

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Blue Bell Company Plant

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

name of related multiple property listing Historic and Architectural Resources of Greensboro, NC, 1880-1941

## 2. Location

street & number 620 South Elm Street [ ] not for publication

city or town Greensboro [ ] vicinity

state North Carolina code NC county Guilford code 081 zip code 27406-1370

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

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

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

**North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources**

State or Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

[ ] entered in the National Register

[ ] see continuation sheet

[ ] determined eligible for the National Register

[ ] see continuation sheet

[ ] determined not eligible for the National Register

[ ] removed from the National Register

[ ] other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

date of action

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**The Blue Bell Company Plant**

**Guilford County, North Carolina**

Name of Property

County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(check as many boxes as apply)

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

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

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

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
_____	_____	buildings
1	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
1	_____	<b>TOTAL</b>

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)  
Historic and Architectural Resources of Greensboro,  
North Carolina, 1880-1941

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**  
N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(enter categories from instructions)

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

INDUSTRY/manufacturing facility  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

COMMERCE/TRADE/office building  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY AMERICAN  
MOVEMENTS/Industrial  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

foundation brick/concrete  
walls brick, concrete  
\_\_\_\_\_  
roof asphalt  
other \_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

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

**The Blue Bell Company Plant**

**Guilford County, North Carolina**

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**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 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 that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

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

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

**Areas of Significance:**

(Enter categories from instructions)

INDUSTRY

ARCHITECTURE

**Period of Significance:**

1921-1958

**Significant Dates:**

1921; 1924; 1927; 1936; 1958

**Significant Person:**

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation:**

N/A

**Architect/Builder:**

Harry Barton, architect; W.P. Rose, builder

**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 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by historic American Building Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**The Blue Bell Company Plant**

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**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreeage of Property** 1.58

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 17 608805 3991850  
Zone Easting Northing

3           
Zone Easting Northing

2         

4         

**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 Annie Schentag, PhD; Kerry Traynor, M.Arch, Principal [Edited by Claudia Brown, NC SHPO]

organization hta preservation specialists date 10/20/2019

street & number 422 Parker Avenue telephone 716.864.0628

city or town Buffalo state NY zip code 14216

**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 SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner** (Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO)

name ZCD & F, LLC (Andrew Zimmerman)

street & number 1515 Gate City Blvd telephone 336.202.3587

city or town Greensboro state NC zip code 27403

**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 to amend existing 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, D.C. 20503

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Narrative Description of Property

The Blue Bell Company Plant at 620 South Elm Street consists of one interconnected building with three major portions constructed from 1921 through 1927. Located just south of the Downtown Greensboro Historic District, which encompasses much of the city's commercial center, the plant occupies a 2.03-acre tax parcel on the west side of South Elm Street between its intersection with Bain Street to the north and West Gate City Boulevard, which was historically known as West Lee Street, to the south. The oldest portion of the two-story building on a raised basement, located at the northeast end of the L-shaped factory, was completed in January 1921. An addition to the west was completed in 1924 and a large south wing was completed in 1927.

The plant faces South Elm Street to the east, with a substantial presence viewed from Lee Street to the south and Bain Street to the north. A large parking lot occupies the southeast quadrant of the property, at the intersection of South Elm Street and West Lee Street. The historic primary entrance is located on the east elevation facing South Elm Street, with additional secondary entrances located off the parking lot at the intersection of the arms of the ell, and centrally on the north elevation. Exits at the second floor, accessing fire escapes, are located on the south sides of the south wing and its west elevation. The surrounding area features several late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century commercial buildings. A Southern Railway Company railroad track and right-of-way runs north-south on the property's west edge. Sidewalks are located to the east along South Elm Street and to the south along West Lee Street. There are no sidewalks adjacent to the building along Bain Street, where the building directly abuts the street.

The L-shaped massing presents a single building with three periods of construction. Overall, the historic concrete, steel, and brick building is a good example of the 1920s daylight factory that demonstrates the growth of a clothing manufacturing business over time. Although constructed in multiple stages, the two-story building presents a relatively unified composition with steel, multi-light industrial sash and a flexible, open floor plan defined by the column grid.

**Exterior**

The two-story, L-shaped brick, steel, and concrete factory comprises three sections. The initial manufacturing and office building, completed in January 1921, is located at the parcel's northeast corner fronting South Elm Street. In 1924, the company erected a twelve-bay long addition that extended west along Bain Street toward the railroad line. The wing that projects south to West Lee Street, from near the west end of the 1924 addition, was constructed in 1927. Industrial, multi-light, steel sash windows with central hopper fill the masonry openings in most of the structural bays.

North Wing (1921 and 1924)

The brick walls have been covered with painted, textured stucco. As suggested by historic photos (Figure 2) it is possible that the brick was originally exposed and the stucco added when the wing was lengthened in 1924.

The 1921 portion, at the east end of the north wing, is nine bays deep. The narrow east, main façade is eight bays at the first story and three at the second. A flat parapet extends across the east elevation and turns the corner for one bay on the north and south elevations, disguising its shallow-pitched, front-gable roof, which is supported by steel trusses. A simple metal cornice embellishes the parapet. There are two main entrances at the middle of the east elevation. Each entrance has a single-leaf, twelve-light stile and rail wood door with four-light sidelights and ten-light transoms extending across the door and sidelights. The replacement doors, sidelights, and transoms emulate the original elements. Above each entrance is a bracketed flat hood. Each of the three outer bays on the first floor contains nine-over-one double-hung, wooden replacement sash with three-light transoms. Each of the three openings at the second story contains a bank of multi-light steel industrial sash. The two outer bays contain three twenty-light sash with a central eight-light hopper; while the wider opening in the middle bay accommodates four sash: two twenty-light units at the ends and two fifteen-light units in the middle, each with an eight- or six-light hopper. Rusticated granite sills embellish the window openings.

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The north elevation consists of the 1921 nine-bay portion of the building and the 1924 twelve-bay addition. Some of the windows are modern in-kind replacements. (The basement and first-story windows were enclosed with brick flush with the wall, likely in the 1960s, and in December 2016 the brick was removed to expose original steel sash in most of the openings.) Due to the variation in the slope of the site, the basement is partially exposed and marked by short ten- or five-light fixed steel windows with central hopper in several of the bays of the original portion of the building. At the first and second stories, the windows are mostly tripartite, steel industrial sash with twenty-light outer sash and fifteen-light middle sash, all incorporating central hoppers. Paired fifteen-light steel industrial sash windows with six-light hopper are located in the first bay from the east, while two twenty-light industrial sash with eight-light hopper are at the eleventh bay from the east. An entrance with paired aluminum doors, with full height glass panel is located at the fourteenth bay from the east provides access to the first floor. At the ninth bay from the east on the north elevation is a second floor loading bay; a three-light aluminum storefront glazing system currently fills the opening. Metal gutters and intermittently-spaced downspouts line both this and the south elevation.

The three-bay west elevation (the west end of the 1924 addition) features industrial metal sash in each bay on the second floor and in the two bays to the north on the first floor. A metal staircase rises across the south bay to a landing at a hollow metal fire door. The elevation is topped by a gabled parapet with concrete coping.

Much of the south elevation is concealed by the south wing. Eleven bays east of the south wing and the upper story of one bay to the west remain visible. Due to the grade of the site, much of the basement is partially exposed east of the south wing and several of the basement windows openings, previously infilled with brick, have been opened and now contain ten-light steel replacement windows with central hopper. Steel industrial sash, organized in a similar fashion to those on the north elevation, line the first and second stories. At the eighth bay from the east is an aluminum frame basement door with sidelights. The brick chimney that rises in the eleventh bay from the east end, on the 1924 addition, was built after the original collapsed during the 1936 tornado.

South Wing (1927)

In its general character and structure, the south wing resembles the north wing, but there are several differences. Its gable roof, facing Lee Street, is not concealed by a parapet and the masonry walls have not been stuccoed. Reinforced concrete posts and beams frame the building's basement and first-story bays, while the walls at the second story are executed in common bond red brick capped with terra-cotta coping. Historic, multi-light industrial steel sash remain extant on the second story, while those on the first floor and basement are in-kind replacement units. Projecting header sills and common bond spandrel panels remain extant.

The central two window openings on the south elevation's first and second stories are shorter than the other openings on that wall. The window openings at the three bays to the west at the basement have been infilled with brick, while the openings at the bays to the east feature replacement in-kind industrial steel sash. Historic photographs indicate that the straight run of steel steps with a steel pipe railing that lead to the steel door in the west section of the south elevation's second story was added after 1936. However, the two single-leaf entrances accessed from the steel steps that rise on the west wall's south section were part of the 1927 plan. Steel pipe railings secure the stairs and first- and second-story landings.

The west elevation, facing the railroad tracks, is similar to the south elevation, with the concrete framing visible on the first floor and common red brick capped with terra-cotta coping on the second floor. The masonry openings on the first floor have been infilled with brick, except at the three bays to the south which feature steel industrial sash. Mechanical equipment is located at the infilled windows. A wood fence surrounds the equipment and obscures the view of the basement and first floors at this location. On the second floor original steel industrial sash remain extant with the exception of the third and fourth bays from the north where the openings have been infilled with brick. At the two bays

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from the south, narrow, rectangular window openings, with fixed industrial sash are located at grade, providing light into the basement. A hollow metal door with fire escape has been added at the third bay from the south.

The east elevation is similar to the other two elevations in its organization. This side faces the parking lot, and due to the grade of the site, the basement is almost fully exposed, giving most of this elevation the appearance of three stories. The windows on the second floor are original sash, while those at the basement and first floor are in-kind replacement units. The organization of the windows on the upper stories is similar to those of the other elevations. The basement windows are tripartite units, similar to those on the upper floors, except that each sash features twelve-lights and no hopper. A concrete loading dock is located at the two bays to the north. The loading bays feature multi-light aluminum storefront windows. A metal canopy, supported by metal posts, is located above the concrete dock. A two-story, flat-roofed, brick and concrete stair tower extends from the bay to the north, at the intersection of the north and south wings. Adjacent to the stair tower is the brick chimney. In the 1980s a three-story gabled, stuccoed passenger elevator shaft tower was added. The tower extends above the roof of the building and features glass block windows on the east and south elevations. The window opening on the third floor is taller than the one on the second. In 2019 a single story entrance vestibule, with projecting metal canopy supported by steel beams and bracing, was added to the east of the older towers. The glazed wood framed entrance features paired aluminum doors at the southeast corner and aluminum storefront windows with transoms on each façade.

### Interior

The plant's interior plan, as depicted in pages 34-36, expresses the building's historic function as a manufacturing facility, with a substantial amount of open floor space to facilitate assembly line production and work stations for specific tasks, such as sewing. The structural system remains exposed in many areas, with painted concrete and brick walls, concrete and steel posts and beams, steel trusses, and wood and concrete floors. The main circulation occurs where the stair and elevator towers are located. All of the steel sash windows are set within the masonry openings and feature brick sills. Throughout the building, ductwork is exposed below the structural framework of the ceiling.

#### North Wing (1921 and 1924)

The main entrance into the building off South Elm Street occurs through paired wood doors. The door to the north leads to a small lobby. Historically, a small office was located to the north, as indicated by ghosts on the floor where the walls were located. Concrete steps lead to the main floor level, which is located three risers above the lobby. The door to the south enters into a second lobby and a stair accesses the second floor. The stair runs between two walls, and features wood treads and risers, and a simple wood handrail. A door to the west enters connects the stair to the main floor level.

The windows on the east elevation feature wood casing, stools, and aprons. These are the only windows in the building finished with wood trim. Two lines of steel columns run east west defining each bay and supporting steel beams in the 1921 portion of the building, while to the west the columns in the 1924 addition are hexagonally shaped concrete structures supporting concrete beams and a concrete ceiling. Between each bay at the perimeter walls are steel columns encased in plaster board in the 1921 portion of the building and engaged hexagonal concrete pilasters in the 1924 addition. Given the exposed brick walls and steel framing, it is highly probable that the plaster board was a later addition, possibly when the wing was lengthened in 1924. The floors throughout are concrete. To the west are two openings in the masonry demising wall shared with the 1927 addition. Overhead fire shutter doors are located at the openings.

The second floor of the 1921 and 1924 portion of the building is open and features hardwood floors, plaster walls, and large window bays with industrial metal sash windows. The windows are set within the opening defined by brick that has been finished with plaster (1921 section) or concrete pilasters (1924 addition). A light gauge steel truss system runs north-south within the space, bearing on steel columns encased in plaster located at the exterior walls between each window bay. The truss system negates the requirement for columns within the space, resulting in a large open space. (As

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documented by a historic photo, the space was filled with sewing work stations.) A line of rectangular work pods running east-west down the middle of the space was inserted into the space in 2019. The pods, which are approximately eight-feet in height, feature glass walls, with minimal solid panels necessary for structural support and function. Similar to the historic sewing work stations, and reflecting the flexible plan, these pods are easily removed. Wood deck and vents are visible at the ceiling of the gable roof. A sprinkler system runs throughout the truss system. A metal track remains extant at the ceiling in the southeast corner. Two heavier gauge steel beams running east-west, centrally located within the 1924 addition, support a tongue-and-groove wood deck, which was possibly used for storage. Two openings in the demising wall to the south connect to the 1927 addition. Corrugated overhead metal doors that function as fire shutters are located at the openings.

The basement features exposed exterior brick walls and concrete floors, posts, beams, and ceilings, most of which have been painted. The basement area under the 1921 and 1924 portions of the building is defined by two lines of square piers running east west. To the west along the south wall this portion of the basement connects to the basement of the 1927 addition via a corridor. This is the only point of access for the basement. Areas of the basement have not been excavated at the two bays to the east, under the 1921 portion of the building, and under the entire 1924 portion.

South Wing (1927)

The main entrance into the south wing occurs to the east where the wings intersect. This entrance leads into a large lobby space constructed in 2019, which features large aluminum storefront windows with wood mullions and concrete floors. Two sets of paired wood swing doors with a large single light lead into the stair tower. A concrete stair with pipe rail connects the basement through second floor. Stamped on the metal nosing is "J. G. Braun Chicago Patent Allowed Nov 19, 1909. Made in Germany." The walls within the stair tower are painted brick. To the west of the stair landing are men's and women's toilets that were updated likely in the 1980s, but retain the original decorative hexagonal ceramic floor tile. The first floor features concrete painted brick walls and square concrete columns, beams, and ceiling slab. The plank formwork remains evident on the ceiling. The dense column grid suggests that a significant machinery load was supported. The floor on this level is a combination of hardwood around the perimeter and concrete within the floor plate, suggestive of the different types of historic functions. For example, sewing would likely have been done on the perimeter where the floors are wood and the windows would have provided natural lighting for the seated task. Small modern office pods, similar to those on the second floor of the north wing, are set back from the windows, on the area of the floor that is concrete, to provide work stations.

The main stair lands at a large open lobby and gathering space on the second floor. To the west are men's and women's toilets, updated and with the same decorative hexagonal tile visible on the first floor. The main factory floor is open, with hardwood floors, painted brick walls, and an exposed light gauge metal truss system with wood beams and ceiling above. The truss system is tied into the brick piers located between each window bay. There is only one line of steel columns running north south within the space, as opposed to the first floor and basement where there is a dense column grid. The columns are wrapped in plaster below the truss. Similar glazed work pods, inserted in 2019, are centrally located within the space.

The basement of the 1927 addition also features concrete posts, beams, and ceiling. Here the columns grid is relatively dense, likely in response to the load of the manufacturing equipment on the upper floors. At grade, window openings along the south and east elevations provide light and ventilation into the basement.

**Integrity Assessment**

The Blue Bell Company Plant retains a sufficiently high level of integrity to convey its significance exemplifying both early to mid-twentieth-century development of the textile industry in Greensboro and a state-of-the-art 1920s open-plan factory.

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Location

The decision to locate the Blue Bell Company headquarters at the corner of South Elm Street and West Gate City Boulevard (West Lee Street) was largely informed by its advantageous location in proximity to railroad lines. This location offered excellent access to multiple shipping networks via railroad lines that historically characterized the city's rise as a prominent center of the textile industry since the late-nineteenth century. The building remains in its original location and continued to be operational into the early 1980s while the other industries in the area shut down during the 1970s-1990s period.

Design

The building reflects its function in design in a manner consistent with early-twentieth-century industrial architecture, with a reinforced concrete and steel structural system, low gable roof, and multi-pane steel industrial sash, typical of this era of fire-resistant design. The Blue Bell Company Plant serves as an excellent example of industrial architecture in the context of Greensboro. The building has retained a significant amount of integrity in terms of design and structural stability to exemplify the industrial architecture of the era.

The L-shaped massing presents a single building, with three periods of construction. Overall, the historic concrete, steel, and brick building is a good example of the 1920s daylight factory typology that demonstrates the growth of a clothing/textile manufacturing business over time. Although constructed in multiple stages, the two-story building presents a relatively unified composition with flexible, open floor plan defined by the column grid. Original steel, multi-pane industrial sash with concrete sills remain extant and in-kind steel sash have been inserted in masonry opening where later brick infill has been removed. Later additions, specifically the 1980s passenger elevator tower and 2019 entrance vestibule to the east at the intersection of the 1921, 1924 and 1927 portions of the building, do not significantly diminish the overall integrity of the design.

The building's historically significant additions all occurred before the end of the period of significance in 1958. Today, the building retains sufficient architectural integrity to demonstrate the type of industrial development that characterized Greensboro and the textile industry during the early twentieth century.

Setting

The neighborhood surrounding the Blue Bell Company Plant remained much the same through World War II and into the 1960s, during which time the textile industry continued to thrive in Greensboro. Due to the broader historic context of civil unrest, nationwide economic downturn, and the shift to offshore manufacturing, the commercial businesses located along South Elm Street were gradually neglected in favor of suburban shopping malls. While the Blue Bell Company Plant remained in operation at this location into the early 1980s, other industries in the area closed their doors during the 1970s. Today the surrounding neighborhood still features many of these brick commercial and industrial buildings, although some have suffered from neglect, abandonment, or architectural muddling, thus making the Blue Bell Company Plant a significant representor of the area's architecture.

Workmanship

The plant retains its industrial character and workmanship associated with a factory building including industrial sash windows, hardwood and concrete floors, column grid, and open floor plan. Designed by architect Harry Barton, the Blue Bell Company Plant is perhaps his most significant and largest industrial building, representing an important moment in Barton's career as he began to achieve considerable success in the early 1920s. Builder William P. Rose worked with Barton in constructing the Blue Bell Company plant, one of his largest industrial buildings.

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Materials

The materials used in the building are consistent with industrial typologies and include hardwood floors, concrete floors, brick exterior walls, industrial metal sash windows, and reinforced concrete and steel structural grid. The 2019 insertion of the glass pods, which serve as work stations, do not negatively impact the historic material fabric. They are a reversible feature that are only approximately eight feet in height and feature minimal connections at the floor plate.

Feeling

While most other industries in the surrounding area shut down, the Blue Bell Company continued to be operational into the 1980s and stands as an excellent example of industrial architecture built for a textile industry. The retention of many original materials, setting, location adjacent to railroad tracks, and design has helped preserve the industrial feeling and historic character of the property.

Association

The Blue Bell Company is directly associated with the textile industry in North Carolina and represents an important era of the industry in the city of Greensboro during the period of significance from 1921 to 1958. The building is also a rare and intact example of the area's industrial architecture. It is remarkably intact with high architectural integrity, with the majority of the original materials, form, and plan intact to convey historic meaning and function.

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**Statement of Significance**

The Blue Bell Company Plant exemplifies both early to mid-twentieth-century development of the textile industry in Greensboro and a state-of-the-art 1920s open-plan factory. Constructed in three major phases for the Blue Bell Company, founded by Charles Crump Hudson at another location in 1904, the plant comprises a 1921 building with a 1924 addition and a 1927 wing. The building served as a factory and the headquarters for Blue Bell, one of the world's largest overall manufacturers during the twentieth century and, as such, an important contributor to Greensboro's economy as a manufacturer, employer, consumer of goods and services, and taxpayer. Most of the workers hired at the plant were women, provided an opportunity at a time when factory work was scarce for females. As an example in Greensboro of a 1920s factory with a reinforced concrete and steel structural system, low-pitched gable roof, and multi-light steel industrial sash, the Blue Bell Company Plant is locally important as a largely intact example of its era's progressive, fire-resistant industrial design. The building's period of significance begins in 1921, when the oldest portion of the plant and headquarters was constructed, continues into the middle of the twentieth century as the company grew with additional manufacturing locations across North America and Europe, and ends in 1958, when the company moved its headquarters to a new building in Greensboro.

The Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF) "Historic and Architectural Resources of Greensboro, North Carolina, 1880-1941" includes the industry context for the Blue Bell Company Plant in Context 2, "Modern Suburbanization and Industrialization, 1900-1941," specifically Section E, "The Textile Industry and Industrial Greensboro," on pages E21-E23. This MPDF presents a portion of the necessary architecture context in "Property Type 4: Industrial and Commercial Buildings" on pages F24-F26. Because it does not discuss the Blue Bell Company Plant's design featuring a reinforced concrete and steel structural system and multi-light steel industrial sash, additional architecture context is included herein. The Blue Bell Company Plant meets the MPDF's significance and registration requirements discussed on page F28 as one of a small number of surviving industrial buildings representing Greensboro's remarkable growth during the early to mid-twentieth century and exemplifies a type of industrial building erected across Piedmont North Carolina during this period.

**History of the Blue Bell Company and its South Elm Street Plant<sup>1</sup>**

The history of the Blue Bell Company begins with Charles Crump Hudson's establishment of the Hudson Overall Company in 1904. At the age of twenty, the Tennessee native moved to Greensboro in 1897. He initially secured employment sewing buttons onto overalls in R.G. Glenn's factory at a 25-cent daily wage, but became the plant manager within just a few years.<sup>2</sup> When Glenn's business closed in 1904, Hudson purchased some of the equipment with his brother Homer and collaborated with W. C. Tucker, M.F. Fox, and W.H. Ragan to incorporate the Hudson Overall Company. His brother Homer also worked in the company.<sup>3</sup> In August 1904, the concern leased space on the second floor of a commercial building that stood at 521 South Elm Street to house its manufacturing operations.<sup>4</sup> Tucker was the company's president, Ragan was the secretary-treasurer, and Hudson its general manager.<sup>5</sup>

In April 1905, the company purchased Centenary Methodist Episcopal Church South at 609 Arlington Street, removed the steeple, and remodeled the building to serve as its factory. However, the business soon required additional

<sup>1</sup> A significant portion of this history has been adapted from Heather Fearnbach, "Blue Bell, Inc. Plant," Study List Application (SHPO North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, December 2016). Fearnbach's work was a foundational study guide in researching the property.

<sup>2</sup> "Famous People of Greensboro," *Greensboro Daily Record* (March 14, 1981), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Steven E Well and Daniel DeWeese, *Western Shirts: A Classic American Fashion* (Gibbs Smith, 2004), 129.

<sup>4</sup> "C. C. Hudson Passes After Long Illness," *Greensboro Daily News* (December 31, 1937), 1.

<sup>5</sup> The Hudson Overall Company was briefly called Hudson Manufacturing Company. "Hudson Overall Company Incorporated," *Greensboro Patriot* (August 24, 1904), 6.

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space. In December 1906, F. M. Brown, who had assumed the company's management in August, orchestrated an expansion into the Bevill Building on North Elm Street. Hudson Overall Company utilized the Arlington Street factory to produce Blue Bell-brand work clothes until May 1909. That month, the manufacturer's ninety employees moved to the upper floors of a newly completed three-story, 75 x 100-foot brick building that stood on the former site of a dwelling at the northwest corner of South Elm and West Lee Streets (in the southwest quadrant of the nominated property).<sup>6</sup> Three storefronts fronted South Elm Street and were rented by commercial businesses, while the remainder of the block remained residential.<sup>7</sup>

The company briefly ceased production in 1912, before C.C. Hudson began acquiring control of the business.<sup>8</sup> When operations resumed in December of that year, the factory employed 125 female sewing machine operators and five men.<sup>9</sup> Under Hudson's ownership, the company began operating under the name Blue Bell Overall Company and subsequently grew exponentially. According to legend, the name "was in reference to a railroad bell given to the brothers [C.C and Homer Hudson] by appreciative railroad customers. Over time, the bell was coated with fine blue dust from the indigo-colored denim being cut and sewn in the factory."<sup>10</sup>

Hudson guided the company's exponential growth. By 1917, daily output had increased to 3,000 pairs of overall fabricated from denim woven at Greensboro's Proximity Mill.<sup>11</sup> By 1919, 250 employees generated 5,000 pairs of overalls each day.<sup>12</sup> Weekly wages for sewing room workers, who were mostly female, ranged from \$12.50 to \$25.<sup>13</sup> By this time, according to the *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*, the company occupied the entire building at the northwest corner of South Elm and West Lee streets, using the building's first floor as offices and machine, cutting and dressing rooms. The second story served as manufacturing space and the third floor as the stock room and shipping department. The company expanded within the facility to keep up with increased production and demand.

Recognizing the company's need to expand, Hudson purchased an L-shaped lot to the northwest of his building in August 1919 and began constructing a new plant.<sup>14</sup> In a company pamphlet, Blue Bell described the conditions of their manufacturing prior to occupying this new building in 1921. They illustrated their previous factory as:

Noisy, half-lit work rooms, where groups of twenty or so machines and operators were clustered at long tables around a central power source, a single shaft with pulleys attached to individual machines. Each machine moved at the same speed, and each operator had her own way of doing the job. Fast operators sat idle while slow ones caught up. There was little efficiency scarcely any specialization, and practically no system.<sup>15</sup>

Upon the completion of the new factory, Hudson announced that approximately 275 women and 25 men would be begin production there on January 24, 1921.<sup>16</sup> The company continued to increase their production lines, made possible by the new factory, and achieved considerable success over the next several years.

The construction of the new factory in 1921 marked a significant moment for Blue Bell. Like other businesses in

<sup>6</sup> West Lee Street is now called West Gate City Boulevard. The dwelling was demolished after the 1936 tornado.

<sup>7</sup> Heather Fearnbach, "Blue Bell, Inc. Plant," Study List Application (SHPO North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, December 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Heather Fearnbach, "Blue Bell, Inc. Plant," Study List Application (SHPO North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, December 2016).

<sup>9</sup> "Hudson Overall Company Resumes Work Today," *Greensboro Daily News* (December 11, 1912), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Steven E Well and Daniel DeWeese, *Western Shirts: A Classic American Fashion* (Gibbs Smith, 2004), 129

<sup>11</sup> "Blue Bell Overalls," *Greensboro Daily News* (February 4, 1917), 10.

<sup>12</sup> "Blue Bell," *Greensboro Daily News* (August 25, 1919), 9.

<sup>13</sup> "Blue Bell Overalls Grow in Popularity," *Greensboro Daily News* (November 16, 1919).

<sup>14</sup> "Blue Bell Company to Have Permanent Home," *Greensboro Daily News* (August 14, 1919), 3

<sup>15</sup> Blue Bell, Inc., *This is Blue Bell* (Greensboro, NC: Blue Bell, Inc, 1959), 2.

<sup>16</sup> "New Overall Factory Will Begin January 24," *Greensboro Daily News* (January 16, 1921), 10.

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the southern textile industry, Blue Bell adopted the "Fordist" methods of a streamlined assembly line manufacturing process popularized by Henry Ford. This new system enhanced both the quantity and quality of the garments and was made possible by the new factory architecture that encouraged the specialization of tasks through its open floor plan. The new building enabled the division and reorganization of assembly lines into multiple floors rather than clustering around a single power source, allowing the company to implement a new Taylorist process, one aligned with mass production driven by the repetition of specialized tasks in an assembly line. Where once "Sewers had been responsible for many steps in the completion of an entire garment, they were now assigned to do just one specialized operation, and to do that by the most efficient and effective method."<sup>17</sup> As part of this new system, "the old line shaft, with twenty or more machines depending for power on a single source, gave way to separately motorized machines. These in turn were individually mounted, making it possible to set up assembly line systems as in Detroit."<sup>18</sup> Adopting Fordist methods that other industries had already been utilizing for about a decade, the Blue Bell Company's transition to assembly line production was made possible by the construction of the new reinforced concrete factory in 1921.

In 1923, C.C. Hudson and R.W. Walker, head of the Big Ben Manufacturing Company, became acquainted at a meeting in Atlanta. Walker subsequently visited the Blue Bell Overall Company Plant on several occasions over the next few years. During this time, high product demand spurred the 1924 construction of a long wing that extended from the factory's rear (west) elevation to the railroad line. This accommodated 600 additional workers, bringing the total employees at the plant to about 825.<sup>19</sup> The company claimed that this \$125,000 addition created the world's largest overall manufacturing facility.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after the new wing was completed, Hudson initiated a merger between Blue Bell and Big Ben. Big Ben was formed from the Jellico Clothing Manufacturing Co. of Jellico, Tennessee, in 1919. Big Ben had plants in Jellico, and in Middlesboro, Kentucky. On January 1, 1926, Big Ben, which then had an estimated net worth of \$238,000, purchased Blue Bell for \$585,000.<sup>21</sup> This made the new company, named the Blue Bell Company, reputedly the largest single company in the country making overalls exclusively for the wholesale trade.<sup>22</sup> Hudson was not involved with the business after the sale. Big Ben president R. W. Walker then moved to Greensboro, and the plant became the company's headquarters. This merger also brought changes to the company's product line, as "until 1925 the company made nothing but suspender back overalls."<sup>23</sup> In 1926 they added a double suspender and an additional bib pocket, "raising prices and selling accounts to customers they had never been able to reach before."<sup>24</sup> As the enterprise prospered, the Blue Bell Company constructed a south wing that doubled the plant's size. The addition was finished in April 1927, reportedly nearly doubling the employees at the plant to reach approximately 1600.<sup>25</sup>

Diversification was particularly important to the textile industry during the early 1930s, when the nation struggled with the economic impact of the Great Depression. The depression coincided with increased mechanization, which transformed manufacturing operations at this time. The development of more efficient equipment resulted in employee pay cuts and job losses. These stresses made unions more appealing to mill workers, and this was a time when many factory employees across the country orchestrated walk-out strikes. On February 22 and 23, 1932, 1,400 non-union Blue Bell employees initiated a strike, representing the combined 1,200 employees at the nominated building at that time and

<sup>17</sup> Blue Bell, Inc., *This is Blue Bell* (Greensboro, NC: Blue Bell, Inc, 1959), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Blue Bell, Inc., *This is Blue Bell* (Greensboro, NC: Blue Bell, Inc, 1959), 2.

<sup>19</sup> "Blue Bell Began Operations at Jellico, Tenn." *The Southern Democrat* (Oneonta, AL June 9, 1955), 1.

<sup>20</sup> "Greensboro Overall Factory to be Largest in World," *Asheville Courier* (January 10, 1924), 2.

<sup>21</sup> "The History of Blue Bell, Inc.," *Southern Garment Manufacturer*, August 1944.

<sup>22</sup> "Blue Bell Began Operations at Jellico, Tenn." *The Southern Democrat* (Oneonta, AL June 9, 1955), 1.

<sup>23</sup> "Big Ben to Blue Bell" *Greensboro Daily News* (May 29, 1971), E36.

<sup>24</sup> "Big Ben to Blue Bell" *Greensboro Daily News* (May 29, 1971), E36.

<sup>25</sup> "Big Ben to Blue Bell" *Greensboro Daily News* (May 29, 1971), E36.

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an additional 200 from the 100 South Elm Street plant nearby.<sup>26</sup> Little is known about this other plant, as it was opened with no major fanfare in 1931 as a secondary, smaller location and may have been located in a pre-existing building. Together, the employees of both plants protested company employment policies, such as a planned transition to hourly wages rather than a production-based pay scale.<sup>27</sup> While these efforts were not immediately successful in securing direct reforms, they were also not isolated. Similarly, the General Textile Strike of 1934 closed down textile mills throughout the region and many mill owners fired known union members and sympathizers in response.<sup>28</sup> As one newspaper stated, Union efforts may not have been in vain, however, as the Roosevelt administration's social and economic reform programs eventually resulted in the institution of a forty-hour work week and increased pay.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these labor issues, the company managed to expand operations with the 1936 acquisition of its chief competitor, Globe Superior Corporation. Based in Abingdon, Illinois, with two other locations in Illinois and one in Georgia, Globe Superior Corporation is credited with developing Sanforization, a manufacturing process that shrinks cloth before it is cut.<sup>30</sup> The newly merged company became Blue Bell-Globe Manufacturing Co. The company experienced significant management changes during the transition: R.W. Baker was elected chairman of the board and treasurer; J.C. Fox assumed Baker's former role as president and chief executive officer; I. J. Walls served as the company's vice-president; and H.H. Overton served as its secretary.<sup>31</sup> By this time the company was well known nationwide, recognized as "practically the United States Steel Company of the work clothes business."<sup>32</sup> The 620 South Elm Street plant not only continued to serve as the company's headquarters, but also served as a major location for manufacturing overalls, debuting their new proportioned fit overalls around this time.<sup>33</sup>

The majority of factory workers at the Blue Bell Company Plant, both in Greensboro and later at satellite plants, were female. Like other companies in the textile industry, the Blue Bell Company demonstrated a commitment to hiring women workers for several decades. In 1921, the Greensboro plant employed 275 females and 25 males.<sup>34</sup> Typically, the female employees worked on the factory floor as sewers, usually seated at a sewing machine to complete a repetitive specialized task for several hours a day. Training occurred on the job and could take anywhere from one to six months, depending on the particular job.<sup>35</sup> Sewing was traditionally viewed as "women's work," and therefore it was culturally acceptable to employ women in the textile industry moreso than in other types of hard manufacturing. While these jobs were difficult, repetitive, and physically challenging, they offered women an independent source of income and work experience at a time when such opportunities were rare.

During World War II, Blue Bell-Globe Manufacturing Company benefitted from the federal Office of War Mobilization's coordination of support efforts that included contracting with clothing manufacturers. In 1943, after absorbing Baltimore-based Casey Jones, Inc., and reorganizing as Blue Bell, Inc., the company leased the former Lenoir Cotton Mill in Caldwell County to serve as a satellite plant to fulfill contracts for military apparel. Blue Bell made and delivered more than 24 million garments to the Armed Forces during World War II.<sup>36</sup> Military commissions included white twill jackets and denim and white trousers for the U.S. Navy; and jungle suits, one-piece suits, denim pants and

<sup>26</sup> "Blue Bell Began Operations at Jellico, Tenn." *The Southern Democrat* (Oneonta, AL June 9, 1955), 1.

<sup>27</sup> "1400 Workers on Strike in Greensboro," *Statesville Record and Landmark* (February 26, 1932), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et. al, *Like a Family: The Making of the Southern Cotton Mill World* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 47.

<sup>29</sup> *Greensboro Daily Record* (April 7 1936), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Steven E Well and Daniel DeWeese, *Western Shirts: A Classic American Fashion* (Gibbs Smith, 2004), 129

<sup>31</sup> "The History of Blue Bell, Inc."

<sup>32</sup> "Big Ben to Blue Bell," E36.

<sup>33</sup> Steven E Well and Daniel DeWeese, *Western Shirts: A Classic American Fashion* (Gibbs Smith, 2004), 129

<sup>34</sup> "The Home of Overalls," *Greensboro Daily News* (March 27, 1921), 9.

<sup>35</sup> Guy Munger, "Blue Bell: An Apparel Giant," *The News and Observer* (August 21, 1966), 22-11.

<sup>36</sup> "Big Ben to Blue Bell," E36.

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coats, olive-drab herringbone-patterned jackets and trousers, and regulation khaki dress pants and shirts for the U.S. Army. At that time, Blue Bell, Inc. was generating approximately 36 million garments annually at fourteen plants in Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Virginia, and its headquarters in North Carolina, where they made denim and khaki products. Blue Bell, Inc.'s administrators also served on the War Production and War Labor Boards and advised government agencies including the Office of Price Administration and the Quartermaster General's Office.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to their military production lines, marketing offices in Chicago, Greensboro, Nashville, and New York promoted the company's retail line, which comprised men's and boy's overalls, pants, one-piece suits, shirts, coats, and jackets sold under the trade names Blue Bell, Big Ben, and Casey Jones. Blue Bell, Inc.'s sales escalated dramatically during the post-war years, climbing from \$13,795,450 in 1943 to \$46,630,060 in 1950.<sup>38</sup> The 1947 introduction of Wrangler-brand leisure wear was a tremendous success. By 1956, sales rose to \$58,073,919 as more than 200 wholesalers distributed popular products including Wrangler jeans to 30,000 retail establishments throughout the nation.<sup>39</sup>

During World War II, Blue Bell, Inc. continued to employ a majority-female workforce at a time when other industries were starting to open their doors to women laborers in the absence of men off at war. Yet while the postwar period limited opportunities for female workers across the country once again as companies re-hired returning soldiers, Blue Bell, and the textile industry in general, remained a significant source of employment for the female workforce. By 1966, the company maintained that "85-90% of the employees at Blue Bell plants are women."<sup>40</sup> While Blue Bell did acknowledge that challenges faced by a female workforce included "marriages, pregnancies, and a high turnover rate," CEO Edwin A. Morris announced his plans to continue hiring female workers as the company expanded: "We're interested in a large supply of female labor."<sup>41</sup> In contrast, all of the higher ranking management and directorial positions were filled by men.

In order to better accommodate administrative staff, in 1958 Blue Bell, Inc. commissioned the construction of an office headquarters at 335 North Church Street in Greensboro. Designed by Charlottesville, Virginia, architects Stainback and Scribner, and Greensboro engineers Ben L. Smith Jr and Associates, the three-story office building was built in the Modern style meant to convey the company's progressive image and continued ambition.<sup>42</sup> The new building was a tangible expression of the separation of administrative tasks from factory work.

In 1961, Blue Bell Inc expanded its production operations to Europe with the acquisition of a plant in Belgium. Subsequent acquisitions included Red Kap, a Canadian industrial and occupational clothing manufacturer, in 1964 and J.W. Carter, a western boot producer, in 1967. In 1970, annual sales were one quarter of a billion dollars. By the early 1980s, company labels included Wrangler, Rustler, and Maverick jeans, as well as Red Kap, Jantzen, Sedgfield and Lucchese Boots. Net sales jumped from \$872 million to nearly \$1.5 billion in 1980.

With the country in an economic recession, the early 1980s proved more difficult for the company, and sales dropped slightly each year through 1983. The company utilized the 620 South Elm Street plant through 1982. In 1986, the merger of Blue Bell, Inc., and VF Corporation of Pennsylvania created one of the world's largest jeans manufacturers.<sup>43</sup> The company operated an international consortium of plants in Asia, Europe, and Latin America from its Greensboro headquarters on North Church Street.

<sup>37</sup> Blue Bell, Inc., "Blue Bell Annual Report, December 1, 1945- December 30, 1946," 18-21.

<sup>38</sup> Blue Bell, Inc., "25 Year Record of Growth," *1973 Annual Report* (Greensboro, NC: Blue Bell, Inc., 1973), 8.

<sup>39</sup> Blue Bell, Inc., "25 Year Record of Growth," *1973 Annual Report* (Greensboro, NC: Blue Bell, Inc., 1973), 8.

<sup>40</sup> Munger, 22-11.

<sup>41</sup> Munger, 22-11.

<sup>42</sup> Blue Bell Inc., "New General Office Building," "ca. 1958 brochure, Blue Bell Inc., vertical file, City of Greensboro Library Central Branch.

<sup>43</sup> Jim Schlosser, "Renovation Reveals Thread of Past," *Greensboro News and Record* (October 22, 2000), B1-B2.

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The 620 South Elm Street plant ceased to function as a factory upon its sale in 1987 to a group of local investors known as the 620 Corporation, who converted the plant into a business incubator they named the Old Greensborough Gateway Center. The interior was subdivided into offices with guidance from local architect Jerry Leimenstoll. The 1921 building's exterior was rehabilitated in 2000, and the property was sold to ZCD & F, LLC in November 2016. That December, the new owners initiated a rehabilitation including window restoration, demolition of interior partition walls and other modifications to changes made in 1988.<sup>44</sup> This phase of the rehabilitation project was completed in 2019 and the first tenant moved in late that year.

### Architectural History and Context of the Blue Bell Company Plant

The oldest portion of the manufacturing building at 620 South Elm Street was constructed for the Blue Bell Company in 1921. The plant is an intact textile factory from the first half of the twentieth century that epitomizes the types and forms of textile industrial buildings constructed in Greensboro during this period. Marvin A. Brown's 1991 Multiple Property Documentation Form "Historic and Architectural Resources of Greensboro, North Carolina, 1880-1941" includes the architectural context and descriptions of industrial buildings, including textile mills, in "Property Type 4: Industrial and Commercial Buildings," on pages F24-F26.

The Blue Bell Company Plant is one of five historic textile mills surviving in Greensboro. A sixth mill, Cone Mills' huge White Oak Plant, begun in 1895 and extensively altered in the decades following World War II, closed in 2018 and was demolished in 2019. The other extant mills include Revolution Cotton Mills (NR 1984), Proximity Print Works (NR 2014), and Mock, Judson, Voehringer Company Hosiery Mill (NR 2011), as well as the Burlington Mills Hosiery Mill. Each of these provides an example of typical textile mill construction characterized by open floor plans, rectangular footprints, and flat and low-pitched gable roofs.

Revolution Cotton Mills and Proximity Print Works exhibit multiple stages of construction. Revolution Mills, begun in 1900, consists primarily of several large buildings of standard slow-burn construction featuring load-bearing exterior walls of brick and interior post and beams and wood floors of wood. Around 1916, Revolution Cotton Mills added a large, five-story building used to store finished goods. It featured a concrete structural system exposed on the exterior and, on the interior, round concrete posts supporting steel joists and concrete floors. In between the exposed vertical and horizontal bands of reinforced concrete are large steel sash windows and Flemish bond brickwork. A 1930s addition that almost doubled the size of the building is the same construction, but the entire exterior is brick-veneered. At Proximity Print Works, more than one dozen buildings dating mostly from the 1920s have structural systems that consist primarily of interior steel columns and posts; steel beams and trusses or reinforced concrete beams; and concrete floors. All of the exteriors of Proximity Print Works' buildings are brick. The conversion of Revolution Cotton Mills as housing, offices, and entertainment venues was completed in 2019 according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. A similar renovation of Proximity Print Works, also according to the Secretary's Standards, is nearing completion in 2020.

Burlington Mills Hosiery Mill, built in 1933 and enlarged ca. 1950, has an interior structural system similar to that of the Blue Bell Company Plant, but its exterior is entirely brick, including some later brick veneer, and it has been extensively altered with the bricking in of all window openings so that little of its historic character remains apparent.

Constructed in stages from 1927 to 1938, the Mock, Judson, Voehringer Company Hosiery Mill is the most similar in design to the Blue Bell Company Plant. Like Blue Bell, the building is two stories and is constructed of reinforced concrete and steel with the concrete structure exposed on most of the exterior, concrete and steel interior supports, and full-height steel frame windows. The two buildings also share a common treatment of their main facades veneered in brick and topped by a parapet. By 1927, the use of brick to 'soften' the appearance of both the Mock, Judson, Voehringer

<sup>44</sup> Guilford County Deed Book 3611, 1301; Deed Book 5402, 1444; Deed Book 7876, 721.

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Company Hosiery Mill and the Blue Bell plant may demonstrate an architectural attempt to reconcile the tension between the utilitarian appearance of concrete and the more familiar use of brick in previous textile mills. In contrast to the other mills with exteriors almost entirely of brick, both mills fully embraced both the newer concrete methods of factory construction and, for the most public face of the building, the long-established tradition of brick.

The Blue Bell Company Plant represents a progressive approach to mill construction in its use of concrete and steel. Begun in 1921, six years before the Mock, Judson, Voehringer Company Hosiery Mill, the Blue Bell building embraced the use of concrete throughout the plant, leaving even the primary elevations exposed rather than covering it in brick. While this was certainly not the first industrial building treated in this manner, the Blue Bell plant, along with the finished goods storage building at Revolution Cotton Mills, is an early example of a reinforced concrete textile mill building constructed in Greensboro. In terms of architectural integrity, the Blue Bell Company plant also remains among the most intact in original form, plan, and materials following its recent rehabilitation. In contrast, the Mock, Judson, Voehringer Company Hosiery Mill has had all of its window openings bricked in and remains vacant and in disrepair.

In 1921, the new Blue Bell Company building was constructed on a site directly north of a three-story brick building (demolished 1936) that the company occupied from 1909 to 1921. The new two-story-on-basement building faced South Elm Street and extended westward in the lot. The company engaged a team of Greensboro contractors to plan and erect the 60-foot-wide by 235-foot-deep plant. Builder W.P. Rose commenced constructing the \$125,000 factory according to a design by Greensboro architect Harry Barton on April 20, 1920.<sup>44</sup> The Carolina Steel and Iron Company supplied the structural steel components. B. McKenzie installed plumbing and lighting fixtures.<sup>45</sup>

Harry Barton was born in Philadelphia in 1876 and completed a degree in architecture at George Washington University. After conducting further study at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in Manhattan, he practiced in Philadelphia and in Washington DC, where he worked for the Office of the Supervising Architect for the U.S. Department of the Treasury before moving in 1912 to Greensboro.<sup>46</sup> Barton soon established his own practice and became one of Greensboro's most prolific architects, with a client base among the city's industrial and financial leaders. Born in Johnston County, North Carolina in 1870, William Preston Rose was a contractor who designed and constructed many buildings in North Carolina beginning in 1910. The Blue Bell Company Plant at 620 South Elm Street was built by Rose according to Barton's architectural designs, marking an important moment in both of their careers as they began to achieve considerable success in the early 1920s.

Exhibiting construction techniques that were popular in industrial architecture by the 1920s, the building designed by Barton and built by Rose featured a steel and reinforced concrete structural system that allowed for an open floor plan. With reinforced concrete floors and just two rows of steel columns supporting reinforced concrete beams, this technique, largely popularized by architect Albert Kahn at the Ford factories in Detroit during the 1910s, allowed for more efficient assembly line production. With large industrial sash windows lining all outer walls, the factory resembled the latest incarnation of a Kahn-style daylight factory that enabled large-scale manufacturing. The building featured a wood roof with steel trusses.

At the front (east) side of the building, a basement level office space and spacious employee cafeteria/assembly room enabled the administrative department to function. The upper floors contained the manufacturing spaces. The open floor plan allowed for the insertion and rearrangement of machines as need to accommodate the most efficient path of production that would minimize worker movements and therefore maximize output. The ample manufacturing space in this new building facilitated the introduction of new products to Blue Bell's line.

<sup>45</sup> Blue Bell, Inc., *This is Blue Bell* (Greensboro, NC: Blue Bell, Inc, 1959), 2.

<sup>46</sup> William B. Bushong, "Barton, Harry (1876-1937), *North Carolina Architects & Builders: A Biographical Dictionary* (2009).

Accessed via web <http://ncarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000057> on September 23, 2019.

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In 1924, a significant expansion was added to the rear of the 1921 building, extending west along Bain Street towards the railroad tracks. This addition, which doubled the size of the building, retained the aesthetic, structural grid, and rhythm of window bays along the elevations; however, the structural system utilized reinforced concrete columns as opposed to steel, which was potentially a stronger material for the factory's needs. The addition also featured reinforced concrete and tile floors, masonry walls, and large steel industrial sash windows with hoppers in the masonry opening, similar to the 1921 portion.

In 1927, a large two-story wing added to the south side of the 1924 portion extended the building southward along the rail tracks to the west. This wing was six-bays-wide and ten-bays deep and similar to the earlier sections in character and structure. Reinforced concrete framing, columns, and floors and exposed steel roof trusses characterize the 1927 south wing. *Sanborn Insurance Maps* indicate this wing was used for manufacturing space, with a dining room and kitchen located in the basement for employees as well.

In April 1936, the building sustained approximately \$200,000 of tornado damage. In a storm that effected the entire city, the Blue Bell Company Plant "suffered tremendously," incurring loss not only to parts of the building but also to much of the machinery and "almost the entire stock of finished garments and cloth on the top floor that was soaked with the rain that followed the storm."<sup>47</sup> The 1927 wing was the most significantly damaged part of the building. As one newspaper reported, "the southwestern wing of the large plant was struck, lifting the top on the corner and crashing windows and a portion of the brick structure at this point. The central part of the plant was also badly damaged with the top collapsing, causing a huge building loss in addition to damages to machinery and other equipment of the interior."<sup>48</sup> The smokestack also "toppled across the roof of the South Elm Street wing."<sup>49</sup> The roof was replaced at this time. The three-story building at the corner that originally housed the company through the 1910s was demolished in the aftermath of the 1936 tornado, along with a two-story frame dwelling nearby. Although it was expected that this significant damage would "close the plant for an indefinite time," the plant reopened in the repaired building just one month later, in May 1936.<sup>50</sup>

The plant remained much the same during the mid-twentieth century, although the interior manufacturing space may have been reorganized to accommodate the conversion to war production during World War II. The open floor plan would have allowed for the rearrangement of machinery and production lines with little disruption to the structural integrity of the building. A filling station was constructed, likely during the 1940s, on the lot, and appears on the 1951 Sanborn Map. Blue Bell moved its administrative offices to a new building in 1958 but maintained manufacturing operations at the 620 South Elm Street plant until 1982.

On July 20, 1987, VF Corporation conveyed the plant at 620 South Elm Street to the 620 Corporation. The building was modified in 1988 with the addition of some steel-frame partition walls and brick-infill of the masonry openings in front of the windows to accommodate new, non-manufacturing uses. The 1940s filling station was likely demolished at this time. Local investors undertook the plant's conversion to offices and shops at cost of about \$2.5 million to serve as a business incubator and art space called the Old Greensborough Gateway Center.<sup>51</sup> Local architect Jerry Leimenstoll guided updates including the interior's subdivision to create offices. The 1921 portion's exterior was rehabilitated in 2000. ZCD & F, LLC acquired the property on November 15, 2016. The next month, the concern initiated a rehabilitation with selective demolition of non-historic partition walls and the reversal of other 1988 modifications that was completed in 2019.

<sup>47</sup> "Thousands of Visitors Pour Into City to See Havoc Due to Tornado," *Greensboro Daily News* (April 6, 1936), 1-2.

<sup>48</sup> "Industrial Plants of City Badly Damaged by Tornado," *Greensboro Record* (April 3, 1936), 18.

<sup>49</sup> "Thousands of Visitors Pour Into City to See Havoc Due to Tornado," *Greensboro Daily News* (April 6, 1936), 1-2.

<sup>50</sup> "Industrial Plants of City Badly Damaged by Tornado," *Greensboro Record* (April 3, 1936), 18.

<sup>51</sup> Taft Wireback, "Former Blue Bell Building to House Arts Programs," *Greensboro News & Record* (January 7, 1988), D2.

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Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary for the nomination for the property located at 620 South Elm Street is defined by information listed on the Guilford County North Carolina On-line Mapping System. Available from internet.  
<http://gis.co.guilford.nc.us/guilfordjs/>

The current parcel includes 2.03 acres, due to the previous combination of two parcels into one. The .45-acre portion containing a parking lot north of Bain Street was historically not part of the Blue Bell Company plant, which instead occupied the remaining 1.58-acre portion of the parcel to the south. Because the nomination encompasses the property historically constructed, owned and occupied by the Blue Bell Company, the boundary of the nominated property follows the original boundary that encompasses only the 1.58-acre portion that historically corresponds to the plant. This is bounded by Bain Street to the north, South Elm Street to the east, West Gate City Boulevard to the south and the rail tracks and parcel line to the west.



The bold dark line is the entire 2.03 parcel. The thinner dark line is the nominated 1.58-acre parcel.

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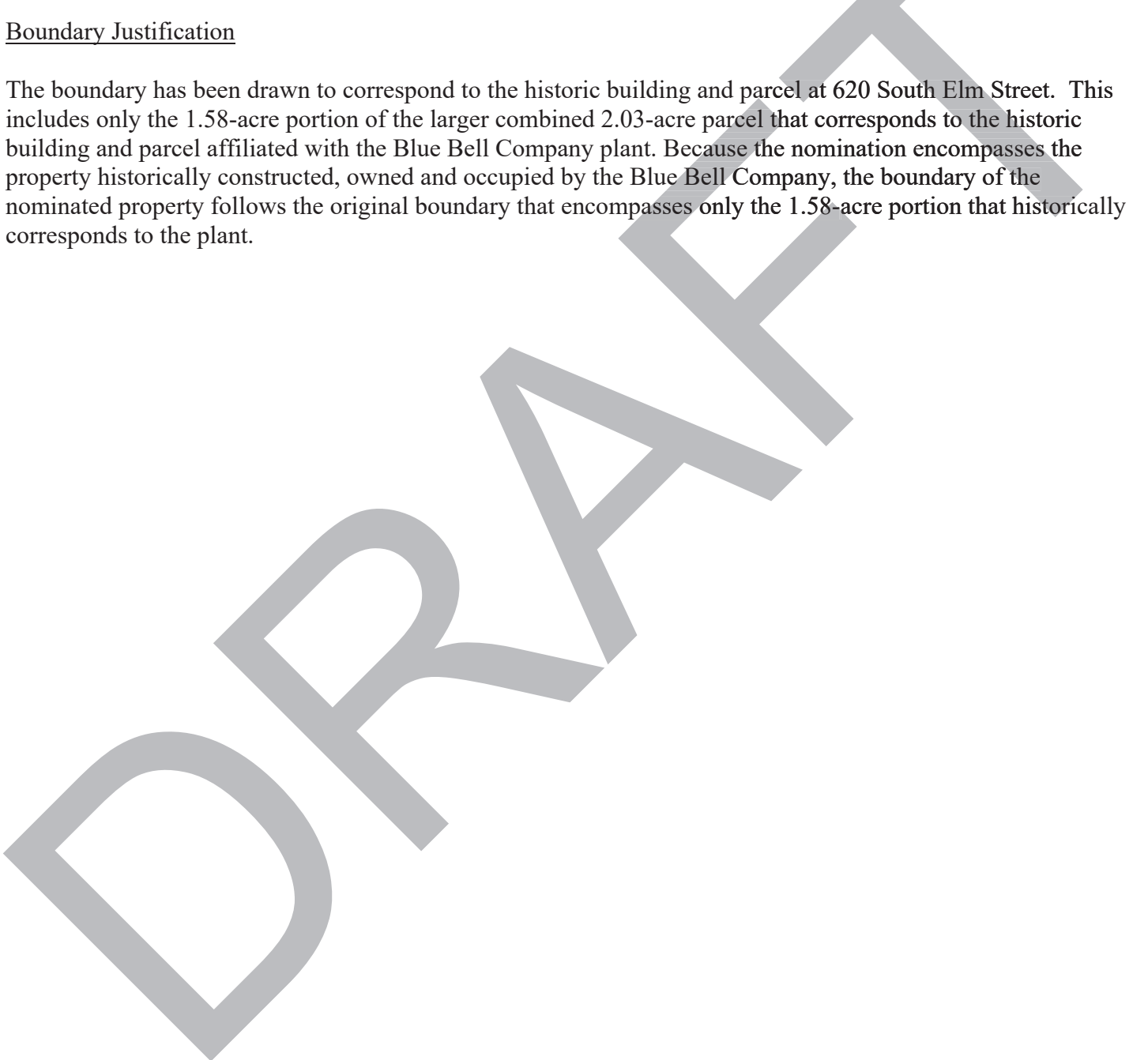
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Boundary Justification

The boundary has been drawn to correspond to the historic building and parcel at 620 South Elm Street. This includes only the 1.58-acre portion of the larger combined 2.03-acre parcel that corresponds to the historic building and parcel affiliated with the Blue Bell Company plant. Because the nomination encompasses the property historically constructed, owned and occupied by the Blue Bell Company, the boundary of the nominated property follows the original boundary that encompasses only the 1.58-acre portion that historically corresponds to the plant.



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Additional Information

Photo Log:

Name of Property: Blue Bell Company Plant

City of Vicinity: Greensboro

County: Guilford

State: North Carolina

Name of Photographer: kta preservation specialists/Carmina Wood Morris

Date of Photographs: December 2019

Location of Original Digital Files: kta preservation specialists, Buffalo, NY 14216

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0001

Looking west at east elevation of building on South Elm Street.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0002

Looking northwest at east and south elevations across South Elm Street.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0003

Looking southwest at north elevation of building.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0004

Looking south at north elevation of building.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0005

Looking west at east elevation of building, across parking lot. Note L-shaped massing.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0006

Looking north at south elevation of building, east wing.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0007

Looking across railroad tracks at rear of building, west wing.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0008

Looking west along south elevation of west wing.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0009

Detail of west portion of building.

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NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0010

Looking north inside east wing. Exterior of west wing visible to the south.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0011

Detail inside building. Note hardwood floors, open floor plan.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0012

Looking inside building, subdivided spaces with removable partitions do not disrupt historic understanding of open space, visible in ceiling above.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0013

Looking in open floor plan space with square concrete columns.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0014

Looking at first floor corner space, with multiplane windows, concrete floors.

NC\_Guilford County\_Blue Bell Company Plant\_0015

Detail of stairs and stairwell.

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Historic Images

**Figure 1.** Architect's illustration of Blue Bell Factory, ca. 1927 (architect remains unidentified for this illustration).



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**Figure 2.** Blue Bell Company Plant, ca. 1921-1927. Primary elevation facing South Elm Street, 1921 portion of the building.



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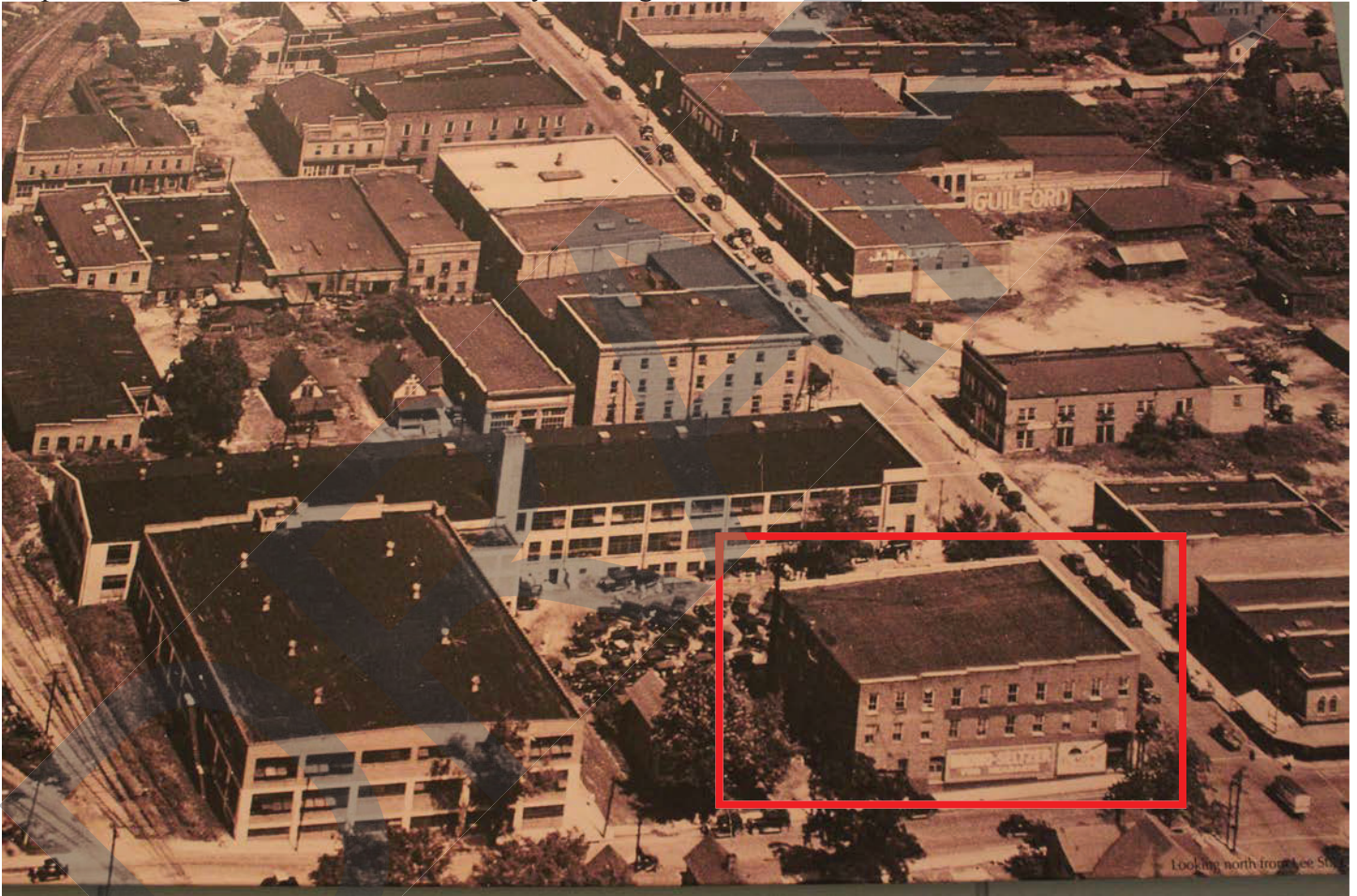
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**Figure 3.** Aerial View of the Blue Bell Company Plant, pre-1936. Note the 3-story brick building at the southwest corner (outlined in red). This building housed the Hudson Overall Company before the nominated L-shaped building was constructed. The 3-story building was demolished in the aftermath of the tornado of 1936.



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**Figure 4.** Tornado Damage at the Blue Bell Company Plant, April 7, 1936. *Greensboro Daily Record*, 4.



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**Figure 5.** Construction view of Blue Bell Company Plant, south wing. Note relationship to rail tracks. Photo shows repairs being made after 1936 tornado.



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Figure 6. Blue Bell Company Plant, view from South Elm Street at corner of Lee Street, 1940s.



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Figure 7. Female workers at the Blue Bell Company Plant, 1940s.



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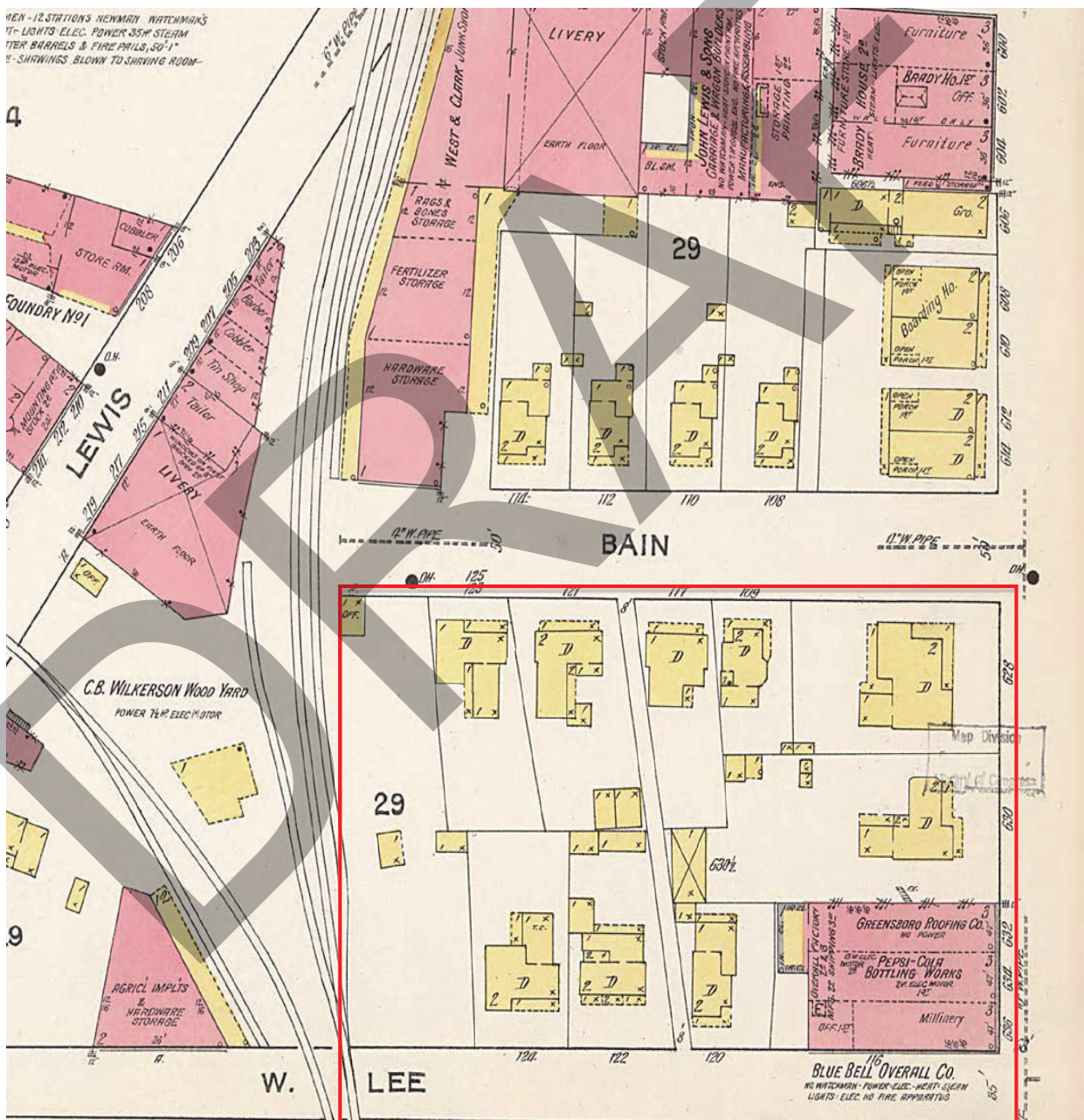
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**Figure 8.** Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1913

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Note the Hudson Overall Company is sharing space in the 3-story brick building, now demolished.



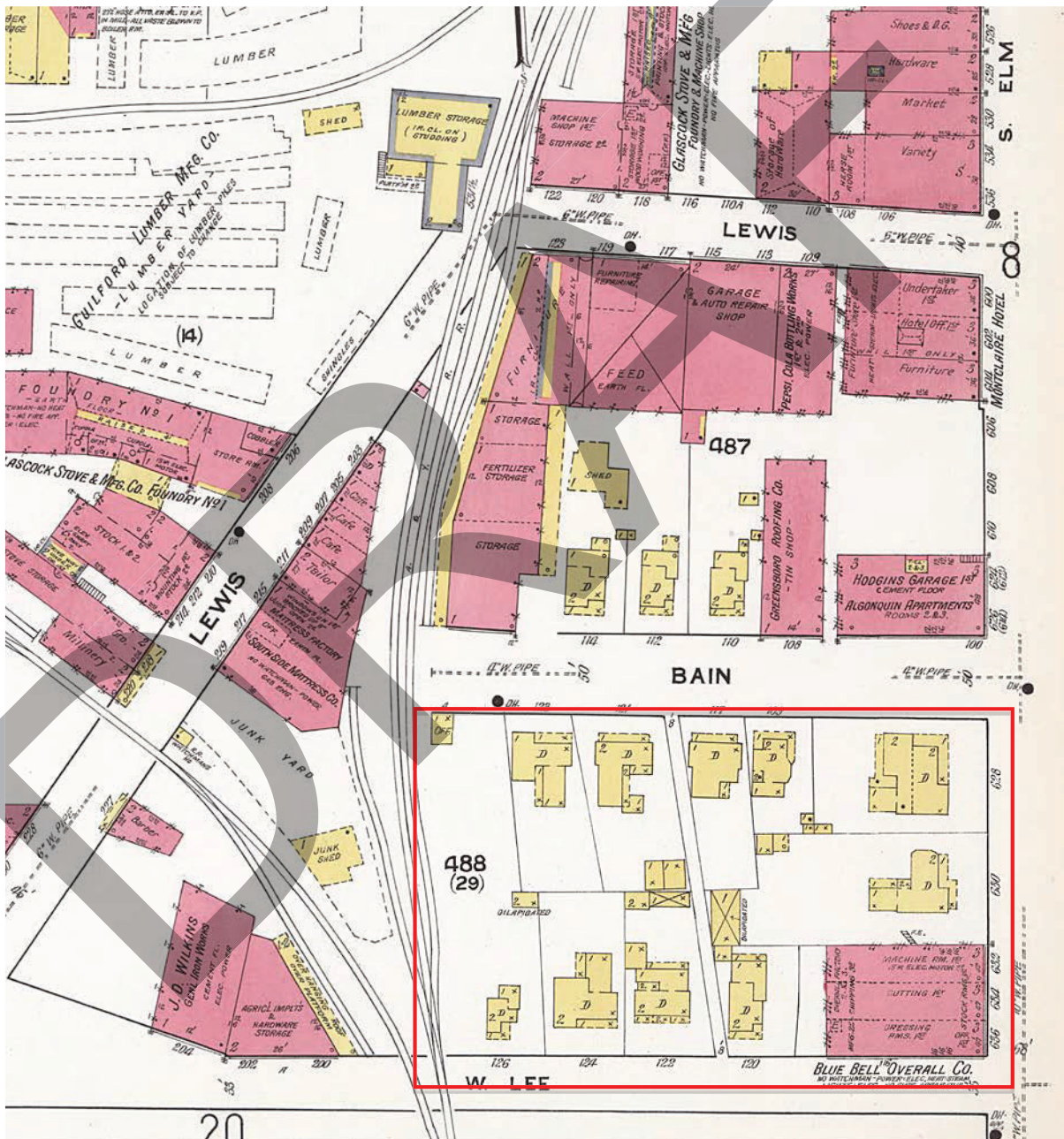
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Figure 9. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1919  
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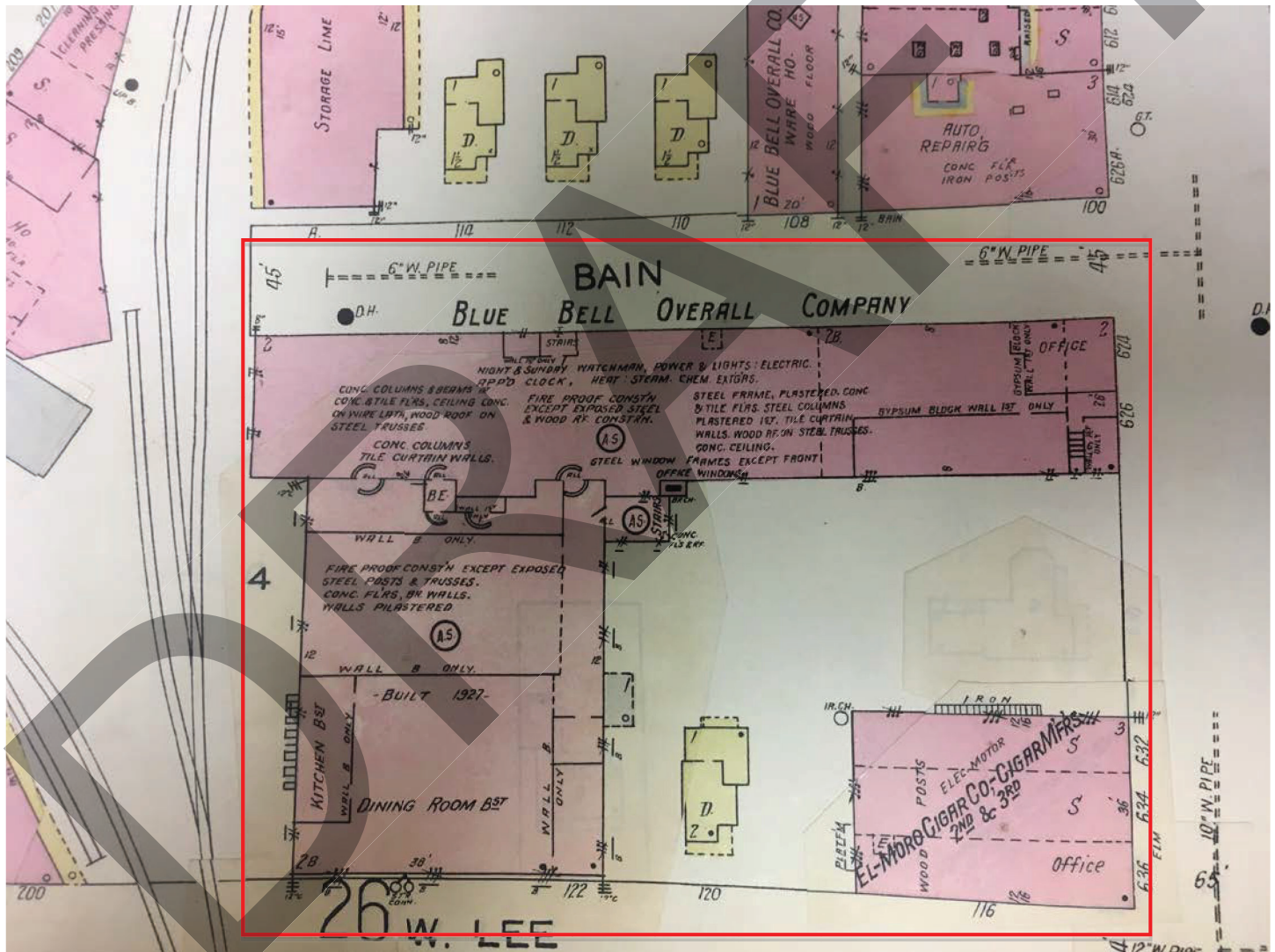
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**Figure 10. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1925-1927**

Note that the company has moved out of the 3-story brick building into the L-shaped nominated building constructed in 1921, 1924 and 1927.



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Figure 11. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1927 corrected 1951  
Volume 1, Sheet 189

