social condemnation and believed that more aggressive actions to secure legal protections

¹ The buildings at 105 and 107-109 West Main Street were listed in the National Register as J. T. S. Brown and Son’s Complex in 1998. These properties became contributing resources to the Whiskey Row Historic District when the latter property was listed in 2010. See J. T. S. Brown and Son’s Complex (Jefferson Co., KY), National Register of Historic Places nomination, Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, KY.

² Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: A People’s GLBT History of the 20th Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 123-27; John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 233-39. Note also that the language used in this document to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) people and movements is consistent with that used in the time periods under discussion.

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and end ostracism would be necessary to achieve gay liberation. Part of that push came from the desire to broaden the horizon of social acceptance beyond the lively gay bar subculture that had become an important base for gay community-building in the postwar years, but one that still kept LGBTQ people marginalized.³

In Louisville, Kentucky, the formation of the Louisville Gay Liberation Front (LGLF) placed local gays and lesbians in the vanguard of the national gay rights movement. Impetus came not from the Stonewall uprising but, rather, from Tracy Knight and Marjorie Jones, a lesbian couple that historian James T. Sears has dubbed the “First Ladies of Gay Liberation.”⁴ On July 6, 1970, Knight and Jones applied for a marriage license at the Jefferson County Clerk’s office in downtown Louisville. Their actions appear to have made them the first lesbian couple in the nation to seek the legal status of marriage. In seeking a marriage license, Knight and Jones shocked many in Louisville, which Sears has described as a place where women “had learned to conform to social mores and subordinate their well-being to men – straight or gay.”⁵ Jones and Knight wished to marry because of their love for one another, but they also recognized that applying for a marriage license would make a statement about gay rights. Jones and Knight received encouragement and support from David Kaplan, an attorney who had previously represented Jones and saw the couple as a potential test case for gay and lesbian rights.⁶

Three days later, on July 9, thirteen women and seven men met in an apartment on Belgravia Court, in the Old Louisville neighborhood, to establish the LGLF. Led by lesbian activist Lynn Pfuhl and “drag queen” Mike Randall, the LGLF dedicated itself to supporting Knight and Jones’s campaign to marry and bringing attention to oppression of gays and lesbians. “Consciousness-raising” became the organization’s main priority. LGLF members spoke to regional universities and civil groups about gay life, established a telephone hotline for persons struggling with their sexuality, and arranged for the University of Louisville to offer a “gay studies” class. The latter effort proved controversial but nonetheless created a forum for open discussion and investigation of sexuality and same-sex relationships. Like other organizations of the post-Stonewall era, the LGLF made equality a central aim. No longer content merely to promote acceptance of gays and lesbians, it sought to achieve visibility as well as equal rights and legal protections for gays and lesbians.⁷

Not all gays and lesbians supported the LGLF. Some gay bars banned the group, even for the purpose of

³ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, chaps. 4-7; Ealkor, *Queer America*, 96-97.

⁴ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 59-62. Knight and Jones were pseudonyms used by the plaintiffs in the ensuing lawsuit.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Catherine Fosl, “‘It could be Dangerous!’: Gay Liberation and Gay Marriage in Louisville, Kentucky, 1970,” *Ohio Valley History* 12, no. 1 (2012): 45-64.

⁷ Fosl, “‘It Could Be Dangerous!’,” 53. On the gay studies course, see especially Dr. Edwin Segal, Oral History Interview with Wes Cunningham, Louisville, Kentucky, November 11, 2015, copy in Kentucky LGBTQ Heritage initiative files, Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research, William Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY (hereafter referred to as KY LGBTQ Heritage files); David McGinty, “Gay Liberation?...U of L worried on possible reaction to class on homosexuality,” *Louisville Times*, October 16, 1970, 1; Lynn Pfuhl interview with Catherine Fosl, Louisville, Kentucky, September 21, 2005, University of Louisville Oral History Center, William Ekstrom Library, Louisville, KY (hereafter Oral History Center).

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distributing leaflets. Members of the LGLF recall The Downtowner as an important gathering spot but also note that the bar staff once turned a water hose on LGLF members who staged a picket there to protest the ban on cross-dressing for non-entertainers. Some bar owners saw the gay rights crusade as a threat. “If people could go anywhere they wanted freely, then perhaps they wouldn’t choose to come to gay bars anymore,” they reasoned.⁸ Moreover, most gays and lesbians remained closeted, fearful, and wary of discrimination. In an era without legal protections for sexual orientation, acknowledging homoerotic feelings often meant public shame, loss of employment, rejection by friends and family members, and harassment.

The LGLF also met strong resistance from local authorities. In 1971, police raided a “Gay Lib” house that LGLF members had established at 1919 Bonnycastle Avenue, in Louisville’s Highlands neighborhood. Police made thirty arrests, mostly for marijuana possession. The raid delivered a “killing blow” to the efforts of the LGLF. Some members of the organization immediately left town; others assumed a lower profile.⁹ The LGLF nonetheless remained committed to the cause of gay rights. As activist Lynn Pfuhl declared, “We are human beings. We are a legitimate segment of society and we want the same opportunity for happiness enjoyed by everyone else.”¹⁰ In the aftermath of the Bonnycastle raid, the LGLF scaled back its efforts and adopted a less militant profile.

By the early 1970s, gay bars had for years played a crucial role in providing forums for organizing, strategizing, and planning. As historians such as Allan Bérubé have noted, gay bars served as anchors of gay culture. Bars offered opportunities for gay men and women to find acceptance, love, support, friendships, and spiritual and emotional sustenance. Gay bars provided spaces of freedom and relief from intolerance and shame.¹¹ In Louisville, bars that catered to gays and lesbians developed soon after World War II. In 1947, the Beaux Arts, a cocktail lounge located on the ground floor of the Henry Clay hotel, became popular with gay men. Gordon’s Restaurant and Bar, which later became known as Gordon’s Golden Horse, opened in 1948 in the 600 block of South Fourth Street.¹² In 1954, Nolan’s Cocktail Lounge opened at 320 West Chestnut Street. Like the Beaux Arts, Gordon’s and Nolan’s accommodated a gay clientele. By the mid-1950s, these three “mixed bars”—establishments that had both heterosexual and gay patronage—operated in the heart of the city’s theater district, close to bars, restaurants, and evening entertainment venues.

In 1957, Sam Meyer Downtowner opened at 320 West Chestnut, in the space formerly occupied by

⁸ Pfuhl interview; David Williams, Interview with Micky Schickel, August 2001, transcript, “Gay Liberation Front – Louisville – 1970s,” Folder 1, Williams-Nichols Collection, William Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY (hereafter Williams-Nichols Collection). Note that these incidents refer to The [Old] Downtowner on Chestnut Street, not the newer location that is the focus of this amendment.

⁹ *Advocate*, January 5, 1972, vol. 76, 13, copy in “Gay Liberation Front – Louisville – 1970’s,” Folder 1, Williams-Nichols Collection; Pfuhl interview; Schickel interview; David Williams, “Gay Men,” in *The Louisville p*, ed. John E. Kleber (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), p. 332-333.

¹⁰ The quote is from an article Pfuhl published in *Free Press of Louisville*, a radical weekly newspaper. It appears in Fosl, “It could be Dangerous!” 50.

¹¹ Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” in *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, ed. Dangerous Bedfellows et al. (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 188.

¹² “Restaurant, Bar to Open on Fourth,” *Courier-Journal*, March 3, 1948, p.10.

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Nolan's Cocktail Lounge. Evolving into one of the first openly gay bars in Louisville, "The Downtowner," as it became commonly known, represented a new step toward gay liberation. Within about a decade it established itself as the most popular gathering spot in the city for gays and lesbians. It remained open far longer than either the Beaux Arts, which closed in 1955, or Gordon's, which operated until about 1965. Thereafter, The Downtowner became Louisville's leading gay establishment.

In February 1974, a fire of mysterious circumstance destroyed The Downtowner and two other businesses that occupied the same building. In the aftermath, The Downtowner's longtime bartender-manager, George Stinson, bought the name and signage and revived the bar in a new location.¹³ In 1975, The New Downtowner opened at 105 West Main Street, about six blocks northeast of its original location.¹⁴ The new venue provided more space and greater visibility. By the mid-1970s, large portions of downtown Louisville had become depopulated as a result of suburbanization. Former whiskey warehouses and office buildings on Main Street offered large spaces at low rents. The Downtowner largely retained its existing clientele but also sought to attract new patrons after it began to face competition from other bars. The Badlands Territory, or "Badlands," another gay bar, had opened at 116 East Main Street in May 1973. In 1976, Mother's Brew, a lesbian bar, opened at 204 West Main Street. At 105 West Main Street, The Downtowner initially occupied half of the first floor. Patrons entering found a large bar made of oak and stained glass on the left and a narrow hallway leading to a theater in the rear. The theater had a small stage and cabaret-style seating. Racy performances drew large crowds.¹⁵

As fads came and went and The Downtowner became more established, it expanded into adjoining spaces. When *Saturday Night Fever* became the biggest film of 1977, The Downtowner installed a lighted dance floor in a small space behind the bar. It proved immensely popular for a time, despite crowded conditions. Later, The Downtowner's owners, George Stinson and Ed Lewis, took over part of the second floor of the building, where they created a bar called "The Loft," more of "a 'butch' type of bar," according to one patron.¹⁶ The first floor continued hosting drag shows and maintained a typical nightclub atmosphere. In the basement of the building, a lesbian lounge called Lady's Choice opened. It did poorly, however, and was not open for long.¹⁷

¹³ Michael Lindenberger, "The Vanishing Terrain of Gay America: A writer returns to the city where he was raised – and exiled – to find what was lost when gay life entered the mainstream," *The New Republic*, June 23, 2015, accessed June 7, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/122089/vanishing-terrain-gay-america>; "3 Chestnut Street Buildings Damaged in Early Morning Blaze," *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 6, 1974, B3.

¹⁴ Kleber, *Encyclopedia of Louisville*, 861.

¹⁵ Kathie D. Williams, "Louisville's Lesbian Feminist Union: A Study in Community Building," in *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 229; David Williams, email to Daniel Vivian, April 12, 2016, copy in KY LGBTQ Heritage files; Jiahui Hui, "Long-Running Lou Gay Club's Roots Run to 70s," *Courier-Journal*, July 15, 2016, <http://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/history/river-city-retro/2016/07/15/long-running-lou-gay-clubs-roots-run-70s/86870032/> (accessed July 30, 2016).

¹⁶ Anonymous interview conducted by Wes Cunningham as part of research for this project. Recording and notes in possession of KY LGBTQ Heritage files.

¹⁷ N. David Williams, correspondence with Jim "Ms. Bird" Wilthers, Bars (Louisville Only), Folder 1, Williams-Nichols Collection; David Williams, email to Daniel Vivian, April 12, 2016, copy in KY LGBTQ Heritage files.

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By about 1980, “a ‘Downtowner crowd’ had emerged – effeminate young men, liberated macho men, black gays and lesbians, bull dykes and femmes, drag queens and bitch queens, tourists, and even a few curious heterosexuals.”¹⁸ The bar’s location spoke volumes about the status of gays in society and the condition of downtown. Like many American cities, downtown Louisville became desolate after regular business hours. Greg Bourke recalls that the depopulation of downtown, particularly the lack of a developed entertainment center, allowed patrons of gay bars to feel safe. Although he remembers “when you were gay in those days you were always looking over your shoulder,” Bourke never felt threatened going to and leaving downtown bars.¹⁹ Two other gay men recall that “the urban area was more anonymous,” that “there wasn’t anything going on downtown at night,” and “if you were downtown, anybody that you worked with would never see you.”²⁰ Anonymity remained important for gays and lesbians in an era before legal protections and widespread public acceptance. The location of The Downtowner and other popular gay and lesbian bars nearby satisfied that need.

Many gays and lesbians recall The Downtowner as crucial to finding acceptance and belonging. Reva Devereaux, a cross-dressing performer who appeared regularly at The Downtowner starting in the late 1970s, recalls the bar as providing a kind of “home and family” not available elsewhere. Discovering The Downtowner and the stage it offered brought a kind of liberation. As Devereaux recalled during a 2016 interview, “that’s the day I felt like I was born.”²¹

As The Downtowner became a center of gay life and culture, Louisville gays and lesbians continued to seek equality. In 1974, Louisville became home to a congregation of the gay-friendly Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). MCC provided spiritual guidance and a supportive environment for gays and lesbians of faith. In 1978, realtor and gay activist Jack Kersey freely acknowledged his sexual orientation on a local TV station, a move signifying greater openness and acceptance.²²

During the 1980s, several events made gay rights more of a focus of public attention in Louisville. The case of Sam Dorr, a First National Lincoln Bank employee who was fired after admitting he was gay, called attention to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Dorr had risen through the ranks to become a bank vice president. He had lived as a gay man for some time and participated in a local chapter of Integrity, a pro-gay advocacy group in the Episcopalian church. When Integrity joined forces with Dignity, its Catholic counterpart, Dorr was elected president of the new organization. Aware that the position would make his sexuality public, Dorr chose to take preemptive action by informing his boss. Initially, Dorr’s supervisor appeared to receive the news without issue. Ten days later, however, on November 20, 1981, bank

¹⁸ David Williams, “The New Downtowner,” March 9, 1986, Bars (Louisville Only), Folder 1, Williams-Nichols Collection.

¹⁹ Greg Bourke, Interview with Wes Cunningham, Louisville, Kentucky, January 31, 2016, copy in KY LGBTQ Heritage files.

²⁰ Anonymous interviews conducted by Wes Cunningham as part of research for this project. Recordings and notes in possession of KY LGBTQ Heritage files.

²¹ Reva Devereaux, in-person conversation with Catherine Fosl, Louisville, Kentucky, March 16, 2016. Devereaux, who is African American, also discussed feeling at ease in the club despite being in the minority. Notes of conversation in Fosl’s possession.

²² “The Hidden History of Gay/Lesbian Louisville,” n.a., n.d., circa 1990s, Williams-Nichols Collection; Lindenberger, “The Vanishing Terrain of Gay America.”

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officials presented Dorr with an ultimatum: either resign from his position with Dignity/Integrity or leave the bank. A few days later, Dorr chose the latter. Bank officials initially told Dorr that they would “try to find him something else,” which he took to mean a position without interaction with customers. When they did not follow through, Dorr considered legal action.²³

Since anti-discrimination laws did not offer protection on the basis of sexual orientation, the first attorney Dorr consulted said “his case would not last ten minutes in the court system.” Dorr then sought the assistance of Oliver Barber, “a bulldog” of an attorney with a well-established reputation “for taking cases that were not necessarily popular.” Barber took the case and filed suit on the basis of religious discrimination. The case went to trial in 1983, and the court quickly ruled in favor of the bank. Dorr immediately appealed and won, but the bank responded by requesting the trial be heard “en banc,” meaning in front of all Sixth Circuit judges. Dorr and the bank then settled the case.²⁴

Dorr’s legal battles gave him status among Louisville gays and lesbians. In 1982, he and others formed Gays and Lesbians United for Equality (GLUE), “which served as an umbrella organization for all Louisville-area nonprofit groups that were supportive of gay rights.”²⁵ Dorr then helped organize a gay pride festival.²⁶ By then, a lesbian newspaper called the *Lavender Letter* had also begun publication. Another called the *Lambda Louisville News*, catering to gay male readers, followed in 1983. A local cable access channel pioneered a gay and lesbian television program in June 1984.²⁷

In 1983, the founding of the Greater Louisville Human Rights Coalition (GLHRC) established a more political counterpart to GLUE. GLHRC was founded “by lesbians and gay men already engaged in combating racism” and “began pressuring elected officials and public agencies to address discrimination against [gay and lesbian] persons in employment, housing, and public accommodations.” The group aligned itself with other social justice causes and brought increased attention to gay rights. In 1986, GLHRC won its first victory by convincing the Louisville-Jefferson County Human Relations Commission to endorse the addition of sexual orientation as a protected category to local civil rights laws. GLHRC also joined groups, such as the Kentucky Rainbow Coalition and the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, in pushing for passage of a “local Hate Crimes Ordinance, which covered race, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.” In November 1991, the Louisville Board of Alderman passed, by a vote of 7 to 4, a law that included protection for sexual orientation, marking the first major victory for gay rights in both Louisville and in the state.²⁸

In 1991, the establishment of the Fairness Campaign inaugurated a new era in the local crusade for gay

²³ Sam Dorr, oral history interview with Wes Cunningham, Louisville, Kentucky, November 20, 2015, copy in KY LGBTQ Heritage files; Williams, “Gay Men.”

²⁴ Dorr interview.

²⁵ Marilyn Mote-Yale, “Lesbians,” in *Louisville Encyclopedia*, 508.

²⁶ Dorr interview.

²⁷ Williams, “Gay Men,” 332-333.

²⁸ Material and quotes in this paragraph come from Erlene Grise-Owens, Jeff Vessels and Larry W. Owens, “Organizing for Change: One City’s Journey Toward Justice,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 16 (2004): 3-5, accessed March 14, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J041v16n03_01.

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rights. Born from various local civil rights groups such as GLHRC and the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, the Fairness Campaign grew out of the battle for the Hate Crimes Ordinance. The group, co-founded by Carla Wallace, Pam McMichael and others, initially focused on enlarging citywide protections by securing the passage of the a “Fairness Amendment, which would prohibit discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations in Louisville on the basis of sexual orientation.”²⁹ Although the GLHRC had attempted to get a similar amendment passed in 1984, Fairness Campaign workers kept bringing up the matter repeatedly and lobbying community-wide for it in spite of a series of defeats by the Board of Alderman.³⁰ Fairness leaders first sought to get the amendment passed in 1991. In a public hearing they “demonstrated the connection between gay rights and other basic civil rights activism,” which “gave a face to the. . . movement and empowered [LGBTQ] people by allowing them to publicly tell their stories of discrimination.”³¹ The organization lobbied local religious leaders and formed alliances with a variety of other social causes. They opened a headquarters in a noticeable location (on Frankfort Avenue), and they knocked on hundreds of doors to discuss the necessity of such protections. Eventually the hard work and increased visibility paid off. In 1999, following more defeats that only intensified supporters’ momentum, “the Fairness Ordinance passed...forbidding sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations.”³² The Louisville ordinance became among a handful of the nation’s first to include protections on the basis of gender identity.

The establishment of the Fairness Campaign occurred only a short while after The Downtowner closed in 1989. Stinson and Lewis subsequently opened a new bar called the Connection at 120 South Floyd Street. It offered five times more usable space than The Downtowner had.

Significance

In its fifteen years of operation at 105 West Main, The Downtowner became a leading institution – arguably *the* leading institution – for Louisville gays and lesbians. It proved more durable than any of the other bars of the 1970s and 1980s and attracted a clientele that included a broader cross-section of gays and lesbians than most of its competitors. To be sure, other bars played important roles. Mother’s Brew, which was open from 1976-78, became a center of lesbian-feminist organizing. Badlands also attracted a strong following and remained popular after changing its name to Discovery in 1981. Several other bars also catered to gays and lesbians. Still, The Downtowner lasted longer and retained its popularity over time. Today it is well-remembered for its significant role in Kentucky’s LGBTQ life.³³

During the era when Louisville gays and lesbians took initial steps to secure equality, The Downtowner

²⁹ Marilyn Mote-Yale, “Lesbians,” in *Louisville Encyclopedia*, 508.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Grise-Owens, “Organizing for Change,” 5.

³² Ibid, 5-10.

³³ Hui, “Long-Running Lou Gay Club’s Roots Run to 70s.” Other gay bars of the 1980s included the City Bar on East Market Street, Murphy’s on East Main Street, Trixie’s and Alley Cats on West Main Street, the Mint Julep (later the Pub) on South Fourth Street, and Jack’s Place. Two other bars, the Regal Queen and the Queen Bee, were located east of downtown.

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provided a forum for solidarity, community, and organizing. Like other gay bars across the nation, The Downtowner gave members of a marginalized group opportunities to find love, support, friendship, acceptance, and temporary escape from oppression. As one of the first openly gay bars in Louisville, The Downtowner took a bold stance toward greater visibility. Its enduring role as a gathering place throughout the struggle for equality made it the best-known establishment of its kind in Louisville. Memories of The Downtowner figure prominently among gays and lesbians and demonstrate its significance. In the two decades between the upsurge of activism that followed the Stonewall uprising and the founding of the Fairness Campaign in 1991, The Downtowner served as the leading public face of LGBTQ people in Louisville.

Integrity

The Whiskey Row Historic District has changed dramatically since it was listed in the National Register in 2010. At the time of the listing, most of the buildings in the 100 block of West Main Street stood in dilapidated condition. In 2007, real estate developer Todd Blue had purchased 105-119 West Main Street with intentions of demolishing them and erecting new office buildings. When the 2008 recession hit, he revised his plans. The buildings sat vacant and deteriorating for several years. In January 2011, soon after newly elected Mayor Greg Fischer took office, Blue sued the City of Louisville for the right to demolish the buildings, reputedly with plans to create surface parking lots. The Fischer Administration sought to avoid court proceedings by agreeing to allow Blue to proceed with demolition, but the decision immediately prompted a public outcry. Citizens had long recognized the significance of the buildings in the 100 block of West Main Streets, and efforts to provide modest protections had resulted in the listing of the Whiskey Row Historic District in 2010 and designation as a local landmark in June of that year.³⁴

In response to the uproar, the Fischer Administration brokered a deal between Blue and a group of civic-minded investors who organized as Main Street Revitalization, LLC (MSR). Blue agreed to sell 107-119 West Main Street; MSR agreed to assess the condition of the five buildings it purchased and, if possible, rehabilitate them using the state and federal tax credits. The deal saved the several buildings from demolition and set planning for revitalization in motion.³⁵ The project proceeded smoothly until July 7, 2015, when workers using a torch in the basement of 111 West Main Street caused a fire that quickly spread through the entire complex. The blaze gutted 111, 113, and 115 West Main and left officials worried about structural failure. MSR immediately took steps to assess surviving structural elements and stabilized the facades of the three buildings.

³⁴ Historic Landmark Designation Report, 105-121 West Main Street, June 28, 2010, Metro Historic Landmarks and Preservation Districts Commission, Louisville, KY; Iron Quarter Block, 105-119 W. Main Street, Structural Stability Assessment, Jan. 29, 2010, Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville, KY; Phillip M. Bailey, “Iron (Quarter) Man,” *Leo* (Louisville, KY), Feb. 9, 2011, <http://www.leoweekly.com/2011/02/iron-quarter-man/> (accessed July 30, 2016); Sheldon Shafer, “Iron Quarter Demolition OK’d: Deal Provides Time to Salvage Facades,” *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 1, 2011, B1.

³⁵ Sheldon Shafer, “Preservation Partners Spare Whiskey Row: Group With Ties to Distillery,” *Courier-Journal*, May 10, 2011, A11.

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In the aftermath of the fire, MSR announced plans to continue with the rehabilitation. Current plans call for 111 and 113 West Main Street to become a mixed-use complex with restaurants at ground level and office space and residential apartments above. Portions of this complex are scheduled to open in June 2017. Brown-Foreman Corporation, a leading manufacturer of distilled spirits, intends to open a distillery and visitor center for its Old Forrester brand bourbon in 115-117 West Main Street. It is slated to open late in 2017.³⁶

At present, 105 West Main Street is an empty lot paved by asphalt with the façade of the circa 1877 building that formerly stood on the site braced by I-beams and other structural reinforcements. The site is expected to remain in this condition for the foreseeable future. The 2011 agreement that saved 107-119 West Main Street and began redevelopment allowed Todd Blue to retain ownership of 105 and 103 West Main Street (the latter property had been vacant for some time), which form the eastern end of the block. Blue has long harbored plans to place a boutique hotel on the site. He has no immediate plans to proceed with construction, however. He instead intends to wait to see the results of the redevelopment of 115-117 and 111-113 West Main Street.

Thus, at present, the structure that The Downtowner occupied from 1975-1989 no longer exists; only its façade remains. While the parcel technically remains listed in the National Register as part of the Whiskey Row Historic District, it has likely lost integrity. It is possible that the façade will be refurbished and incorporated into new structure in the future, but, at the moment, it stands in isolation, without immediate plans.

Bibliography

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Photographs Showing Current Condition of 105 West Main Street and Adjoining Properties.

Photographer: Daniel Vivian
Date of Photographs: August 2016



105 West Main Street, view from southwest.

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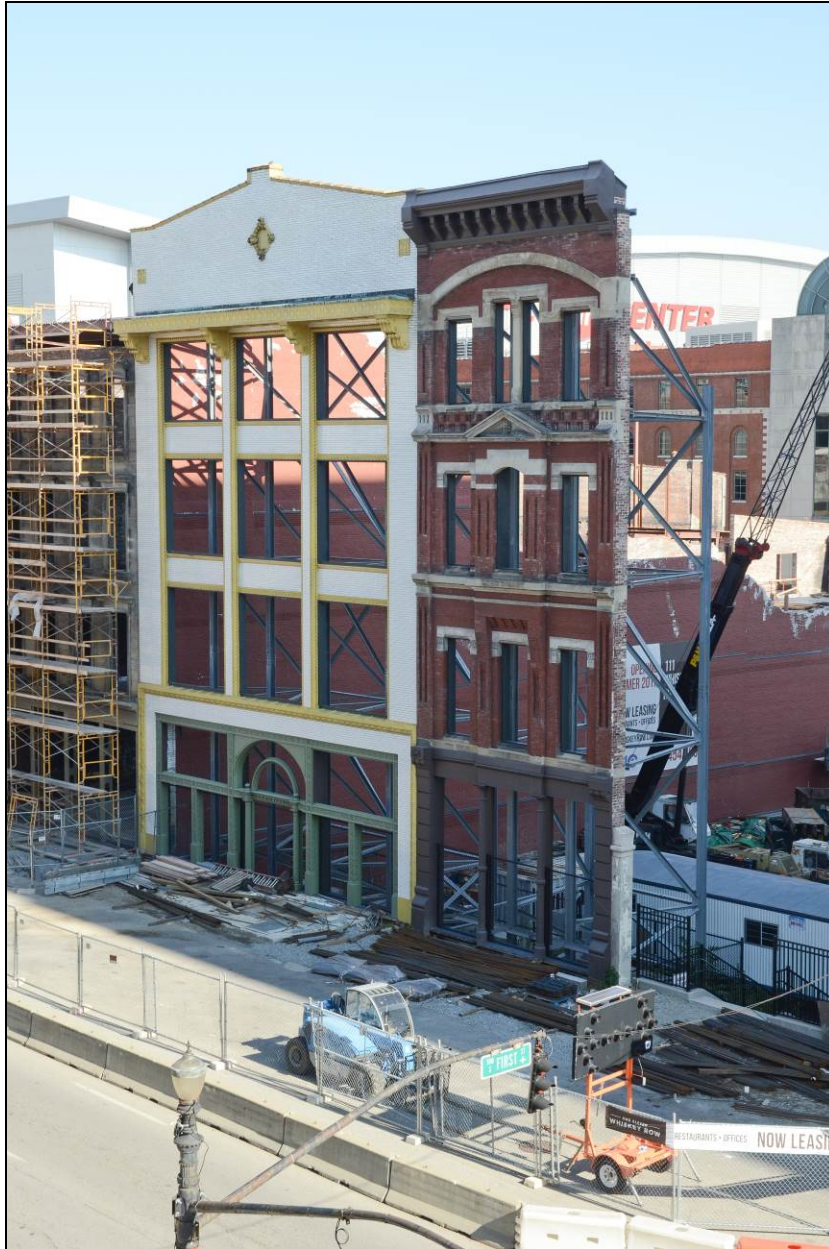


103-109 West Main Street, view from north.

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105-109 West Main Street, view from southeast.

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105 West Main Street, view from southeast.



105 West Main Street, view from east.