

State of North Carolina
Division of Archives and History

Catawba COUNTY

Hickory QUAD

INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY FORM FOR

Catawba County Multiple Resource Nomination

MULTIPLE RESOURCE OR THEMATIC NOMINATION

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Piedmont Wagon Company

AND/OR COMMON

Piedmont Wagon Company

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

Main Ave. NW, opposite jct. w/ 10th St. Place SW

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY TOWN

Hickory

VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

North Carolina

CODE
037

COUNTY

Catawba

CODE
035

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	<input type="checkbox"/> ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL ^{storage}
			<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY
			<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
			<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
			<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
			<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
			<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
			<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

B & B Builders of Catawba County Inc. (Larry Barringer & Nancy Boyd)

STREET & NUMBER

72 27th Street NW

CITY TOWN

Hickory

VICINITY OF

STATE

North Carolina 28601

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC

Register of Deeds Office

STREET & NUMBER

Catawba County Justice Center

CITY TOWN

Newton

STATE

North Carolina

6 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Laura A. W. Phillips, Consultant

Historical Research: Michael Hill, Research Branch
Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N. C.

ORGANIZATION

DATE

June 16, 1983

STREET & NUMBER

637 N. Spring Street

TELEPHONE

919/727-1968

CITY OR TOWN

Winston-Salem

STATE

North Carolina 27101

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Built ca. 1889, the Piedmont Wagon Company building in Hickory is the oldest remaining industrial building in that city and is the only surviving structure of what was once a large industrial complex.

The Piedmont Wagon Company building is a two-and-one-half-story brick structure with basement (partially above ground), laid in five-to-one common bond. On south and west sides of the L-shaped building, the fenestration is irregularly arranged, while both east and north gable ends have a more regular, three-bay-wide arrangement. Doors and windows alike have segmental-arched heads with slightly projecting hood molds as well as stone sills. All window openings and some door openings, however, were bricked-in during the late 1970s. Entrances which do remain functional have modern replacement doros. The building is covered by a gable roof which forms a hip at the southwest corner where the two arms of the L meet. Corbelled parapets are found on east and north gable ends, and a parapeted fire wall projects from the roof on the west side of the building. Projecting from the roof ridge are several monitor-like cupolas, once enclosed with glass windows but now boarded-up. Until the 1970s a loading dock ran the length of the south side--the longest side--of the building. Its shed roof was supported by large chamfered wood braces. Now only the vertical bracing members which rest on small corbelled supports remain. On the east side, a small, one-story brick addition with gable roof and entrance porch projects from the center bay. A modern brick chimney is found on the west side of the building near the southwest corner. A low metal-sheathed addition, probably dating from the 1960s, projected from the west side next to this chimney, but was removed after the mid 1970s. On the north side of the building, in the V formed by the two arms of the L, is a one-story frame addition with shed-roof, German siding and large sliding doors. Its date of construction is unknown.

The interior of the Piedmont Wagon Company building consists of large open spaces with brick walls, wooden floors, and rows of heavy wood posts with chamfered corners and bracket-like caps which support the large wood ceiling joists.

This last surviving component of the once large Piedmont Wagon Company is located on Main Avenue NW, facing south toward the Southern Railroad tracks. The tracks of the Carolina and Northwestern Railroad form the northeast boundary of the property, now reduced from thirteen acres to approximately one acre. At present the site is overgrown and the building itself is heavily covered with vines, which along with generally poor maintenance, are contributing to its deterioration.

The structure, of course, is closely related to the surrounding environment. Archaeological remains, such as trash pits, wells, and structural remains, which may be present, can provide information valuable to the understanding and interpretation of the structure. Information concerning use patterns, social standing and mobility, as well as structural details are often only evident in the archaeological record. Therefore, archaeological remains may well be an important component of the significance of the structure. At this time no investigation has been done to discover these remains, but it is probable that they exist, and this should be considered in any development of the property.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

_____ NATIONAL

_____ STATE

_____ X LOCAL

PERIOD		AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES ca. 1889 BUILDER/ARCHITECT Unknown

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Piedmont Wagon Company was Hickory's first major industry and a key to the town's growth from 1880 to the 1920s. The company, established by George C. Bonniwell and Andrew L. Ramseur at a site on the Catawba River in 1878, was moved to Hickory two years later for access to the railroad and to increased capital. The plant, which in time covered a thirteen-acre lot, quickly prospered, being incorporated in 1882 and reincorporated in 1887 and 1890. The present two-and-one-half story brick building was built in 1889. The company employed over 100 workers in the 1890s and had a productive capacity of 1,000 wagons per month, making it one of the country's largest wagon producers. Piedmont's primary products were horse-drawn wooden wagons, used on farms throughout the Southeast. A falloff in demand for the product began in the 1920s; production ceased in the 1940s. A major fire in 1958 destroyed all but the one remaining building.

CRITERIA ASSESSMENT

- A. The Piedmont Wagon Factory, the first industry in Hickory, is associated with the industrial development of Hickory in the late 19th century, and was one of the largest manufacturing concerns in the city during the early 20th century.
- B. The Piedmont Wagon Company was founded by George C. Bonniwell (1837-1912) who was called the "Father of Industry" in Hickory. Bonniwell was an architect, engineer and builder. His partner, Andrew L. Ramseur was a prominent industrialist during the late 19th century. The Piedmont Wagon Company was also associated with several other prominent Hickory and Catawba County Families.

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The last remaining building of the Piedmont Wagon Company in Hickory is located in the 900 block of Main Avenue NW between 10th and 11th streets SW. All other structures on what was once the thirteen-acre grounds of the factory have been lost to fire or razing. The one left standing is an ell-shaped, two-and-one-half story brick building finished about 1889. Three small cupolas rest atop the structure; a loading dock runs the length of the building on the south side. The Piedmont Wagon Company, which moved to Hickory in 1880, was the town's first major industry. For five decades it was one of the principal local employers. At its height the factory produced as many as 1,000 wagons per month. Piedmont, whose horse-drawn "quality" wagons were used on farms across the South, was thus one of the largest wagon-building companies in the country. Although the firm did not withstand the coming of the internal combustion engine, it did play an important role in the development of transportation and agriculture in the South after 1880. On the local level the Piedmont Wagon Company was of preeminent importance in the industrial development of Hickory and Catawba County. A local writer in 1911, taking stock of the role played by the "immense Piedmont wagon plant" over the preceding thirty years, posited that "Hickory was cradled in a wagon bed."¹

Prior to the establishment of the Piedmont Wagon Company small wagon and blacksmith shops dotted Catawba County. Work in these shops, usually located at crossroads, was all done by hand, whereas much of the factory's work was done with the aid of machines. George C. Bonniwell (1837-1912) is generally credited with establishing the company. An architect, engineer, and builder, Bonniwell came to North Carolina from Philadelphia in 1878. He found a business partner in the person of Andrew L. Ramseur, the operator of an iron forge, gristmill, and sawmill on the Catawba River. Bonniwell convinced Ramseur to shift his emphasis to the manufacture of wagons and thus the first "Piedmont wagon" was soon produced. Ramseur's operations were at Horseford Shoals on the Caldwell County side of the Catawba River. In 1880 the two moved the wagon-building operation to Hickory so that they might have access to the railroad and in order to seek increased capital for their company.²

In 1879, preparatory to the move, Ramseur had bought eight acres in the west part of Hickory from Henry Robinson. In 1882 he purchased five adjacent acres from Bettie R. Holden to increase the size of the company's lot to thirteen acres.³ The land was located at the intersection of the Western North Carolina Railroad and the Chester and Lenoir Narrow Gauge Railroad (later known as the Carolina and Northwestern Railroad). The present-day building is located on a slight knoll in the angle formed by the two sets of railroad tracks. The location was thus ideal for the growth of the business. As the company prospered, its physical plant, spread over the thirteen acres, increased in size. The earliest buildings were mostly frame, including a large woodworking shop, an iron storage building, several warehouses, the body shop, the machine shop, and the office. As of 1885 only three buildings--the wheel shop, blacksmith forges, and one warehouse--were brick. On March 4, 1885, the first of what would be numerous fires over the years struck the plant. The drying houses, frame structures on the west side of the lot, burned on that date. For protection from fire subsequent frame buildings were constructed with brick dividing walls. Improvements were made to the plant annually during the 1890s and the two following decades. A 50,000 gallon reservoir, housed in a raised tank, was by 1907 replaced by 400,000-gallon brick and cement reservoir.

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A spur line of the railroad track was placed through the middle of the lot around 1915. Several once free-standing structures, including the present-day building, were connected by additions.⁴ The construction of that building, and the uses to which it was put, was detailed in this 1890 account:

A new building of brick has been erected and is 60x200 feet in size and two and one half stories high, with five walls and double fire proof doors, and with all its arrangements adjusted so as to facilitate the work. Raw lumber will go in at one door to woodworking machines, thence to be put together, then to the blacksmiths for ironing, from whence it passes to a power elevator, which takes it to the floor above for finishing, painting, etc. and then to the storehouses and the cars . . . the new building was erected around the old one, but it was impossible to stop work on account of the large orders on hand.⁵

The newspaper report further detailed that electric lights had recently been installed to allow for night work. For tax purposes in 1890 the factory lot was valued at \$3,500. Tools were assessed a value of \$6,500 and other property, presumably including all inventory, was valued at \$50,000. Two horses and two mules were kept on the lot, perhaps to conduct product testing.⁶

The two founders were not with the company for long. Ramseur, who was sixty-two years old in 1880, returned to operating his mills and forge at Horseford Shoals. Bonniwell, twenty years his junior, moved on to other ventures, in time earning the moniker of Hickory's "Father of Industry." Most notably, in 1881 he founded the Hickory Cooperative Association (in time known as the Hickory Manufacturing Company), a wood-working plant which made sashes, doors, blinds, inside trim, and other building material. The firm, later bought by Hutton and Bourbonnais Company, was located northeast of the Piedmont Wagon Company, just across the railroad tracks. Bonniwell married twice, first to Louisa Pillois and then to Catherine Snedaker, and had several children. He⁷ died in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1912, but was buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Hickory.

The Piedmont Wagon Company was incorporated in 1882, in the words of the articles of incorporation, "to promote manufacturing and the utilization of the natural and industrial resources in western North Carolina." Capital stock totaling \$20,000, in 400 shares at \$50 each, was offered. The principal investors were J. O. Hall with ninety-one shares, F. B. Alexander with fifty-five, Bonniwell with thirty-nine, A. M. Peeler with twenty-four, and Thomas J. Linn with twelve.⁸ In 1887, due to increased demand and production, the company was reincorporated, with a stock offering of \$100,000, an amount which by 1890 had risen to \$200,000 with an option to increase to \$500,000. The stock was earning a return of four percent semi-annually by 1890. Officers of the corporation in that year were: G. H. Geitner, superintendent; J. G. Hall, president; A. A. Shuford, vice-president; H. C. Dixon, secretary; and H. D. Abernethy, treasurer, "all of whom are business men of established reputation," according to the local newspaper. Hickory, with an 1890 population of 2,850, was in the midst of the period of its greatest growth, a development in which the Piedmont Wagon Company played a key role. The paper's editor boasted that the town had three of the best educational institutions in the South, the first post office in the state, the finest opera house in the South, the South's finest modern-style hotel, and "one of the largest wagon factories in the country."⁹

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The work force at the Piedmont Wagon Company, made up in large part of loyal, longtime employees, grew steadily over the years. The operation began with only four or five workers at Ramseur's place on Horseford Shoals. By 1885 that number had grown to seventy-five and by 1890 it had increased to one hundred.¹⁰ Management's pride in their workers was reflected in this 1890 report:

The labor which is employed in the mill is of the best quality, many of the employees having been in the works five to ten years, and by the larger number of them owning their own homes. Mr. Hall claims with pride too that no more intelligent, moral, and law-abiding set of workmen can be shown by any manufactory in the world.¹¹

The division of labor at the factory was reflected in the constituent parts of the plant--the lumber yard, blacksmith shop, paint shop, bed department, and shipping department. The plant's work force was split between skilled and unskilled, being weighted toward the latter. An analysis of the 1910 census illustrates this fact. Of the fifty-four Hickory residents employed at the Piedmont Wagon Company, there were six blacksmiths, eight machinists, six painters, two foremen, three office workers, one wheelwright, one watchman, and twenty-seven general laborers.¹² J. Weston Clinard, author of a volume of historical sketches about Hickory, recalled that he was one of many in town who were employed there at one time. Clinard most vividly recalled that the plant was known for having outstanding factory whistles. "Working at Piedmont wasn't simply a job. It became a tradition," he wrote.¹³

At its height the primary markets for Piedmont's products were eleven southeastern states, extending from Virginia to Texas. Output increased to 1,000 wagons per month. This was from a business which originally produced only one wagon per week. Then, as later, Piedmont's best known wagon had red gear and a green body. The earliest wagons were tied together and pulled through the countryside where they were sold or bartered.¹⁴ Access to the railroad after 1880 made such trade unnecessary. Advertising replaced personal contact:

The attention of Planters and others using WAGONS, CARTS, DRAYS, or WHEELBARROWS is called to the PIEDMONT, which is rapidly establishing itself as the leading Wagon sold in the South . . . Buy a PIEDMONT without fear of the result. It has not failed to meet all reasonable expectations of those who use it. It is guaranteed to do so.¹⁵

Despite the self-contradictory language in the ad sales continued apace. Though the economic depression of the early 1890s affected the demand somewhat, sales and production had rebounded by the end of the decade. In 1914 and 1917 officials of the company signed agreements with Catawba County landowners whereby the company received all timber rights to their property.¹⁶ Yet the product line had become diversified by that time as demonstrated by the fact that the company received a contract for all-metal carts for the French army during World War I.¹⁷ The Piedmont Wagon Company's preeminence in the field was challenged in North Carolina only by the Nissen Wagon Works of Winston-Salem, which at its height in 1919, produced 15,000 wagons per year.¹⁸ However, the market for horse-drawn wagons within the next decade almost disappeared completely due to the wide distribution of internal combustion-engine vehicles and the effect they had on transportation and commerce.

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The Piedmont Wagon Company has undergone numerous ownership changes in the twentieth century. The first of these came around 1910 when the plant was sold to a group of New York investors. In the following year the name of the operation was changed to the Piedmont Wagon and Manufacturing Company.¹⁹ Through these changes G. H. Geitner remained as superintendent of the plant, a position he held until 1918. In 1924 the company was sold for \$300,000 to Daniel E. Rhyne, prominent Hickory citizen and benefactor of Lenoir-Rhyne College.²⁰ Rhyne had been a major investor in the operation even before he bought the company outright. During his term of ownership the company became embroiled in a tax controversy and subsequent lawsuit. The case stemmed from the company's failure to pay income taxes for the years 1917 to 1919. The defense used was that secretary-treasurer Preston Rhyne, whose uncle later owned the company, was only a naive "country boy" ignorant of corporations and the law. The defense attorney for the Piedmont Wagon Company in the suit was Marion Butler, former United States senator.²¹ The Rhynes sold the company to Henry Leonard in the 1940s, about the time production ground to a halt.

Yet the company's tax problems did not end with the sale and the cessation of regular production. A variety of financial difficulties led to the apparent failure of company officials to pay taxes from 1943 to 1947. A series of tax liens were placed on the property beginning in 1948 and continuing throughout the 1950s. In 1955 the company's real estate was valued at \$69,836 while the remaining property was adjudged at \$29,921.²² As a result of the tax liens, totaling some \$300,000, the property was placed at auction in November 1958. Interest in the sale was so great that it was broadcast over a local radio station. The Hickory Development Corporation bought the property for \$60,000 with the intention of using it for new industrial and business sites. Prior to the sale, in February 1958, a fire caused an estimated \$100,000 damage to the company's physical plant, leaving only the one building standing. In August 1960 the site, which the local paper called "a rat-infested jungle," was bulldozed.²³ Fires in May 1961 and October 1977 also did minor damage to the remaining structure.²⁴ The building's most recent tenant was the Ace Spring Manufacturing Company. The deed to the property was last held by a bank and a local realtor.²⁵ The building, although basically sound, has suffered somewhat from deterioration and vandalism in recent years.

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NOTES

¹George W. Hahn, The Catawba Soldier of the Civil War (Hickory: Clay Printing Company, 1911), 47.

²(Hickory) Press and Carolinian, Trade Edition, Volume 20, Number 1 (January 1890); Levi Branson, comp., Branson's North Carolina Business Directory (Raleigh: Levi Branson, 1872, 1878), 1872, pp. 54, 55; 1877/1878, p. 63.

³Catawba County Deed Book 13, p. 401 and Deed Book 18, p. 26.

⁴Sanborn Map Company, Hickory, Catawba County, North Carolina maps, 1885, 1890, 1896, 1902, 1907, 1913, 1919, 1925, 1931 (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1885-1931). The maps fully document the plant's growth.

⁵Press and Carolinian, January 1890.

⁶Catawba County Tax Records, North Carolina State Archives.

⁷Hickory Daily Record, 11 September 1965, and Hickory Democrat, 24 October 1912.

⁸Catawba County Deed Book 18, p. 138.

⁹Press and Carolinian, January 1890; Branson's, 1890, pp. 169, 175. The 1890 newspaper contains a sketch of the plant, showing the buildings and their positions relative to one another and to the railroad tracks.

¹⁰Sanborn maps, 1885, 1890.

¹¹Press and Carolinian, January 1890.

¹²1910 Census, Population Schedule. Although many Hickory residents were employed in the wagon factory, far more were employed in local cotton mills.

¹³J. Weston Clinard, Clinard Looks Back: A Compilation of Short Stories Covering Early Days in Hickory (Hickory: Hickory Printing Co., 1962), 179-180.

¹⁴Hickory Daily Record, 11 September 1965.

¹⁵Undated clipping from the (Salisbury) Carolina Watchman, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

¹⁶Catawba County Deed Book 117, p. 179 and Deed Book 130, p. 126.

¹⁷Clinard, Clinard Looks Back, 181.

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¹⁸ Gwynne Stephens Taylor, From Frontier to Factory: An Architectural History of Forsyth County (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1981), 56. The physical plant of the Nissen Wagon Works, founded in 1834, was sold in 1925 for \$1.1 million. Winston-Salem Journal-Sentinel, 23 August 1953.

¹⁹ Catawba County Deed Book 98, p. 411.

²⁰ Catawba County Deed Book 164, p. 557.

²¹ United States Court of Claims, Number K-254, pp. 39-70, Piedmont Wagon and Manufacturing Company, Plaintiff, vs. The United States, Defendant.

²² Catawba County Deed Book Grantor Index; Catawba County Tax Records, North Carolina State Archives.

²³ Hickory Daily Record, 19 August 1960; Clinard, Clinard Looks Back, 178.

²⁴ Hickory Daily Record, 11 September 1965 and 5 October 1977.

²⁵ Catawba County Deed Book 1014, p. 586; Deed Book 1050, p. 507; and Deed Book 1097, p. 601.

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United States. Court of Claims. Number K-254, pp. 39-70. Piedmont Wagon and Manufacturing Company, Plaintiff, vs. The United States, Defendant.

United States. Tenth Census, 1880, Manufacturing Schedule, and Thirteenth Census, 1910, Population Schedule.

249.75'

(21)

(20)

8

(19)

(18)

381.08'

(17)

9A

(16)

449.9'

9

(15)

532.55'

10

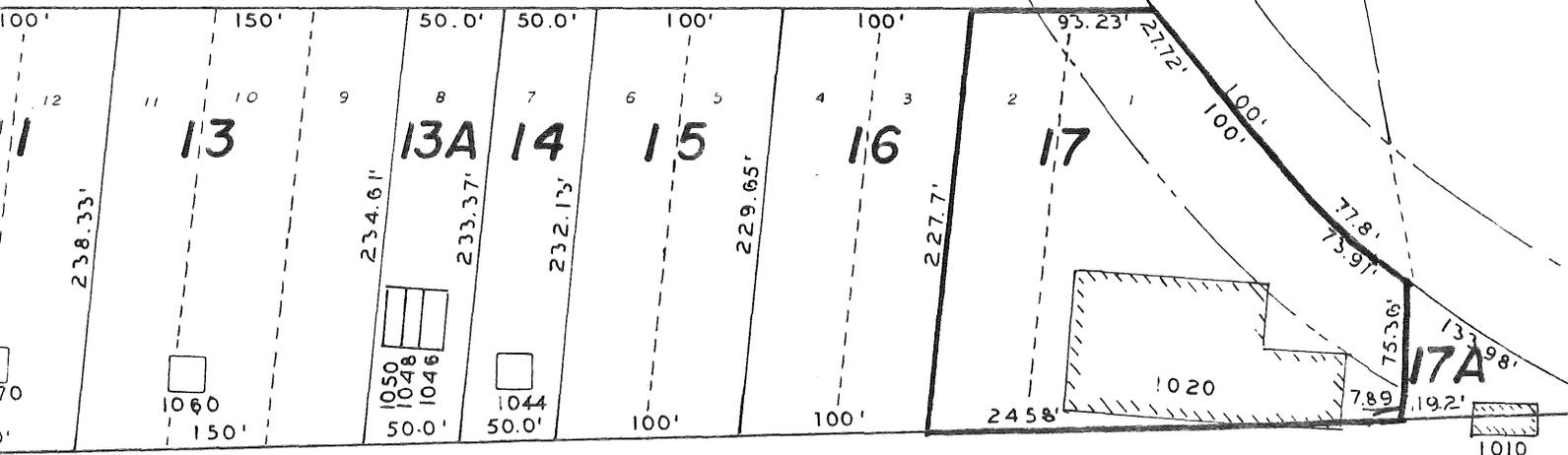
(14)



1060

612.82'

MAIN AVENUE DRIVE N.W.



MAIN

Southern

AVENUE

Railroad

MAIN

6A
3.9 Acres

3

150'

700.82'

125.42'

50'

50'

148.19'

50'

1245.3'

138.57'

8.74'

100'

100'

100'

100'

100'

100'

100'

100'

100'

93.23'

21.72'

100'

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100'

77.8'

75.91'

75.36'

133.98'

7.89'

19.2'

