

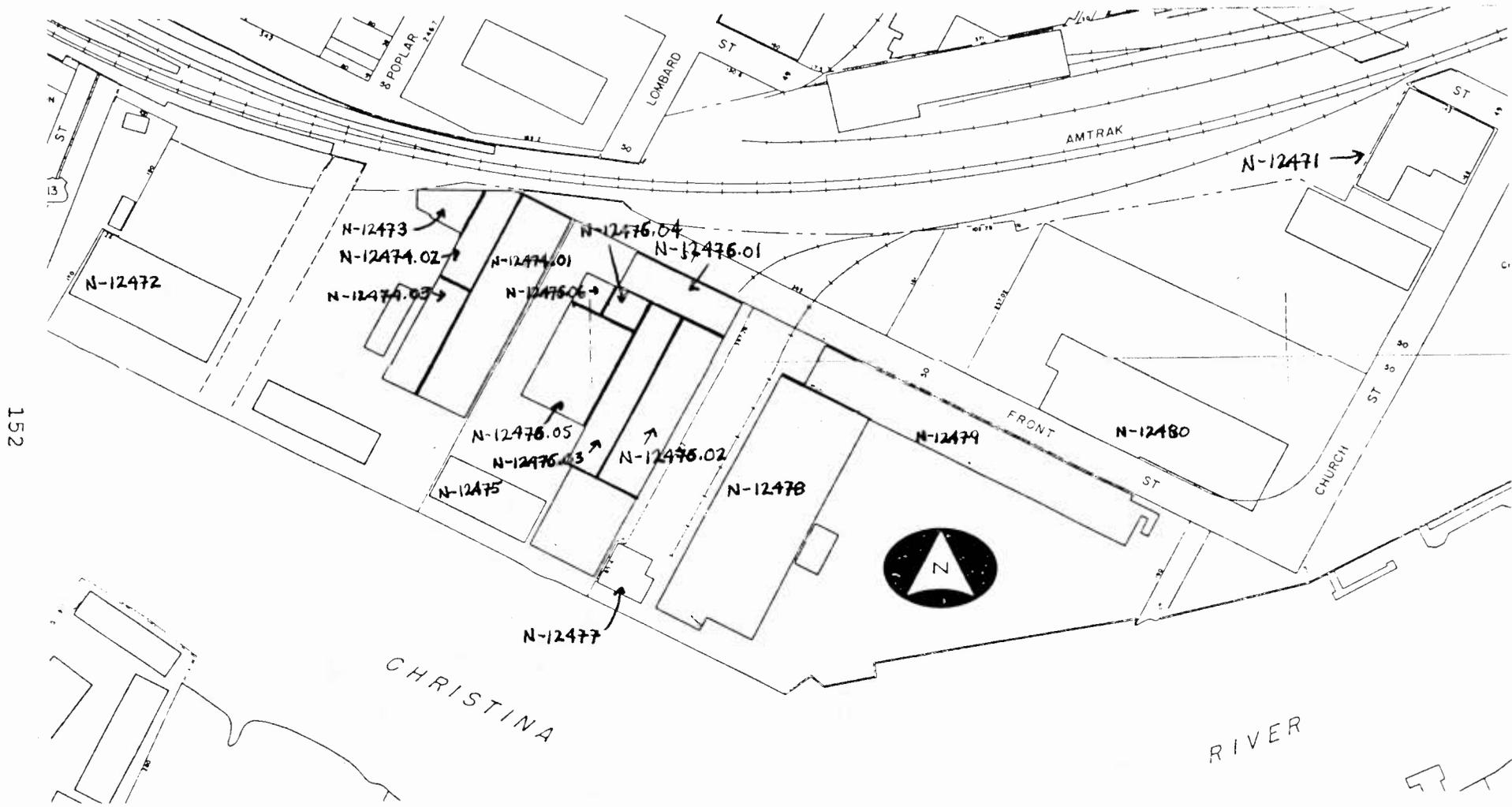
COMPLEX #9
THE CRANE CO.

Statement of Significance

Significant as an example of the rebuilding of Wilmington's heavily industrialized areas during the early twentieth century the Crane Co. building is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, buildings that are associated with events contributing to broad patterns of history. Standing on the southwest corner of South Church and Third Streets in Wilmington's Waterfront Analysis Area (see Figure 28, p. 152), the Crane Co., building constructed c. 1930, reflects a period of new construction along portions of the Waterfront Area. Previously dominated by huge industrial complexes, such as railcar manufacturers, iron shipbuilders, and metal processing and machine makers, the early twentieth century witnessed the bankruptcy or closing of many of Wilmington's waterfront industries. Formerly a portion of the Diamond State Iron Co.'s rolling mill stretching across both shores of the Christina River, the Crane Co. building relates to the closing of Diamond State Iron and subsequent rebuilding on that site. A manufacturer of wrought iron pipe, malleable and cast iron fittings for steam, water and gas, and plumbing hardware and supplies, the Crane Co. building illustrates the attempted revitalization of Wilmington's industrial base and riverfronts during the 1930s.

Although described by the Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan as situated in the Urban Geographic Zone (Zone V; see Figure 4, p. 9), an area contained within the City of Wilmington's corporate boundaries, the Waterfront Analysis Area actually lays within the Coastal Geographic Zone (Zone IV). A great diversity of flora and fauna once lived in the Coastal Zone, land bordering major and minor streams flowing into the Delaware River and Bay. A wide variety of fishes as well as turtles, muskrat, wood ducks, great blue herons, ospreys, turkey vultures and bald eagles thrived in the tidal marshes and waterways of Delaware. Flora included arrowarum, spatterdock, water-willow, smartweed, and red and white oak. Modern survivals of some of these species of flora and fauna may occur in less-developed sections of eastern and southern Wilmington. Coastal Zone soils vary from wetlands to moderately well-drained and medium-textured loam. Landfill has obscured most of Wilmington's pre-colonial shoreline. The Wilmington Waterfront Analysis Area approximately describes land bordering both the Christina and Brandywine Rivers and forms a discrete geographical area defined by the City of Wilmington's Office of Planning.⁹¹

⁹¹ Ames, et al., pp. 31-36.



152

Figure 28: Site Plan of Complex #9
The Crane Co.

The Crane Co. building relates to the historic theme 6E in the Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan (Manufacturing, 1880-1940 +/-: Urbanization and Early Suburbanization). Manufacturing describes the mechanical or chemical transformation of inorganic or organic materials into new products by establishments typically housed in plants, factories or mills using power driven machinery and/or handling equipment.⁹² The period of Urbanization and Early Suburbanization (1880-1940 +/-), characterized by continued industrial expansion and growth during the first few decades of the period, witnessed a diversity of manufacturing establishments throughout the city although the Waterfront Area was dominated by iron-shipbuilding, railcar factories, and metal processing firms, including machine and tool manufacturers.

After the turn of the century a number of factors contributed to a steady decline among Wilmington's riverfront manufactures. These factors included changing market demands and technology, and the rise of national corporations capable of supplying vast amounts of capital and material resources. Local industrialists and entrepreneurs encouraged the formation of new manufacturing firms in Wilmington, especially in southern sections of the city where development occurred slowly. Tangible characteristics of this trend included the construction of railroad freight spurs through south Wilmington in the 1890s, periodic dredging of the Christina River to prevent silting, and the construction of the Port of Wilmington harbor facilities in the 1920s. The construction of the Crane Co. reflects the local encouragement of manufacturing expansion throughout portions of the Waterfront Area during the period of Urbanization and Early Suburbanization (1880-1940 +/-).

The Crane Co. began manufacturing wrought iron and brass pipes and fittings for a variety of uses in Chicago during the mid-nineteenth century. Incorporated as the Crane Brothers Manufacturing Company in 1872, the firm supplied steam heating equipment to the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet and the Cook County Courthouse. In 1890, the company became the Crane Co. and fabricated flanged fittings, compound engines, nickel castings, steel valves, air brake equipment, and drainage and ammonia fittings. The establishment of branch jobbing and retail shops throughout the nation became a feature of the Crane Co. A shop in Omaha acquired in 1884 began the movement toward the creation of local shops. Richard Crane, founder of the firm, determined that branch shops cut out middlemen, provided customers with speedier and more reliable sources of products, and boosted profit margins. By 1890, ten branch houses had been established across the country including one in Philadelphia. A later branch shop erected circa 1925 still stands on Locust Street in Center City Philadelphia. Fifteen additional branch shops were opened between 1900 and 1905.

⁹² Ibid., pp. 26, 36-37.

Between 1914 and 1931, the Crane Co. witnessed its most active period of expansion. Growth during the early years of this period was spurred by military contracts for plumbing supplies outfitting World War I military bases. Branch shops were also established in Canada, England and France after the war. Ninety branches were launched between 1922 and 1930. Many of these shops were housed in newly constructed buildings. Hit hard by the Depression of the 1930s, branch shops under construction were completed prior to the company economizing operations and divesting itself of excess physical facilities. The Crane Co. building in Wilmington reflects these trends of Crane's expansion and retrenchment in the early twentieth century.⁹³

Prior to the construction of the circa 1930 Crane Co. building (N-12471), the property formed part of the Diamond State Rolling Mill. An 1897 insurance map depicts one and two-story brick buildings forming an ell occupied by the nut and bolt works of the Diamond State Iron Co. Diamond State Iron suffered financial problems in the early 1900s and closed down in 1904. A similar shaped building belonging to the Diamond State Steel Co. stood at the site in a 1914 insurance map although the notation "now vacant" labeled the building. In April of that year George S. Cappelle and John Richardson, Jr., receivers of the assets of the bankrupt Diamond State Steel Co., sold the Crane Co. lot along with four other lots to Daniel J. Driscoll and his wife Laura, both from Reading, Pennsylvania. The very same day Driscoll and wife sold the lot to the Wilmington Trust Co. Two years later the Trust Co. sold the lot back to Daniel and Laura Driscoll.⁹⁴

The Crane Co. acquired the lot in 1930 and erected the building soon thereafter. Architectural evidence, most notably modernistic or art deco stylistic motifs, indicate a date of construction of circa 1930. Architectural historian Marcus Whiffen describes modernistic architecture as a style of ornament predominated by rectilinear forms often utilizing zigzags and frets flanking windows and doors. Rectangular projections frequently surround wall openings. Modernistic buildings also stress vertical proportions and were popular in the United States beginning in the late 1920s through the 1940s.

Despite architectural features hidden underneath corrugated aluminum, the most salient feature of the Crane Co. building remains the incised bricks forming ornamental piers on the building's elevations. Accentuating the vertical proportions of

⁹³ Richard Tyler Crane, The Autobiography of Richard Tyler Crane, 1832-1912 (Chicago: The Crane Co., 1927); John B. Berryman, An Old Man Looks Back (Chicago: 1943).

⁹⁴ Sanborn (1897); Munroe, p. 157; Sanborn-Perris (1914); NCC Deed Books: Y-24-316, Y-24-325, F-26-9 (NCCRD).

the building, the symmetrically-spaced piers define window and door openings and possess concrete capitals. Although not an especially striking example of the Modernistic Style, the Crane building's subtle decorative motifs help to date its construction. A photograph of Wilmington's waterfront area taken in 1931 illustrates the presence of the building in that year while a 1928 aerial view of the city does not depict the presence of the Crane Co. building.⁹⁵

The Crane Co. owned the building until 1940. Directories indicate that Crane occupied the building for only a few years. The Quality Manufacturing Co. occupied the building in 1936 according to insurance maps. William H. Harris III purchased the Crane building in 1940 and continued to own the building until 1950. During the Second World War trigger assemblies for rifles were manufactured in the former Crane Co. building. The MARCO Co. acquired the building in 1950 and sold it in 1955 to the T D S Co. The T D S Co. owned the building until 1959 when the current owner bought the building. An insurance map last updated in 1956 identifies the tenant as Saxony Electronics, Inc.⁹⁶

Related to the historic theme Manufacturing during the period of Urbanization and Early Suburbanization (1880-1940 +/-) the Crane Co. building helps document the attempted revitalization of the Wilmington Waterfront Analysis Area during the early twentieth century. Due to changing economic factors many of Wilmington's industries experienced plant closings and business failures prompting city boosters and local entrepreneurs to encourage establishment of new manufacturing concerns. As a result, some older Wilmington firms moved to previously undeveloped sites in southern portions of the Waterfront Area in addition to new firms being established. The Crane Co. participated in the subsequent rise of new industries in Wilmington following 1920. Erected circa 1930, the Crane Co. helps illustrate the introduction of new manufacturers along the Waterfront Area. As such the Crane Co. building is eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, buildings associated with events contributing to broad patterns of history.

⁹⁵ NCC Deed Book: V-36-492 (NCCRD); Marcus Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780 (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1981), pp. 234-40; Carol Hoffecker, Wilmington, A Pictorial History (Norfolk, VA: Donning Company, 1982), pp. 176-77; Chamber of Commerce (1928), p. 1.

⁹⁶ NCC Deed Books: F-42-432, X-49-72, C-56-312, S-64-294 (NCCRD); Franklin (1936); Sanborn (1956).

Architectural Description

Situated at the intersection of North Church and East Third streets, the Crane Company Building (#9) eastern or main elevation faces Church Street and a city park (see Figure 28, p. 152). The AMTRAK Northeast Corridor Viaduct passes directly west of the building while the Pusey & Jones Complex (#11) sprawls a short distance to the south of the Crane Company building. Subtle Art-Deco flourishes in the building's brick facades form an interesting architectural counterpoint to the unadorned mill buildings to the south formerly belonging to Pusey & Jones.

The Crane Company building (N-12471), currently occupied by the Wilmington Florists Exchange, stands two stories high on the southwest corner of Church and Third streets with one story wings extending south along Church Street and west along Third Street (see Plate 26, p. 157). The original primary elevation contains seven bays along Church Street, five on the two story portion and two on the southern wing. Seven bays currently penetrate the northern elevation fronting Third Street but architectural evidence indicates twelve bays once punctured the northern wall massing. One story additions on the southwest corner give the complex an overall Zee-shape. A small square brick chimney stack exits the southwest portion of the main building's flat roof.

A concrete foundation supports four ornamental piers composed of incised bricks, or bricks laid diagonally to the face of the elevation revealing only the corners of the brick exposed. These piers delimit three bays along the main two-story portion of the elevation. The piers extend only three-quarters up the elevation and possess concrete capitals. Corrugated aluminum covers all windows above molded concrete sills. The middle bay contains a former main entrance flanked by incised-brick piers capped by aluminum sheathed lintel. Broken letters spell "Wilmington Florists Exchange" above the former entrance now infilled with brick. The concrete coping that tops the one-story southern wing continues across the two-story section acting as a string course between the two stories. A flat concrete lintel crowns a large second-story window opening. A concrete pad in the sidewalk under the two-story building's southern bay probably indicates the location of an earlier bulkhead entrance to a basement.

The north elevation exhibits similar incised-brick pier treatment surrounding the two bays of the two-story section. In addition, five symmetrically-spaced piers with flat faces extend along the one-story portion of the west wing. A wooden horizontal roll door interrupts the fourth pier from the east. The concrete string course continues from the Church Street elevation and forms a coping atop the west wing. Fiberglass sheathes second story window bays. First story bays contain aluminum corrugate. Two steel doors pierce the west end of the wing. The western elevation of

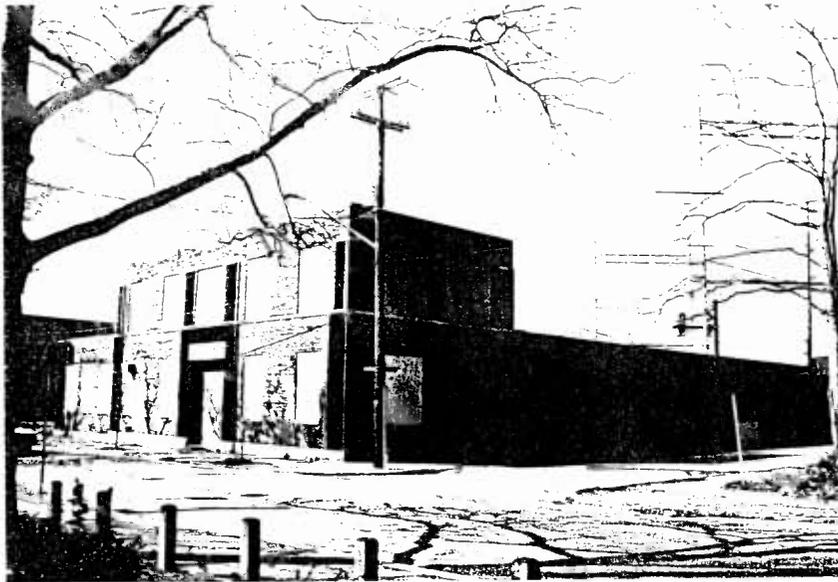


Plate 26: East and north elevations of the
Crane Co. (N-12471) looking west
(Photograph by Stuart Dixon)

the wing displays ten concrete block-filled bays veiled by overgrown brush and the AMTRAK Viaduct. A concrete coping caps the western elevation.

The southern elevation of the south one-story wing possesses two loading bays filled with concrete block and capped with rowlock lintels. A small shed roof overhangs the west half of the western loading bay and a steel entrance door. Square green posts support the asphalt-shingled roof. Wood panels surround the steel door. The shed roof continues west over a former concrete loading dock with four concrete steps on its eastern end. Corrugated metal sheaths this portion of the loading dock roof. Concrete block walls encase the dock creating a one-story addition. Wood paneling sides the addition. A concrete block wall extends diagonally to the southwest from the loading dock addition where it connects to another one-story flat-roofed ell addition. Three boarded windows and two steel casement doors penetrate the east wall of this ell. The ell's southern elevation includes two openings filled with concrete block and one covered with corrugated metal. A one-story, wood-frame addition with corrugated metal siding and a shallowly-sloped gable roof extends west of the ell and forms the final member of the Zee-plan. A large sliding door rests in it's southern elevation.