

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Reliance Varnish Company Building

Other names/site number: JFL 9094

Name of related multiple property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 915 East Kentucky Street

City or town: Louisville State: Kentucky County: Jefferson

Not For Publication: NA

Vicinity: NA

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X 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 X 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: X 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 _____

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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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

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u>1</u>	_____	Total

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Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register NA

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

DOMESTIC/Multiple Dwelling

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTENCE/Storage

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTENCE/Processing

INDUSTRY/PROCESSING/EXTRACTION/Manufacturing Facility

COMMERCE/TRADE/Warehouse

Current Functions

VACANT/NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification

LATE 19th AND EARLY 20th CENTURY AMERICAN MOVEMENTS: Commercial Style

Materials:

Principal exterior materials of the property:

Foundation: Concrete, Brick

Walls: Brick, Concrete

Roof: Synthetics

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Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

The Reliance Varnish Company Building (JFL 9094) is a sprawling industrial building constructed ca. 1887 and located at 915 East Kentucky Street Louisville, Kentucky (Figure 1). The nominated property is approximately 0.713-acres and encompasses the western half of the city block on the north side of East Kentucky Street, between Swan Street and the historic Louisville & Nashville (L&N) railroad line. The property has undergone several additions since its construction to allow for continued use of the property and growth of the businesses operating therein. The resource is bounded by East Kentucky Street to the south, the L&N railroad line to the west, the South Fork of Beargrass Creek to the north, and the building at the northwest corner of East Kentucky and Swan Streets to the east. The Period of Significance stretches from 1920-1946, the years in which the Reliance Varnish Company's operations were there. This Period of Significance encompasses all of the historic additions made to the building. The building is in good condition and retains sufficient integrity for listing.

Character of Site

The Reliance Varnish Company is situated in Germantown, a densely populated residential neighborhood consisting of single-family houses with some multi-family dwellings scattered throughout and commercial and industrial developments on its outskirts, along major thoroughfares. To the east of Reliance Varnish are residential streets with Shotgun style houses sitting on narrow lots. The Hope Worsted Mills building (NRIS 95001543) is situated to the south, across East Kentucky Street, with more residential streets beyond.¹ Industrial and commercial buildings surround the resource to the north and west, due to the proximity of the railroad line and the South Fork of Beargrass Creek, just half a block to the north. To the west, across the railroad tracks, sits the Smoketown and Shelby Park neighborhoods. The Reliance Varnish Company Building is just south of the East Smoketown Historic District (NRIS SG100009533) and just east of the Shelby Park Historic District (NRIS SG100010247).² Since its construction in 1887 as a tenement housing building, Reliance Varnish Company has undergone several alterations and additions, indicating changing uses for the resource from residential to industrial/commercial. The most notable additions occurred during Reliance Varnish Company's tenure and include a 1926 addition to the east of the original building, a 1936 addition to the north, and a 1941 addition further to the east, off the 1926 addition.

¹ National Register of Historic Places, Hope Worsted Mills, Jefferson County, Kentucky, National Register ##95001543.

² National Register of Historic Places, East Smoketown Historic District, Jefferson County, Kentucky, National Register #97000661; National Register of Historic Places, Shelby Park Historic District, Jefferson County, Kentucky, National Register #08000190

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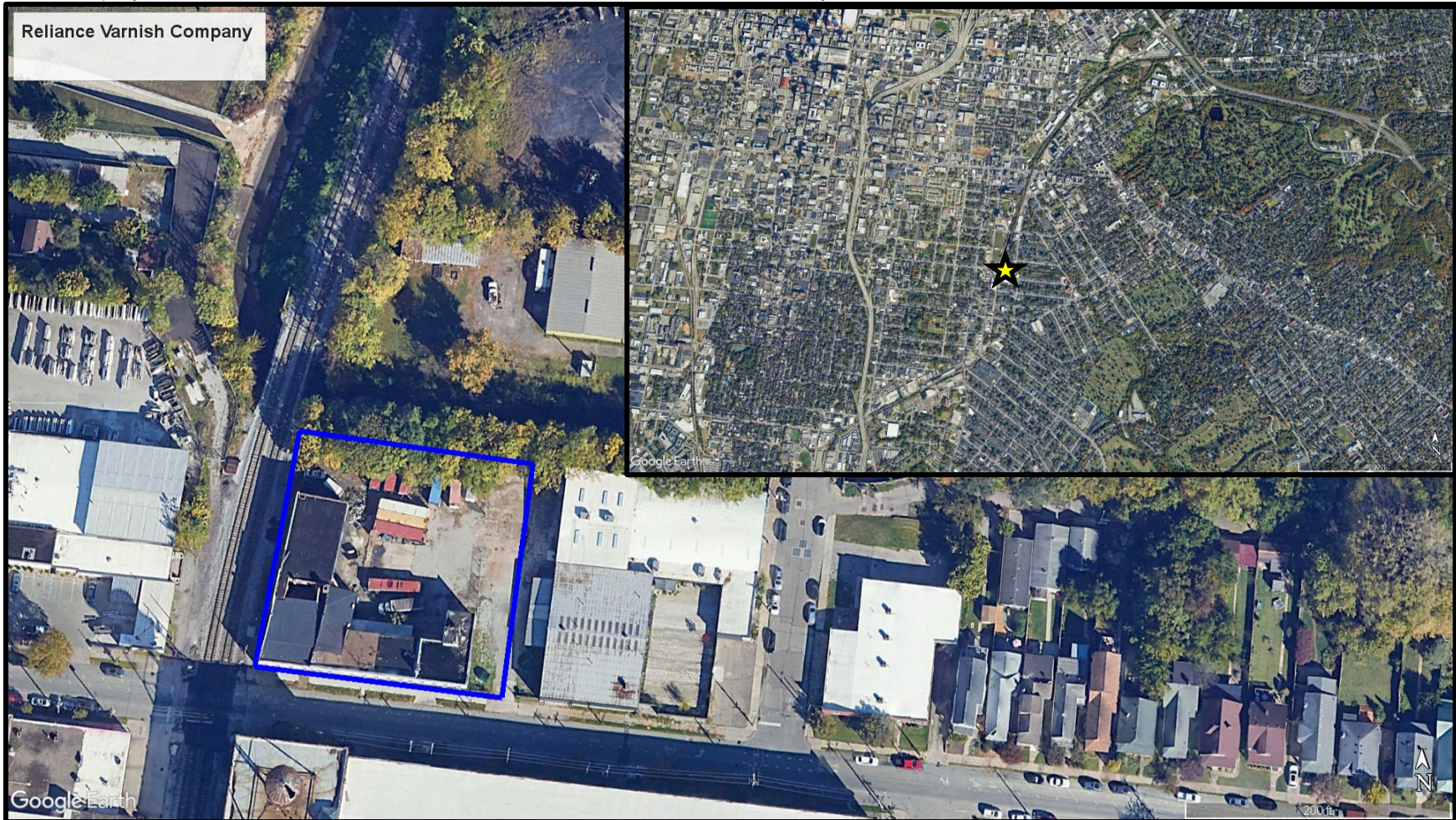


Figure 1. Boundary of the Reliance Varnish Company Building (Google Earth). Vicinity map in the corner callout.

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History of the Reliance Varnish Company Site and Building

The Reliance Varnish Company Building was constructed in ca. 1887 as tenement housing for African Americans. From 1887 to 1901, Louisville City Directories indicate that the building was residential housing for anywhere from 5 to 9 African Americans and the 1892 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows the original building as being “Negro Tenement” housing.

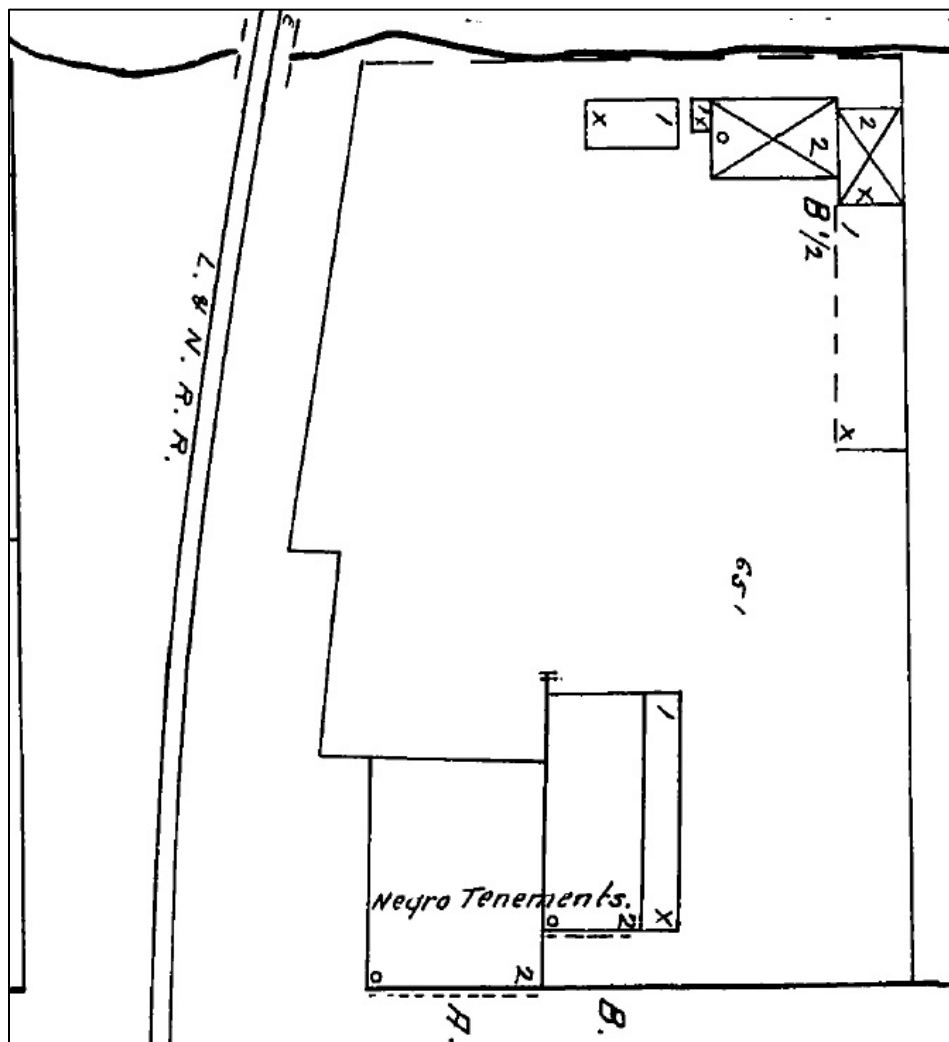


Figure 2. 1892 Sanborn Map

Around the turn of the century, as the City of Louisville underwent large-scale industrialization and as industrial operations moved outward from the city center, this area became a key geographic location due to its location along the L&N railroad line and Beargrass Creek. In 1902, this building switched uses and was occupied by the Finzer Brothers Tobacco Company. The Finzer Brothers stayed there until 1904 when, for only a year, according to Louisville City Directories, the P. Jacobson Furniture Manufacturer moved in. From 1905 through 1909, the J.M. Case Mill Manufacturing Company occupied the space. This company is shown on the 1905 Sanborn Map, which also shows two associated buildings behind the original structure. These buildings were demolished at some point between 1905 and 1928.

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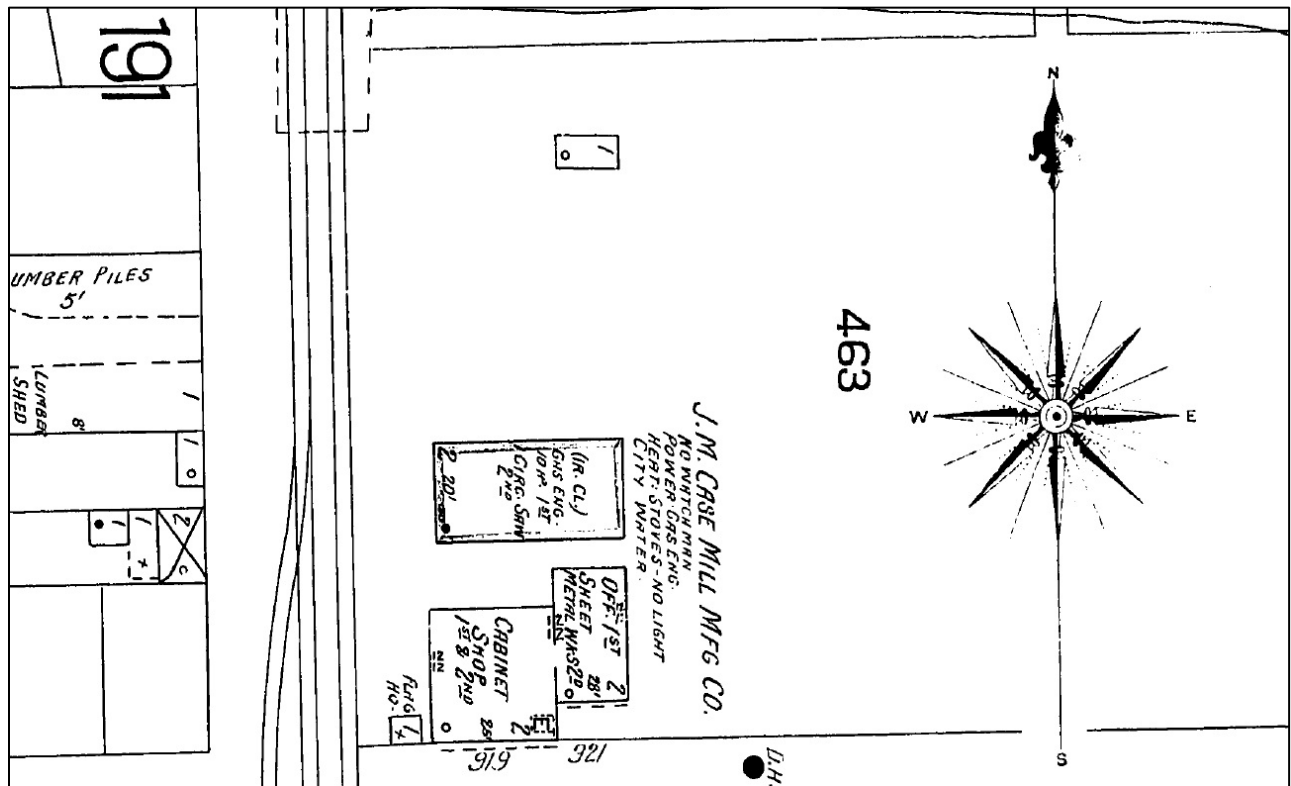


Figure 3. 1905 Sanborn Map

From 1913 until 1919, the Quinine Whisky Company held their operations at 915-917 E. Kentucky Street until, in 1920, Reliance Varnish Company moved in. The Reliance Varnish Company grew the site from what it looked like in the early 20th century to its current appearance and footprint. They held their factory in the main portion of the building with a raw material warehouse to the north (in the 1936 addition), lacquer manufacturing and offices to the east (in the 1926 addition), and the shipping and labeling room in the far western addition (built in 1941).

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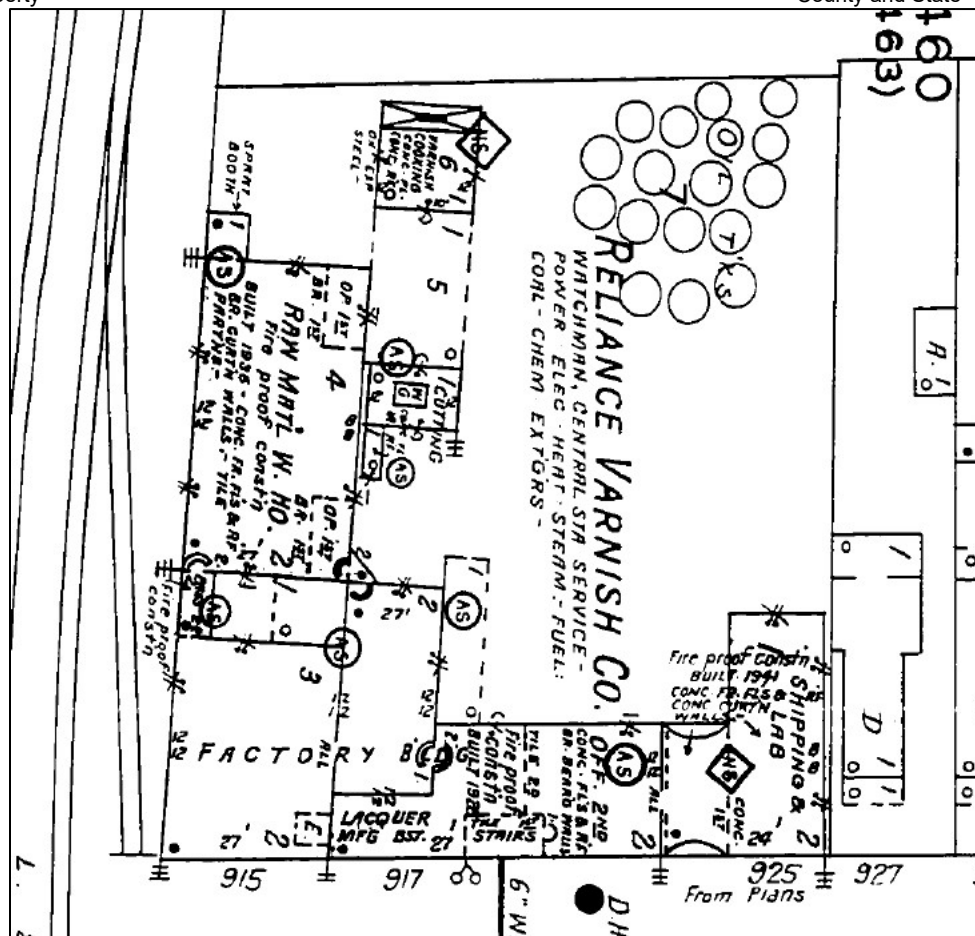


Figure 4. 1928 Sanborn Map updated in 1941

In the years since Reliance Varnish Company operated at the building, it housed various other industrial manufacturing businesses, a printing press, and then, in the late 20th and early 21st century, it became storage.

Description of Reliance Varnish Company Building as it Stands Today

Exterior

The Reliance Varnish Company Building is a long two-story brick building of varying heights, with a brick and concrete foundation, a common bond brick exterior with stone accents around window and door openings, and a flat roof with a small parapet. The south (main) façade is made up of four distinct sections: the westernmost being the original, 19th century portion of the building, the middle portion being the largest in width and height, a small portion just east of that with an covered thruway/driveway, and the final being the easternmost portion.

The westernmost section is the oldest and thus the most unlike the later additions. The first level of the south facade features a wide rusticated entryway on the east end where the large first addition stands and two small replacement window openings to the west, each with stone sills and arched brick lintels. The second level features four evenly spaced replacement double-hung windows with stone sills and brick lintels that are straight and flared, unlike the arched opening on the first level.

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The central portion has nine bays, each of which are identical, except for the central bay which houses a rusticated entryway with open pediment on the first level. The other eight bays feature replacement double-hung windows on the first floor that are taller than those on the original portion of the building, and small windows in the raised basement. All nine bays have window openings on the second floor that are identical to those on the original portion of the building, one of which has been infilled with brick (third from the west). The window openings on the first floor have arched brick lintels and stone sills while the windows in the basement and second floor all have stone sills and brick lintels that are straight and flared, matching the style of the original building.

The third section is dominated by the wide opening on the first floor to accommodate a vehicle and access to the thruway/driveway. The two windows on the second level are identical to those on the other two sections. The large opening has a brick lintel that matches all the window openings. The final, easternmost section has two bays that are identical to those on the second section. There is a single interior brick chimney where sections two and three meet and the roofline for the second section reaches slightly higher than that of the rest of the building.

The western façade had window openings in the past, all of which have been infilled with brick, leaving the sills and lintels exposed, which are nearly all identical to those on the main façade. The one exception lies in a slightly protruding hyphen between the original building and the 1936 addition that once had a window in the second level with a round-arched lintel. On this same section, there was once a secondary entryway, with a concrete block ramp in front, that has since been infilled with concrete blocks. There is also an interior brick chimney on the north end of the original portion of the building that is flush with the exterior wall.

The eastern façade, which is associated with the 1941 addition, features asymmetrical fenestration on both levels. The first level has a large eight-over-eight double-hung window on the south end with a small window next to it that has been infilled. North of that window is a ribbon of three window openings with a stone sill. Just north of the ribbon of windows is a single, four-over-four double-hung window with a stone sill and a secondary entryway. The second level features four window openings of different heights and widths, all of which appear to be original double-hung windows with stone sills and no lintels. The style of this façade differs slightly from the rest of the building as well, with imbedded pilasters and bands separating the bays and the two floors as well as a band of rowlock brick near the roofline.

The final form of the plant is a large L-shape, running along the railroad tracks on the west side and East Kentucky Street on the south. On the west side, along the rail spur, is the raw materials warehouse, constructed in 1936.³ Behind it is a varnish cooking building and a cutting room. The primary factory runs along East Kentucky Street with lacquer manufacturing in the basement, varnish manufacturing on the first floor, and offices on the second floor.⁴ On the far east side of the parcel is a covered tunnel entrance through the building to the rear yard and a shipping room and laboratory. At the back of the site was a cluster of oil tanks (now removed).⁵

³ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1941.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

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The physical plant itself was a three-story brick structure plus a basement. The architectural design of the exterior was in a decidedly late-nineteenth century commercial style that was relatively devoid of ornamentation. The interior was followed the traditional manufacturing facility layout with open floors for storing raw materials and house manufacturing equipment. Since it was a multi-story building, the gravity-flow method of paint production was easily implemented.

Interior

The interior of the building matches the exterior in both materials and apparent layout. Along the south side of the building, running east and west along East Kentucky Street, there are three bays on the west side and a single long bay on the right side, prior to the pass-through. On the other side is a single room on the first floor. At the rear of the building, running north/south along the tracks, is a single large room with an open courtyard separating it from the front of the building. One of the interior bays extends slightly to the rear, disrupting the interior of the overall L-shape of the building. The second-floor interior matches the first floor configuration, except there are more combined spaces at the front of the building, where the first floor features individual bays.

There are three staircases within the building. One at the rear is a straight stair flight, the primary staircase is in the center of the front building, directly adjacent to the primary entrance. The final staircase is on the far east side and is a straight flight between the first and second floors.

The floors are nearly all concrete with a single second floor space featuring a layered wood floor in very poor condition. The ceilings are nearly all concrete as well with regularly spaced barrel arches and regularly spaced concrete columns and beams. The entire structure is visibly designed to carry very heavy operations, consistent with the production of whiskey and then varnish, where nearly every material is a liquid. The second-floor ceilings are a mix of concrete and exposed roof rafters and planks. The building's materials point to the evolution of the building's use, from a tenement building to its later construction that served heavy industry.

The walls are primarily exposed or painted brick, though in a few instances the staircases feature exposed fireblocking. The windows along the front of the building are primarily wood double-hung windows, regularly spaced across the façade. At the rear and on the sides the windows are more industrial and are primarily the typical large steel windows associated with industrial facilities. None of the windows are in good condition, but most appear to be at least original to the construction of the building.

Changes to the Property Since the Period of Significance

The building has not changed much since the Period of Significance. Most of the building's alterations occurred during the Period of Significance when Reliance Varnish Company operated at the site. Since their occupation, the building has had some replacement windows and doors, had some openings infilled with brick or concrete block, and the parapet's ridgeline capped with metal. All of these alterations have occurred to allow the building to remain in use as an industrial/manufacturing site and later as a viable storage warehouse.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- 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

- 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 old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance

INDUSTRY

Period of Significance

1920-1946

Cultural Affiliation

NA

Significant Dates

1887, 1920, 1936, 1941

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Significant Person

NA

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The Reliance Varnish Company Building (JFL 9094) meets National Register Criterion A. The building is associated with the Reliance Varnish Company, which began in 1919 and grew into one of the largest industrial suppliers in North America. The company began at the site in 1919 and operated there through 1947, when its expansion required a more modern industrial setting further from the city center. The founding of the company as a family concern and its growth through mergers and acquisitions closely followed the trend of the industry in Louisville between 1865 and 1955. Its success contributed to the City of Louisville being the 6th largest producer of paint and varnish in the country after World War II.

Historic Context: Paint and Varnish Manufacturers in Louisville, 1865-1955

Research Methodology

The Varnish industry in Louisville has been sparsely documented to date. The best account of the industry comes from the Dehart Paint and Varnish Company National Register nomination (NRIS 05000789), by Cynthia Johnston in 2005. Her context has been heavily used here, with original citations. Where possible this context has been supplemented with additional information that has become more accessible in the last twenty years. The original context was developed with primary and secondary resources, theses, and trade publications located through a search of the University of Kentucky's databases. Repositories in Louisville at The Filson Club, the University of Louisville and the Louisville Public Library were checked for sources to develop a local context of the industry in Louisville. Two archives were identified at the University of Louisville's Special Collections that contained documentation concerning the paint and varnish industry in Louisville. The development of the Reliance Varnish Company was developed through mostly primary resources. This includes Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, The Courier-Journal, The United States Patent Office, and court filings.

Comparison Properties

The Reliance Varnish Company was compared to similar buildings associated with the paint and varnish manufacturing industry in Louisville. The company began as a small family operation and the subject building illustrates the company's first growth phase and shows what is the typical size for a production facility within the Louisville industrial market.

The majority of the existing properties of this sort are typical of late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century industrial architecture, and are scattered in areas surrounding the central business district. Resources in the central part of the city which have been demolished include Bridges and Smith Co., 227 West Market; Merchants and Manufacturers Paint, 108-110 South 2nd Street; Strassel-Gaus Paint Co., 213 West Market; Progress Paint Company 826 West Main.

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Only one paint and varnish manufacturing facility located west of downtown is extant. The Peaslee-Gaulbert Paint and Varnish Company (NRIS 83002719, later owned by Devoe and Reynolds), at 1427 Lytle Street, is a large complex of four- to five-story brick buildings. Non-extant resources in this area of the city include General Varnish Company, North 15th and High Street; Louisville Paint Manufacturing Company, 1110 West Main Street; Vulcan Varnish Company, 1112 West Main Street; and Progress Varnish Company, 16th and High Street.

There are five remaining properties located on the east side of downtown Louisville, including the Reliance Varnish Company at 915 East Kentucky Street. These resources are DeHart Paint and Varnish Company, 906 East Main Street; J.F. Kurfes Company (KCI), 201 East Market; Edward H. Marcus Paint Company, 235-237 East Market; Blatz Company, Inc. at 319 Shelby Street; and Lampton Paint Company, 1201 Story Avenue. Four of these resources, including DeHart Paint and Varnish, are three- or four-story brick buildings. Only the Lampton Paint Company building is a one-story brick facility.

Resources associated with paint and varnish manufacture were also located in the industrial areas south of the central business district. Extant properties associated with paint and varnish manufacturing are: Jones-Dabney Company, 1481 South 11th Street; Louisville Varnish Company, 14th and Maple Street; and Kelly Technical Coatings, 1445 South 15th Street. All of these extant resources were 3- and 4-story brick buildings. The Jones-Dabney Company and Kelly Technical Coatings contained several buildings on their sites. Porter Paint Company at 400 South 13th Street is also extant. This manufacturing plant was constructed at the end of the context period in 1949. It is also a large 3-story brick building. Resources demolished in this section of the city include: Charles Long Company, 1520-1530 West Hill Street and Schaefer Company, 1315 West Kentucky Street.

Paint and Varnish Production

Paint as a material has existed for centuries. Paint was primarily used for decorative purposes such as artwork. By the mid-nineteenth century, the use of paint had become widely popular for the protection of building surfaces. These paints were confined to white paint (white lead in oil) and red paint (red oxide in linseed oil).⁶ These types of paints were prepared by mixing the dry mineral with a binder, like linseed oil. The individual painter made paints on-site.⁷

The process of modern paint manufacturing was patented in 1867. This method of producing ready-mix paint was invented by D.R. Averill of Newberg Ohio.⁸ The development of prepared paint introduced a variety of new colors and new applications. Paint served to preserve and protect buildings, products and machinery by prolonging their useful life. By the 1880s, mixed-paint manufacturing became an established industry.⁹ Paint manufacturers also produced varnish as either a binder for paint production or as a separate coating product.¹⁰

⁶ Johnson, Paul C., p. 3.

⁷ Trigg, Ernest, 1945, p. 3.

⁸ Trigg, Ernest, 1945, p. 3.

⁹ Johnson, Paul, C. p. 3.

¹⁰ Spiegelman, Stanley, p. 2.

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Paint and varnish production began as a regionally based industry. This was largely a function of keeping distribution costs low to make the business profitable.¹¹ The industry was mainly characterized by small-to-medium-sized manufacturing plants during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.¹²

The equipment required for the manufacture of paint and varnish is relatively simple. Paint manufacturing involves a process of mixing pigments with a suitable vehicle and grinding it to a particular fineness, color and consistency.¹³ There is a five-part process involved in the manufacture of paint: mixing, grinding, thinning, filling and packaging.¹⁴ Dry pigments are placed in mixers with a vehicle, or oil. These materials are mixed into a paste. The paste is then sent to the grinding mill to knead the mixture until the pigment has become dispersed in the vehicle. This process creates a liquid paint. Then the paint is sent to the thinning tanks. Tints and thinning solvents are added to the paint until the desired product is achieved.¹⁵ From this point the finished paint is sent to the filling area where the paint is poured into cans. After that, the paint cans are labeled and packaged for distribution.¹⁶

Paint is produced in batches. By producing paint in batches, the quality and consistency of the product is controlled.¹⁷ This method of production made it easy for small firms to participate in the industry. Large manufacturers were just multiplying the production method with more equipment.¹⁸

The method used to produce paint worked best in a vertical arrangement, known as gravity-flow. This allowed the paint to move through the production facility in stages from top to bottom. Since gravity-flow was the preferred method in producing ready-mixed paint, multi-story buildings were essential for manufacturing.¹⁹ The typical paint plant was a three- to four-story brick building. Buildings could either be built to specification or existing buildings could be used.²⁰ Equipment was generally compact, allowing for retrofitting of buildings. Elevators were also a required to move the raw materials to the top floor.²¹ In the post-World War II era, large, single-story buildings began to be used for paint manufacturing. Using a horizontal flow method, these plants helped to maximize efficiency and avoid bottlenecks from the transfer of materials.²²

Varnish manufacture involves a process of cooking, cooling, thinning and cleaning.²³ Most of the production takes place in large kettles. Thinning tanks are also used.²⁴ Varnish manufacturing

¹¹ Johnson, Paul C., p. 3.

¹² Louisville Magazine, p. 12.

¹³ Mutersbaugh, Gordon, p. 477.

¹⁴ Johnson, Paul C., p.15.

¹⁵ Spiegelman, Stanley, p. 9.

¹⁶ Bidlack, Verne and Edgar Fasig, p. 44-45.

¹⁷ Spiegelman, Stanley, p. 9.

¹⁸ Bidlack, Verne and Edgar Fasig, p. 1.

¹⁹ Spiegelman, Stanley, p. 9.

²⁰ Bidlack, Verne and Edgar Fasig, p. 3.

²¹ Spiegelman, Stanley, p. 9.

²² Bidlack, Verne and Edgar Fasig, p. 3.

²³ Ibid, p. 48.

²⁴ Johnson, Paul C., p. 18.

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takes place in a single area. This created a horizontal flow operation, so production could take place on a single floor.²⁵

Many manufacturing plants also had in-house laboratories. Their purpose was both for research and development, as well as quality control of the products. Raw materials had to be approved both chemically and physically, by the laboratory.²⁶ Once the paint batch was thinned, the lab tested samples to make sure it met company standards. This was done before the product entered the filling and packaging stages.²⁷

Though the basic production methods of paint manufacture remained relatively unchanged, the size and ownership of firms started to change. Mergers and acquisitions of paint companies increased during the mid-twentieth century.²⁸ In an effort to increase standing in a market, larger firms started appearing. These large manufacturers often changed from a regionally-based firm to nationally oriented businesses. As the twentieth century progressed, the number of small and medium-sized paint and varnish businesses decreased.²⁹

Paint and Varnish Manufacturing in Louisville

Louisville's first paint manufacturer was the Peaslee-Gaulbert Paint and Varnish Company that was established in 1867. The plant was located at 139 Main Street near 4th Street.³⁰ Prior to this time, paint supply houses imported paint manufactured in the Mid-Atlantic region or the East coast. The first paint retailer in Louisville was the H. Marcus Company founded in 1853.³¹ Louisville was an attractive location for paint and varnish manufacturing. Easy access to raw materials and established distribution channels made Louisville an ideal city for the industry.³² Louisville's central location and established transportation routes made access to regional markets convenient. A market for industrial paints and coatings was already established in Louisville. The wide variety of manufacturing industries in the city—from tools, to wood products, to machinery—provided a ready market.³³

By 1875, five firms were listed in the city directory under the heading of “Paints, Oils and varnishes.” These included: the Bates and Blatz Company at 61 Market St; W. H. Fox at 359 Main Street; H. Marcus Company at 139 Main Street; and G.W. Porter at 215 Market Street.³⁴ There was no delineation between manufacturers and suppliers at this point.

The city directory in 1885 had two separate listings for paint manufacturers and paint dealers/suppliers. The Peaslee-Gaulbert Company was listed as a manufacturer at 415-417 West

²⁵ Bidlack, Verne and Edgar Fasig, p. 48.

²⁶ Trigg, Ernest, 1917, p. 6.

²⁷ Spiegelman, Stanley, p. 10.

²⁸ Kleber, John E., ed., p. 683.

²⁹ Rich, Susan, ed., p. 5.

³⁰ The Courier-Journal, 1941, Section 2-1.

³¹ Kleber, John E., ed. P. 683.

³² Center of American Markets, Louisville, p. 16.

³³ Louisville, A Guide to Falls City, p. 39.

³⁴ Caron's City Directories for Louisville, 1875, p. 675.

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Main. Peaslee-Gaulbert was the only Louisville based manufacturer. John Lucas Company was also listed as a manufacturer, but this firm was actually based in Philadelphia. The paint suppliers were listed as: John Bates and Son, 235 West Market; Valentin Blatz, 223 West Market; G. Kline and Son, 1801 West Market; McCarty and O'Bryan, 925 West Market; and H. Marcus Company, 239-241 East Market.³⁵

According to the 1890 city directory, three firms were listed as paint manufacturers. These were: Collins Varnish Company, 14th and Maple; D.J. ETTY, 152 Bullitt; and Louisville Lead and Color Works (Peaslee-Gaulbert), 417 West Main. Ten other businesses were listed under the heading "Paint, Oil and Glass."³⁶

By the turn of the century, Louisville's paint manufacturing industry was beginning to become established. The local industry had become a substantial presence and formed its own trade group in 1898, the Louisville Paint, Varnish & Lacquer Manufacturers Association (later known as the Louisville Paint and Varnish Production Club).³⁷ Fourteen paint manufacturers were now operating in Louisville: J.B. Atkinson and Company, 629 West Market; Val Blatz and Sons, 213 West Main; Bridges-McDowell Company, 829 West Main; Bridges-Strassel Company, 233-235 West Market; Central Paint Company, 1204 8th Street; L.H. Harping, 1940 Shelby Street; William Hinkle, 853-855 West Main; J.F. Kurfees, 118 East Market; Lampton, Crane and Ramey Company, 813-815 West Main; Edward H. Marcus, 239-243 East Market; J.W. McCarty and Company, 713 West Main; Peaslee-Gaulbert Company, 413-417 West Main; Robinson-Pettet Company, 528-532 West Main; and John Ryans, 323 West Market.³⁸

The 1910 city directory listed 18 paint and varnish manufacturers throughout the city.³⁹ The number of businesses increased to 23 by 1920.⁴⁰ By 1927, Louisville's paint and varnish industry was ranked 15th top producer in the nation.⁴¹ In 1928, Peaslee-Gaulbert Paint and Varnish Company was purchased by the national paint manufacturer, Devoe and Reynolds Company. This represented a transition from a regional manufacturer to a national producer for one company.⁴²

In 1930, the number of paint and varnish manufacturers had dropped to 21 in Louisville.⁴³ These were firms located throughout the city, including: Blatz Company, Inc., 319 Shelby Street; Bridges, Smith & Company, 227-229 West Market Street; Eastland Paint Company, no address given; General Varnish Company, 15th and High Streets; Jones-Dabney Company, 1481 South 11th Street; J. F. Kurfees Paint Company, 201 East Market Street; Lampton, Crane and Ramey Company, 1201 Story Avenue; Charles R. Long Jr. Company, 1520-1530 West Hill Street; Louisville Paint Manufacturing Company, 1110 West Main Street; Louisville Varnish Company, 14th and Maple Streets; Merchants and Manufacturers Paint Company, 108-110 South 2nd Street;

³⁵ Caron's City Directories for Louisville, 1885.

³⁶ Caron's City Directories for Louisville, 1890.

³⁷ Louisville Magazine, p. 12.

³⁸ Caron's Directories for Louisville, 1900.

³⁹ Caron's Directories for Louisville, 1910.

⁴⁰ Caron's Directories for Louisville, 1920.

⁴¹ Beck, Alfred Luceine, p. 14.

⁴² Louisville Magazine, p. 12.

⁴³ Paint, Varnish, and Lacquer Manufacturers of the U.S. and Canada, p. 13.

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Peaslee-Gaulbert Paint and Varnish Company (Davoe and Raynolds Co.), 15th and Lytle Streets; Porter Paint Company, 101 West Market Street; Progress Varnish Company, 16th and High Streets; Reliable Paint Company, 906 East Main Street; Reliance Varnish Company, 915 East Kentucky Street; Strassel-Gans Paint Company, 213 West Market; The Schaefer Company, 1315 West Kentucky Street; Sun Varnish Company, Inc., 15th and Magnolia Streets; and Vulcan Varnish Company, 1112 West Main Street.⁴⁴ The Reliance Varnish Company began manufacturing in 1919 at 915 East Kentucky Street. They remained at that location until 1948, when their new facility was opened.

The 1940 city directory lists 36 paint manufacturers in Louisville. Seven of these firms were not locally based but were franchises for companies based elsewhere.⁴⁵ Additionally, Devoe and Raynolds had acquired the local firm of Jones-Dabney Company in 1938.⁴⁶ A shift from the small, regional manufacturer to the large, national manufacturer was starting to occur in Louisville. With this many firms involved in the paint and varnish manufacturing industry, Louisville had become the 6th top producer in the nation by 1941.⁴⁷

By the close of the context period in 1955, Louisville's paint and varnish industry consisted of 17 manufacturers.⁴⁸ During the 1960s, Louisville's paint and varnish industry had expanded beyond a regional focus. Many of the manufacturing plants were now marketing their products on a national basis.⁴⁹ This was largely a function of the mergers and acquisitions trend that had been increasing. There were sixteen paint manufacturers left in the city in the mid-1950s. Louisville had become one of the leading producers of coatings products.⁵⁰ Of these manufacturers, seven firms were still operating as small, regional paint and varnish producers. This trend would continue through the end of the twentieth century.⁵¹ The era of the small paint and varnish manufacturer was fading, as large companies were supplanting them in the industry.

Reliance Varnish Company

Ben G. Robertson started the Reliance Varnish Company in 1919, acquiring the former Quinine Whisky Company property at 915 East Kentucky Street.⁵² The new concern immediately began expanding the building to meet their needs with an approved permit to construct a \$5,000 addition.⁵³ Approaching the market aggressively, Robertson schemed to induce employees of other companies to recommend Reliance Varnish, paying them with cash and automobiles.⁵⁴ The matter was quickly brought to the Federal Trade Commission's attention and by December 1924 the company had agreed to cease the practice, fully admitting to all of the allegations.⁵⁵

⁴⁴ Paint, Varnish, and Lacquer Manufacturers of the U.S. and Canada, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Caron's City Directory for Louisville, 1940.

⁴⁶ Kleber, John E., p. 683.

⁴⁷ Hazelip, Mary Jane, p. 261.

⁴⁸ Caron's Directory for Louisville, 1955.

⁴⁹ Kleber, John E., p. 683.

⁵⁰ Louisville Magazine, p. 12.

⁵¹ Kleber, John E., p. 683.

⁵² Caron's Directory for Louisville, 1919.

⁵³ Courier-Journal, 7/1/1919, p. 6.

⁵⁴ Courier-Journal, 11/7/1924, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Courier-Journal, 12/17/1924, p. 3.

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Figure 5. Historic Photo of the Reliance Varnish Company ca. 1935. Note that the thruway had not been covered and the 1941 addition had not been added.

From about 1925 through 1933 the business prospered. Throughout the 1930s the company developed several veneer stenciling techniques, obtaining patents in 1934 and 1936.⁵⁶ The company primarily supplied other industrial manufacturers, specifically those producing furniture and cabinetry.⁵⁷ These lines of business help explain the development of veneer stencils, as a cheaper alternative to actual hardwood veneer, during a time when the consumer market was weak.

Though the Great Depression was shuttering other smaller paint and varnish businesses, Reliance Varnish took the opportunity to expand. Just prior to World War II, in 1941, the company filed plans to expand on their existing site, adding additions and a new laboratory building.⁵⁸ The next year, as war production was ramping up, the company added a framed shed on the site.⁵⁹

Throughout the war years the company hired and expanded, relying on those exempted from service and not already employed at their highest skill in another war production capacity.⁶⁰ The existing product line was directly applicable to wartime needs and so was able to continue production without significant alterations to the original products.

⁵⁶ US Patents #729894 & #2141020A

⁵⁷ *Reliance Varnish Co. v. Mullins Lmbr. Co.*, 213 S.C. 84, 48 S.E.2d 653 (S.C. 1948)

⁵⁸ *Courier-Journal*, 1/1/1941, p. 4.

⁵⁹ *Courier-Journal*, 11/15/1942, p. 9.

⁶⁰ *Courier-Journal*, 4/15/1943, p. 9.

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By the completion of the Second World War, the company had filled its existing parcel along East Kentucky Street, employed 160 workers, and was searching for a better place to expand.⁶¹ Despite its proximity to the L&N Railroad, the South Fork of the Beargrass Creek, and the heavy industrial zoning in its current location, the company simply needed more room. The company increased its capital stock from \$400,000 to \$750,000 and began the process of purchasing land on Crittenden Drive, a developing suburban industrial area near the airport to the south of the city.⁶² By 1948 the company's new \$1,000,000 modern industrial complex was complete and the whole concern moved away from East Kentucky Street, selling the premises to Hart Products Company.

Over the next several decades the company purchased and opened additional plants around the country, supplying industrial concerns nearer to their original production points and expanding into new industries, such as concrete, resins, laminates, and adhesives. By the early 1980s the company had eight operating divisions and 26 plants across the United States and Canada.⁶³

Evaluation of the Significance of the Property within the Historic Context: Paint and Varnish Manufacturers in Louisville, 1865-1955

The Reliance Varnish Company Building meets National Register Criterion A. The building is associated with the Reliance Varnish Company, which began in 1919 and grew into one of the largest industrial suppliers in North America. The facility is typical of other smaller varnish and paint company buildings in the city at the beginning of the twentieth century and matches the expected type in location, setting, design, materials, association, and feeling. The company operated at the site for almost thirty years, growing from a small family operation to a multi-national corporation. Its growth and operation at the site coincided with the growth of the industry in Louisville, from the 15th largest producer of varnish and paint to the 6th largest producer in the nation. The company only left the site when its expansion was so great that it could no longer fit, matching the typical practice of expansion within the historical city area until moving to a more suburban industrial site.

Evaluation of the Integrity Between the Significance and the Property's Physical Condition

Manufacturing plants in Louisville should possess integrity of location, design, and materials if they will be enabled to have an integrity of association that is necessary for eligibility under Criterion A. The historic significance of the industrial complex at 915 East Kentucky Street is visible through its location, setting, design, and materials. Thus, there is an integrity between the property's physical reality and our historic associations with the company's significant presence in the paint and varnish industry.

The location of the property should be the one that is historically associated with the particular business. The Reliance Varnish Company has integrity of **location**, as it remains at its historic site. The location of the industrial complex underscores the sense of identity because the building

⁶¹ Courier-Journal, 4/24/1947, Sec. 2, p. 10.

⁶² Courier-Journal, 1/30/1945, p. 11.

⁶³ Courier-Journal, 1/4/1970, F8.

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has not been moved. The property has retained a high level of its integrity of **setting**. The area immediately surrounding the building remains intact. Across the street to the south the Hope Worsted Mills remains entirely intact with its original massing, creating a street wall along East Kentucky Street. The South Fork of the Beargrass Creek remains the same, running along the north side of the property before sharply turning north. The similar industrial buildings in the surrounding Germantown, Shelby Park, and Smoketown neighborhoods reinforce the smaller scale industrial function of the building, directly linking it to the industrial development of the area.

Louisville paint and varnish manufacturers prior to 1945 preferred the multi-story building design. This vertical arrangement of space maximized the manufacturing capacity in urban areas during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Interiors should be open floors with few partitions, reflecting a manufacturing function. Additions can be expected but should not impact the historic building in scale or massing. The primary material on the exterior should be brick, which reflects a turn-of-the-century manufacturing aesthetic. Interior materials should reflect the time period that the building was constructed. Decorative finish materials would only be expected in office areas. Buildings which retain these physical characteristics will convey the sense of the property's industrial identity.

The property retains a strong level of **design** integrity. The building's historic design and configuration, as seen in photographs from the 1920s and Sanborn Maps from the 1940s, remains intact, with almost no exterior modifications aside from the removal of tanks at the rear of the site. The original massing and detailing remain the same as when the building was used by Reliance Varnish. The interior floor plan remains similar to how the building was originally used.

The building also possesses strong integrity of **materials**. The original concrete and brick surfaces all remain intact and exposed through the interior and exterior of the building, reinforcing our ability to perceive the industrial purpose of the building.

Because the building retains an integrity of location, setting, materials, and design, it can be said to have an integrity of **association** with its Paint and Varnish industry. The high level of intactness of the entire complex reinforces both the significance of the individual building, and reinforces the historic identity of the surrounding historic neighborhoods and neighborhood industrial centers. The company began as a small enterprise and through ingenuity developed into one of North America's largest industrial suppliers. Though the company moved away from the site in the post-WWII era, 915 East Kentucky was its original home where it developed its most important original products.

Reliance Varnish Company Building
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"Louisville Institutions." The Courier-Journal, February 27, 1941, Section 2-1. Muttersbaugh, Gordon. "Paint Manufacturing." Paint and Varnish Technology.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- 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 Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

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Primary location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State agency

Federal agency

Local government

University

Other

Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____ JFL 9094 _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property 0.713 acres

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

1. Latitude: 38.236337

Longitude: -85.738319

Verbal Boundary Description

The following description was taken from the property's deed, held in the Jefferson County Clerk's Office in Deed Book 12958, Page 722:

Being all of Lot 1 of Minor Subdivision Plat of record in Plat and Subdivision Book 63, Page 5, in the Office of the Clerk of Jefferson County, Kentucky.

Being the same property conveyed from C&A Properties, LLC now known as Arington Family, LLC, a Kentucky limited liability company, by Deed to MMCS Properties, LLC, a Kentucky limited liability company, dated 5/21/2018, recorded 5/23/2018, of record in Deed Book 11156, Page 541, and further by a part of Deed of Consolidation dated 10/12/2022, recorded 10/13/2022, of record in Deed Book 12475, Page 959, all in the Office of the Clerk of Jefferson County, Kentucky.

The property is bounded by East Kentucky Street to the south, the CSX Transportation (formerly L&N) railroad line to the west, the South Fork of the Beargrass Creek to the north, and the property at 986 Swan Street to the east.

Boundary Justification

This boundary was selected to encompass the entirety of the parcel associated with the historic resource. The entire parcel encompasses the western half of the city block between the railroad line, Kentucky Street, Swan Street, and the South Fork of Beargrass Creek.

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Reliance Varnish Co

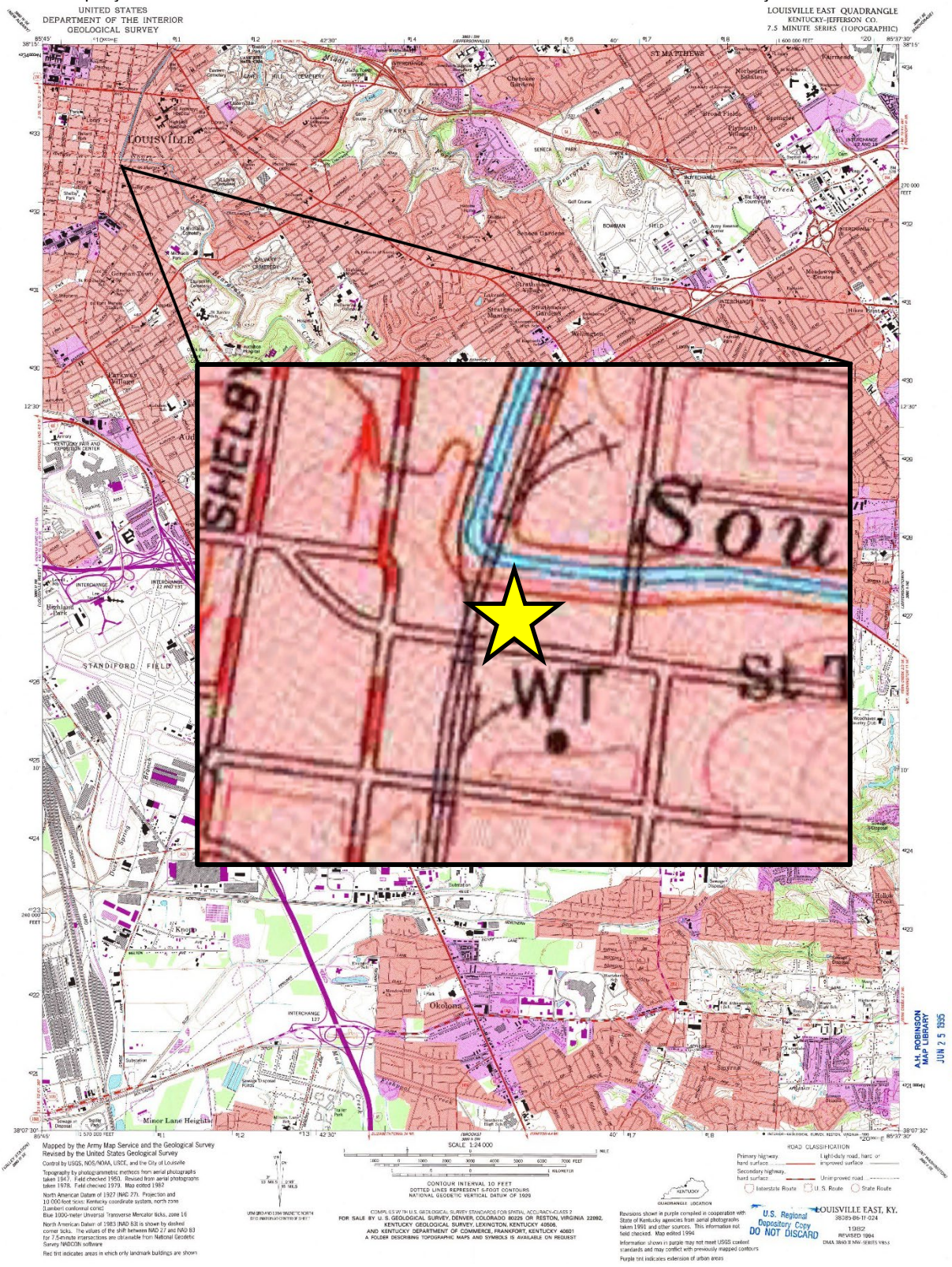
1/14/2025, 1:08:28 AM



Louisville Metro, MSD, LWC & PVA © 2025
This map is not a legal document and should only be used for general reference and identification.

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Reliance Varnish Company Building
Name of Property

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Property Owner:

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

name East Kentucky Lofts Owner LLC
street & number 711 Lyndon Ln. telephone _____
city or town Louisville state KY zip code 40222

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Wes Cunningham, MA Sr. Principal Investigator History/Architecture, Director of National Register Nominations & Research
organization: Pinion Advisors
street & number: 1131 Logan Street
city or town: Louisville state: Kentucky zip code: 40204
e-mail: wcunningham@pinionadvisors.com
telephone: 502-807-0575
date: January 2025

Additional Documentation

- **Maps** (submitted as separate PDF documents):
 - A **USGS map** or equivalent indicating the property's location.
 - **Property Valuation Administrator map** showing the full property's boundary (may differ from the boundary proposed for listing)
 - **District sketch map** (all district nominations; any single listing with 3 or more features)
 - **Photograph Identification Map** (all districts, recommended for any nomination)
- **Floor Plan** for Kentucky properties nominated according to Criterion C
- **Survey Form:** All properties must be surveyed on KHC Individual Resources form. Sites surveyed more than 5 years ago must be re-surveyed.
- **Photographs:** 2 sets. Official set (each image 6MB or larger) named according to NR naming convention; Small set (each image 100-200 KB). Submit as .jpg files
- **Presentation:** Short PowerPoint or video presentation of your property for Review Board

Photographs**Photo Log**

Name of Property: Reliance Varnish Company Building
City or Vicinity: Louisville
County: Jefferson
State: Kentucky
Photographer: Joseph C. Pierson
Date Photographed: 1/15/2025

Reliance Varnish Company Building

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Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 26. The building from the east, facing northwest.
- 2 of 26. The building from the west, facing northeast. The original loading dock is located along the west façade, though the rail spur has been removed.
- 3 of 26. The front façade of the building, facing East Kentucky Street.
- 4 of 26. The rear of the buildings as seen from the neighboring parcel, facing west.
- 5 of 26. The rear façade of the front portion of the building. Facing south toward East Kentucky Street.
- 6 of 26. The rear of the west side of the building, which runs along the rail road track. Facing west.
- 7 of 26. The rear of the site, facing north toward the South Fork of the Beargrass Creek.
- 8 of 26. The rear corner of the west portion of the building, facing southwest.
- 9 of 26. One of the rooms on the first floor, facing south from the rear entrance of the building.
- 10 of 26. One of the rooms on the first floor, facing north toward the entrance from the rear of the building.
- 11 of 26. The first floor on the far north side of the building, facing north.
- 12 of 26. The courtyard in the center of the building along the west side.
- 13 of 26. One of the first floor rooms in the southwest corner, facing south toward East Kentucky Street and the front of the building.
- 14 of 26. The far north end of the building on the first floor.
- 15 of 26. The second floor of the far north portion of the building, facing south from the rear wall.
- 16 of 26. A fire door separating the far north portion of the second floor from the courtyard at the second floor.
- 17 of 26. The second floor in the southwest corner, facing north toward the rear of the building.
- 18 of 26. The southwest corner room on the second floor, facing east toward the rest of the building.
- 19 of 26. One of the bay rooms on the second floor at the front of the building, facing north toward the rear of the building.
- 20 of 26. The second floor at the front of the building, facing east. The primary staircase is on the right.
- 21 of 26. The front of the second floor, facing west.
- 22 of 26. The primary staircase as seen from the second floor, facing down toward the first floor.
- 23 of 26. The southeast corner of the second floor, facing northwest toward the rear of the building. The staircase leads to the first-floor shipping space.
- 24 of 26. The far east side of the second floor, facing south toward the front of the building.
- 25 of 26. The far east side of the first floor, facing south toward the front of the building.
- 26 of 26. The center of the first floor, facing west. East Kentucky Street is to the left.

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