

CHRYSLER CORPORATION
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)
12200 East Jefferson Avenue
Detroit
Wayne County
Michigan

HAER No. MI-24

HAER
MICH
82-DETRO
61-

~~PHOTOGRAPHIC~~

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Northeast Region
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

HAER
MICH
82-DETRO,
61-

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Location: 12200 East Jefferson Avenue
Detroit
Wayne County, Michigan

UTM: A: 17.338125.4692420 C: 17.338740.4691900
B: 17.338410.4691760 D: 17.338500.4692500

Quad: Belle Isle, Michigan, 1:24,000

Dates of
Construction: 1908-1955

Architects: Albert Kahn; Smith, Hinchman & Grylls

Present Owner: The Chrysler Corporation
12000 Chrysler Drive
Highland Park, MI 48288

Present Use: Demolished in 1991

Significance: The Chrysler Jefferson Avenue Plant was the southern anchor of the Jefferson/Conner industrial district of Detroit and was the district's largest and oldest factory complex. Albert Kahn designed the reinforced-concrete factory buildings constructed here in 1908-1918, as well as most of the other industrial buildings in this district built in the 1910s and 1920s.

Project

Information: This documentation is the result of a Memorandum of Agreement among the Chrysler Corporation, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the City of Detroit as a mitigative measure prior to demolition of these buildings. It was completed in March 1993 by Charles K. Hyde, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan 48202

The Development of the Jefferson/Conner Industrial District

The Chrysler Corporation's Jefferson Avenue manufacturing complex was part of an industrial district that developed from the early 1900s to the late 1920s along Jefferson and Conner Avenues, which intersect about five miles east of Woodward Avenue, Detroit's major commercial artery. This territory was incorporated as Fairview Village of Grosse Pointe Township in December, 1903. The City of Detroit annexed the area in October 1907 in order to divert the village's sewage from the Detroit River by extending Detroit's sewage system along Jefferson Avenue past Connor's Creek, the source of the pollution. The annexation extended Detroit's eastern boundary nearly 2.5 miles to Alter Road and included roughly 4 square miles of real estate. This was another chapter of Detroit's rapid physical expansion in the early twentieth century. The city's population grew from 285,704 in 1900 to 465,766 in 1910, but then leaped to 993,675 in 1920, in large part because of the expanding automobile industry. Detroit's incorporated area likewise grew from 23 square miles in 1900 to 79 square miles by 1921 and nearly doubled again over the next decade.¹

This particular area emerged as an industrial district because of the availability of cheap land and the location of the Detroit Terminal Railroad, which ran on a north-south line parallel to and west of Conner Avenue. The concentration of manufacturing facilities, primarily west of Conner, extended nearly two miles from Freud to Warren Avenue. The Detroit Terminal Railroad was established in 1905 as a beltline railway to connect the major rail lines which entered Detroit, but were not linked together. The first segment, opened in 1906, was four miles long and extended north from the Detroit River on the west side of the city. The major railroads serving Detroit jointly owned and operated the line for most of the twentieth century. The line extended into the Jefferson\Conner area in 1908-1909. When the last section opened in 1914, the Detroit Terminal Railroad had eighteen miles of mainline track, an additional eighteen miles of side track, and eighteen locomotives, representing an investment of more than \$1.5 million.²

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The rapid development of this industrial district can be seen in the real estate and fire insurance atlases covering the area. A real estate atlas of 1905 showed the lands west of the eventual location of Terminal Avenue fully platted into house lots, but the area east of Terminal, both north and south of Jefferson Avenue, was entirely undeveloped. By 1911, however, the area already had substantial industrial development. Besides the Chalmers Motor Company plant south of Jefferson and immediately east of the Detroit Terminal Railroad line, two major manufacturing complexes stood north of Jefferson, flanking Connor's Creek Road (later known as Conner Avenue). The Hudson Motor Car Company, organized in 1909, bought a 25-acre site and built a sprawling reinforced-concrete factory at the northeast corner of Jefferson and Connor's Creek Road in 1909-1910. The Anderson Forge and Machine Company, organized in 1906, bought a 13-acre parcel at the northwest corner of that intersection and in 1910 built a large plant, which was projected to employ 500 workers.³

By the mid-1910s, automobile-related industries occupied a two mile belt along the Detroit Terminal Railroad line extending from south of Freud through Warren Avenue. A February 1914 issue of The Automobile identified eleven manufacturers of automobiles or components: the RCH Corporation; Zenith Carburetor Company; Chalmers Motor Company; Anderson Forge & Machine; Hudson Motor Car Company; Continental Motors Company; Metal Products Company; Michigan Electric Welding; Bower Roller Bearing Company; Motor Foundry & Machine Company; and the Lozier Motor Company. A Sanborn insurance map of 1916 showed only two major new manufacturing firms, both located immediately north of Jefferson Avenue and west of the Detroit Terminal Railroad. The Wadsworth Manufacturing Company, which produced automobile bodies, fronted on Jefferson Avenue and the McCord Manufacturing Company, which made automobile radiators, was located just north of the Wadsworth plant.⁴

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In the 1920s, the Jefferson/Conner district continued to attract industrial firms which built new plants on the available lands. A 1923 real estate atlas showed four large plants occupying most of the land between Jefferson and Kercheval, on both sides of Conner. From east to west, they were Continental Motors, Hudson, Jefferson Forge Products (formerly Anderson Forge and Machine), and the American Motor Body Company (formerly Wadsworth Manufacturing Company). After a spectacular fire destroyed the Wadsworth plant in August 1919, the firm engaged Albert Kahn to design a six-story reinforced-concrete replacement building, which was completed the following year. Wadsworth then leased its factory complex to the American Motor Body Company, which bought it outright in 1923. The new Chrysler Corporation in turn acquired the property in 1925, when it became the Chrysler Corporation Kercheval Avenue plant.

In 1923, three large plants filled the blocks bounded by Conner, the Detroit Terminal Railroad, Kercheval, and Charlevoix - the Timkin-Detroit Axle Company (previously Metal Products Company), the Detroit Vapor Stove Company, and Plant No. 2 of the Hudson-Essex Motor Company. The Liberty Motor Car Company occupied the next block to the north, between Charlevoix and Goethe. Although the firm was incorporated in 1916, it did not build this manufacturing complex until three years later.⁵

A 1929 Sanborn fire insurance map of this industrial district shows most of the same firms that were there in 1923. Many of the automobile manufacturers, including Chrysler, had greatly enlarged their facilities and largely "filled in" their existing land holdings. In 1925, the Budd Realty Company bought the Liberty Motor Car Company property between Charlevoix and Mack Avenue and leased the plant to the Budd Wheel Company. Budd immediately built a large body plant to supply the Detroit automobile companies with closed steel bodies. The Chrysler Corporation Mack Avenue Stamping Plant (formerly Briggs Manufacturing) occupied a large tract between Mack and Warren avenues and defined the northern boundary of this district. The Jefferson/Conner industrial corridor has remained a center for the production of automobile components and finished vehicles from the 1910s to the present.⁶

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The Jefferson Avenue Plant in Historical Perspective

This plant was the birthplace of the Chrysler automobile and a major production facility for the Chrysler Corporation for most of its history. Walter Percy Chrysler (1875-1940) had served as works manager (1912-1916) and president (1916-1920) of the Buick Motor Company in Flint, Michigan, before becoming an executive vice-president of the financially-ailing Willys-Overland Company in 1920-1921. He was president of the Maxwell-Chalmers Motor Car Company in 1920-1925. Chrysler introduced a pathbreaking new automobile, the Chrysler Six, in 1924 and first produced it at the Jefferson Avenue plant. With the success of his new models, Walter Chrysler gained control of Maxwell-Chalmers and reorganized the firm as the Chrysler Corporation on 6 June 1925.

Chrysler jumped from twenty-seventh to fourth place within the U.S. auto industry in terms of sales between 1925 and 1927. The following year was one of the most important in the corporation's history. In July 1928, Walter Chrysler acquired the Dodge Brothers Company, with its large factory complex in Hamtramck, Michigan for \$170 million in Chrysler stock. The Dodge purchase tripled Chrysler's manufacturing capacity. Later in the year, Chrysler launched two new lines of cars - the low-priced Plymouth, intended to compete directly with Ford and Chevrolet, and the medium-priced De Soto.

The Jefferson Avenue complex was one of the Chrysler Corporation's three major factories in the Detroit area in the late 1920s. The second, the "Main Plant" of the Dodge Brothers Company ("Dodge Main"), manufactured and assembled the Dodge line of cars, and was located roughly 4.5 miles northwest of the Jefferson Avenue plant. Chrysler opened a third major factory in December 1928 to build the Plymouth automobile - the Lynch Road plant, about 1.5 miles northeast of Dodge Main. There, Albert Kahn designed an enormous complex that featured a single-story steel-framed building, 375 feet wide and 2,490 feet long. After Lynch Road opened, the Jefferson Avenue plant assembled the Chrysler line of cars and occasionally De Sotos as well. Chrysler's enlarged manufacturing capacity enabled the corporation to increase its sales from 192,000 cars in 1927 to 450,543 in 1929, making it one of the top three U.S. automobile companies.⁸

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The products assembled at the Jefferson Avenue plant, as well as the parts manufactured there, changed considerably over time. After its introduction in 1928, the De Soto was initially assembled at Dodge Main, but its production was periodically shifted to Jefferson Avenue as well. In 1936, Chrysler acquired the former La Salle factory on Detroit's west side, at Wyoming and McGraw, and moved the production of De Sotos there. Kahn designed an enormous Press Shop for De Soto in 1936, with a large addition in 1941. In the postwar period, Chrysler built most of its new production facilities in outstate Michigan and in other states as well.⁹

The manufacturing and assembly operations south of Jefferson Avenue continued to expand through the Second World War, as did the Kercheval (body) plant north of Jefferson. By 1941, the two plants had a combined employment of 14,000 and produced 850 cars per day. All the bodies were manufactured at the Kercheval plant and then transported across Jefferson Avenue on flatbed trucks, which could carry only eight bodies at a time. The Jefferson Avenue complex reached its peak production and employment in the late 1950s, after Chrysler built a \$20 million addition to the Kercheval plant in 1955. The new buildings housed modern Body-In-White assembly lines and painting facilities, which enabled Chrysler to produce welded bodies prior to painting. In the late 1950s, the complex employed 16,500 and produced 1,200 cars per day. To eliminate the costly and harmful practice of transporting bodies to the assembly plant across the street by truck, Chrysler also built a bridge over Jefferson Avenue in 1955 to house body conveyor lines. The bridge connected the two plants at the second floor level.¹⁰

The Jefferson Avenue plant remained a significant production center for the Chrysler Corporation until it closed in February 1990. It produced the Chrysler "K-Cars" (Dodge Aries and Plymouth Reliant) from August 1980 until February 1989 and then the subcompact Dodge Omni and Plymouth Horizon models until its closure in February 1990.

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NOTES

¹"Section of Fairview Which May Become Part of Detroit," Detroit Free Press, 8 March 1907; "Fairview Village Will Be Right Up to Date," Detroit Free Press, 20 February 1910, Section 4, p. 3; and Sidney Glazer, Detroit: A Study in Urban Development (New York: Bookman Associates, 1965), pp. 129-130.

²"Completion of Last Section of Detroit Terminal Railway Increases Its Importance in Development of Industry," Detroit Free Press, 28 June 1914.

³William C. Sauer, Detailed Official Atlas of Wayne County, Michigan (Detroit: W. C. Sauer, 1905); George W. Baist, Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Detroit and Highland Park, Michigan (Philadelphia: G. W. Baist, 1911); Clarence M. Burton, The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701-1922 (Detroit: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), Volume 1, pp. 583-584, 599; and "New Forge and Machine Plant to Employ 500," The Detroit News, 2 March 1910, p. 16.

⁴"Map of Detroit Showing Automobile, Truck, and Accessory Plants," The Automobile, Volume 30, February 26, 1914, p. 497 and Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, Insurance Maps of Detroit, Michigan, Volume 11 (New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, 1916).

⁵George W. Baist, Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Detroit, and Suburbs, Michigan (Philadelphia: G. W. Baist, 1923), Volume 1; "Blaze Damage Above Million: Wadsworth Officials Believe Sparks From Incinerator Caused Fire," The Detroit News, 2 August 1919, pp. 1, 2; and Burton, The City of Detroit, Volume 1, p. 584.

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⁶Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, Insurance Maps of Detroit, Michigan, Volume 11 (New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, 1929) and Robert J. Kothe, "Budd Company," in George S. May, editor, The Automobile Industry, 1896-1920 (New York: Brucoli Clark Layman, 1990), pp. 60-61.

⁷Richard P. Scharchburg, "Walter Percy Chrysler," in George S. May, editor, The Automobile Industry, 1920-1980, pp. 57-62.

⁸George S. May, "Chrysler Corporation," in George S. May, editor, The Automobile Industry, 1920-1980, p. 64 and W. Hawkins Ferry, The Legacy of Albert Kahn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), p. 24.

⁹Grant Hildebrand, Designing For Industry: The Architecture of Albert Kahn (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1974), pp. 165-171 and W. Hawkins Ferry, The Buildings of Detroit: A History (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), pp. 338-339.

¹⁰Jefferson Assembly Plant Quality Product Improvement Team, Jefferson Assembly Plant, 1907-1984: 77 Years of History! (Detroit, 1984), no page numbers.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings: Original drawings have survived for the Jefferson Avenue plant buildings designed by Albert Kahn. Virtually all of the major industrial buildings in the Jefferson/Conner industrial district were also designed by Kahn and those drawings have survived as well. They are preserved in the corporate archives of Albert Kahn Associates, Architects and Engineers, the Albert Kahn Building, 7430 Second Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48202. Original drawings have also survived for most of the buildings designed by the architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. These also survive in microfiche form in the office of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates, Inc., 150 West Jefferson Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48226.

B. Historic Views: Three major sources of historic views were identified. The largest collection, approximately 1,500 views, is found at the Chrysler Historical Collection, the Chrysler Corporation, 12000 Chrysler Drive, Highland Park, Michigan 48288. The National Automotive History Collection at the Detroit Public Library, 5201 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48202, has roughly 600 historic photographs, primarily interior views. The office of Albert Kahn Associates in Detroit also has approximately 150 views.

C. Bibliography

1. Secondary and Published Sources

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C. Bibliography (Continued)

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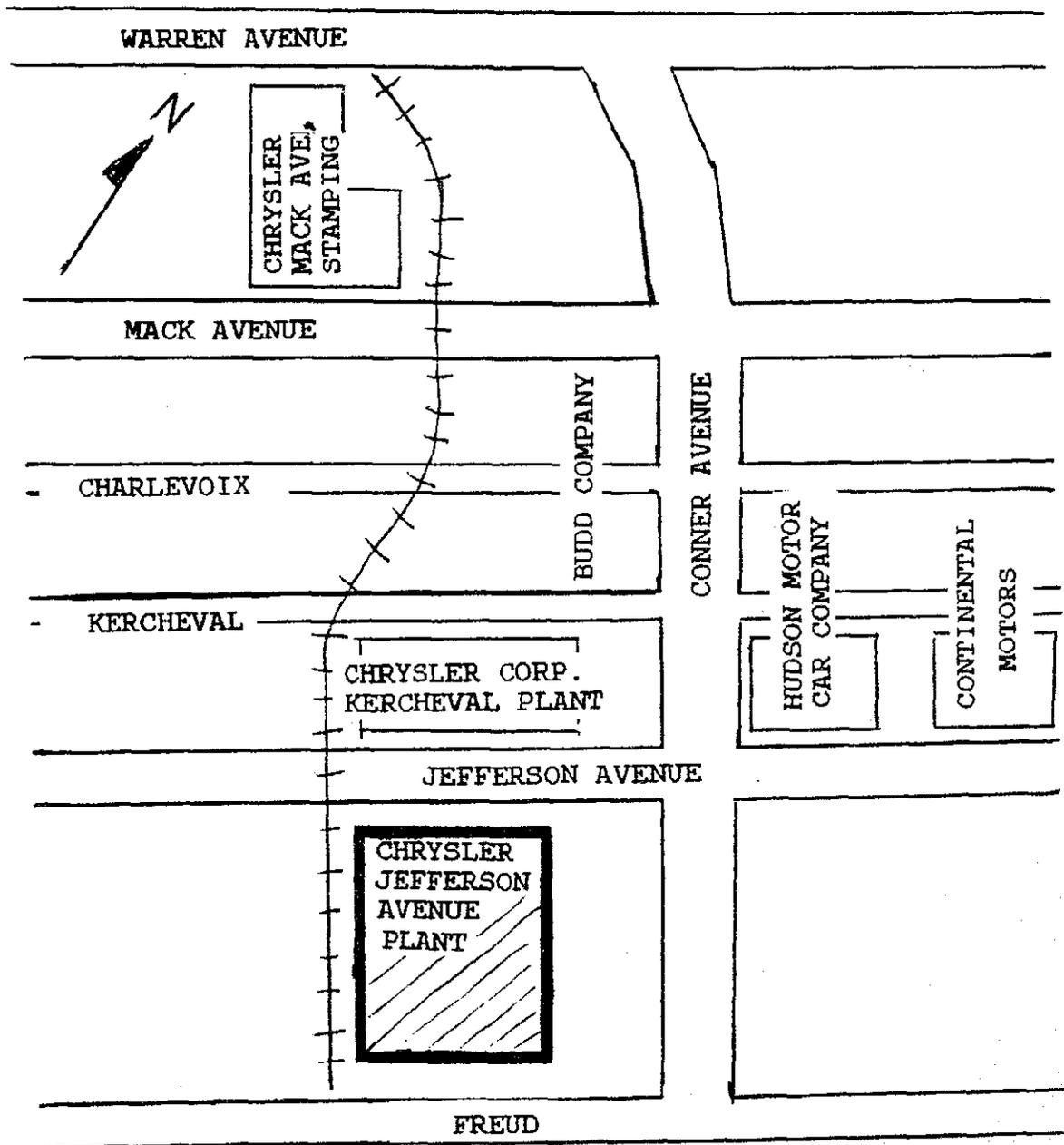
---. The Automobile Industry, 1920-1980 (New York: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1989).

Moritz, Michael and Barrett Seaman, Going For Broke: The Chrysler Story. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981).

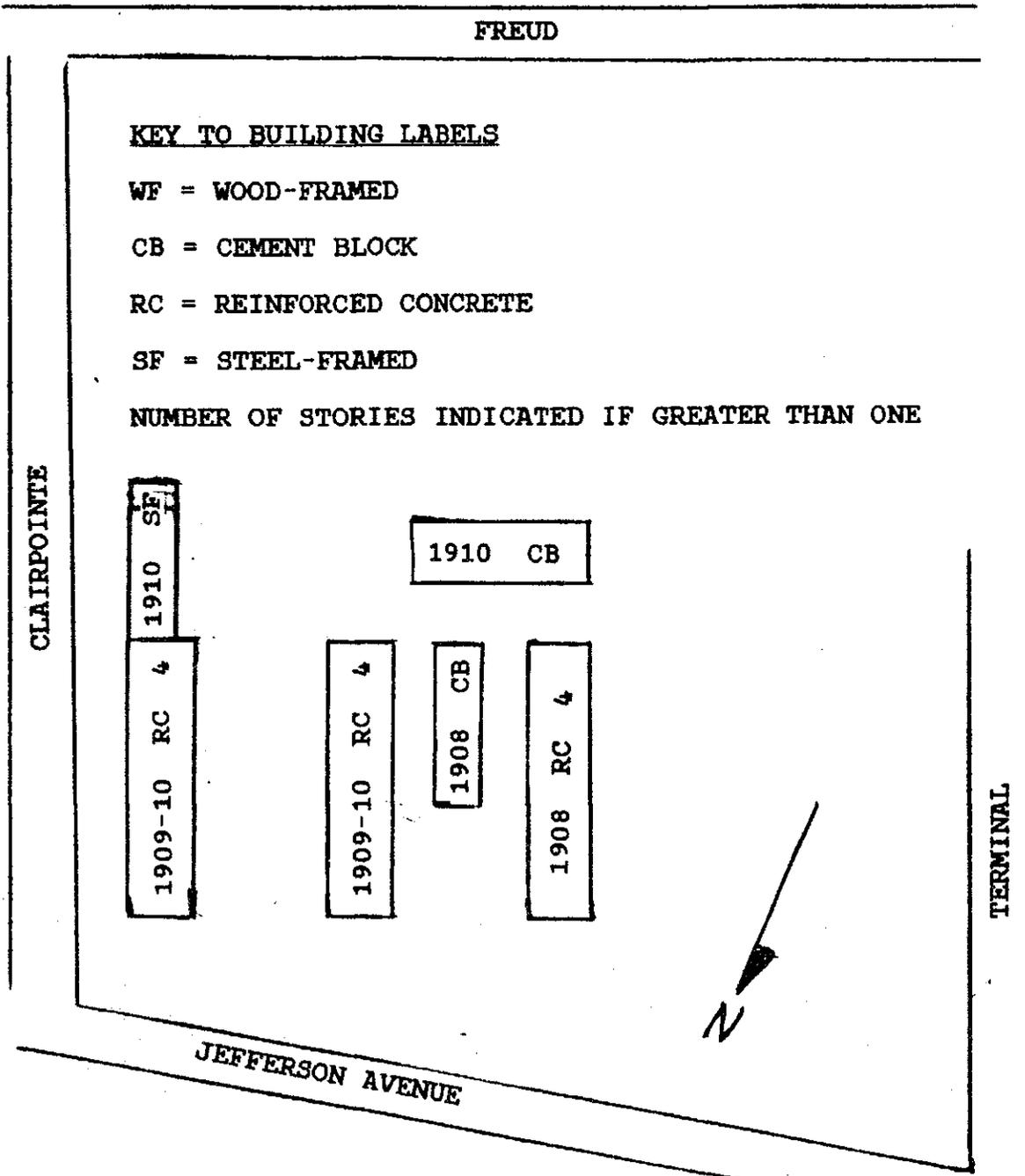
Sanborn Map and Publishing Company. Insurance Map of Detroit, Michigan, Volume 11 (New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, 1916, 1929).

Sauer, William C. Detailed Official Atlas of Wayne County, Michigan (Detroit: W. C. Sauer, 1905).

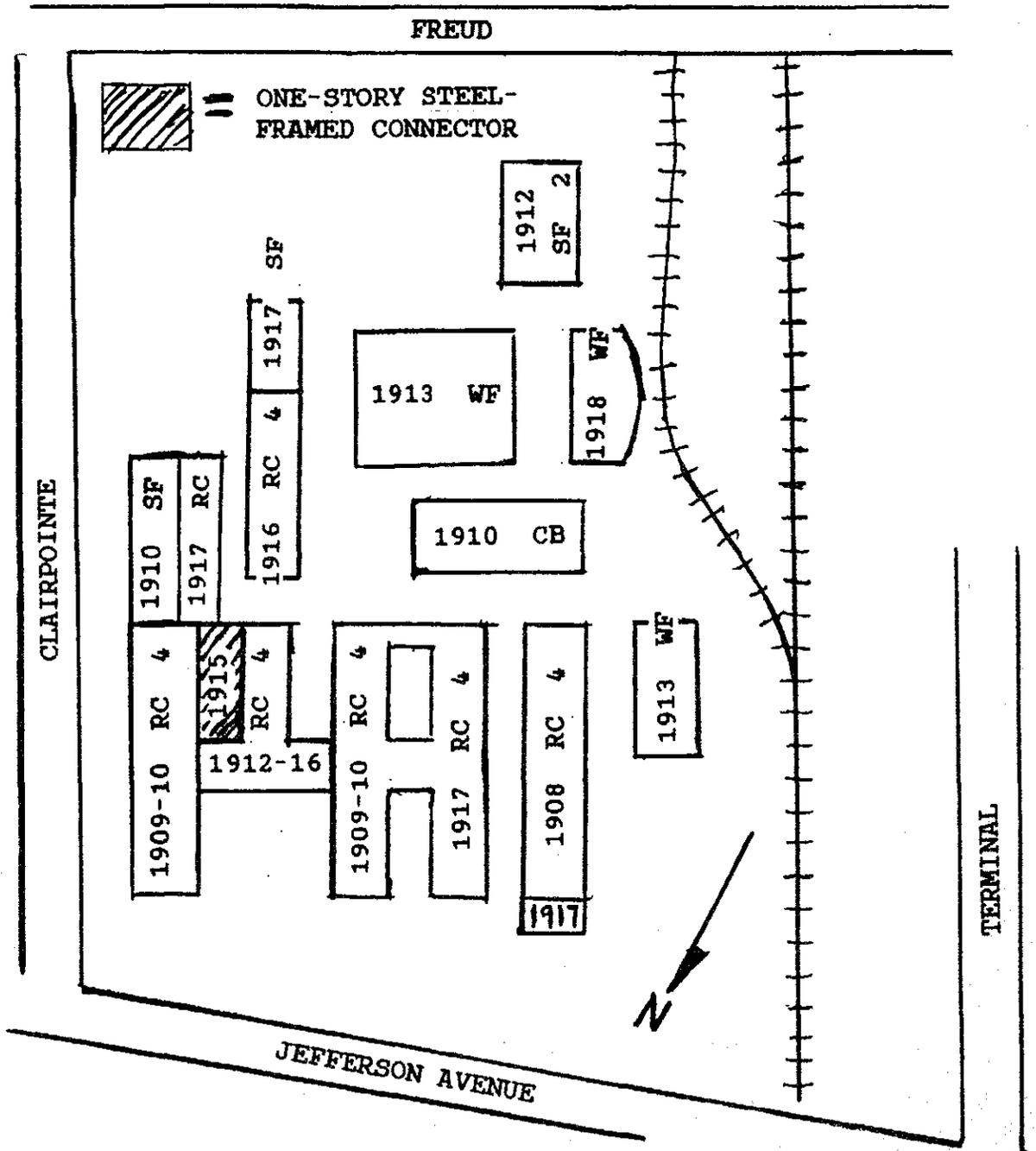
SITE PLAN OF THE JEFFERSON/CONNER INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT



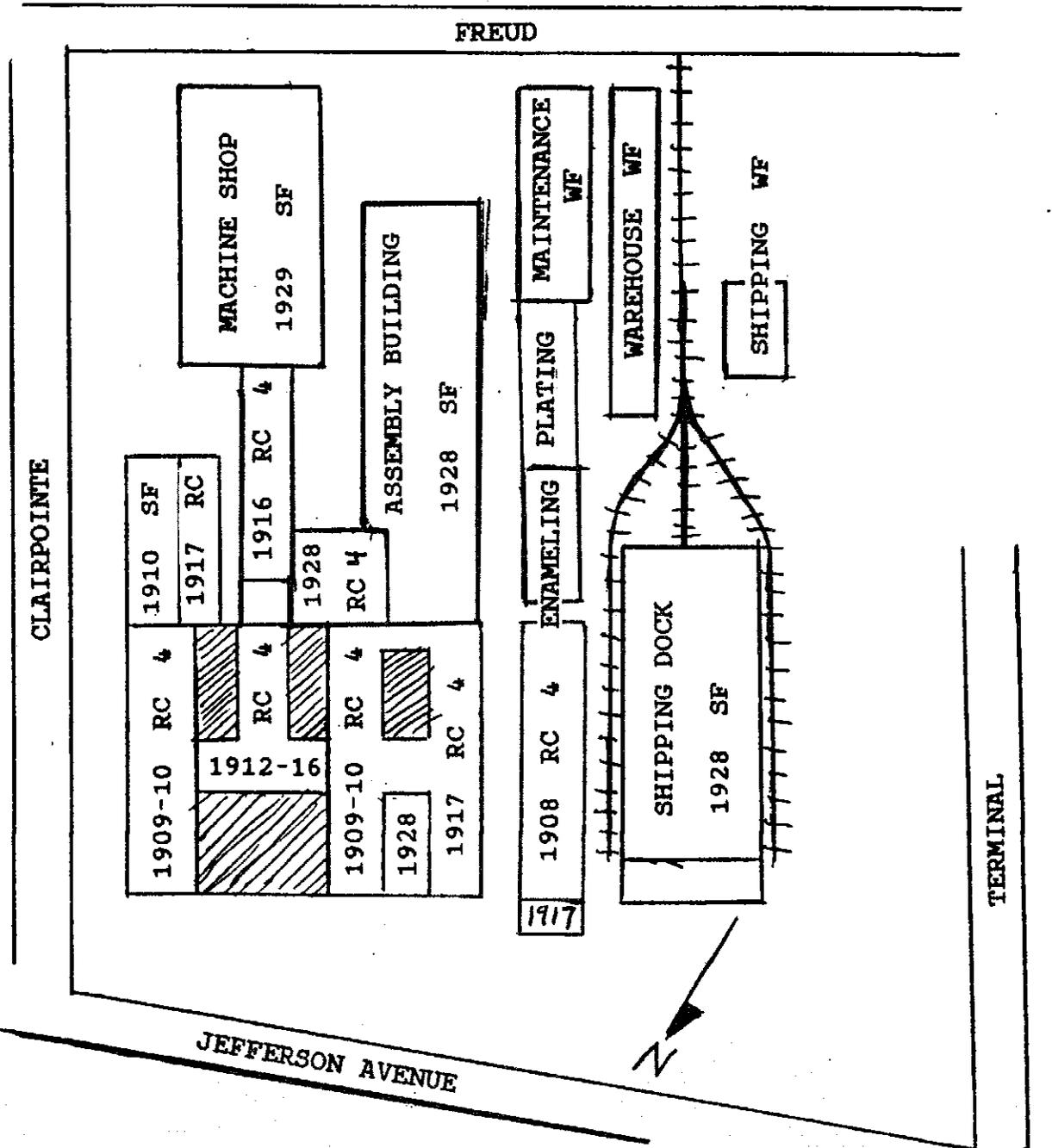
SITE PLAN, 1910



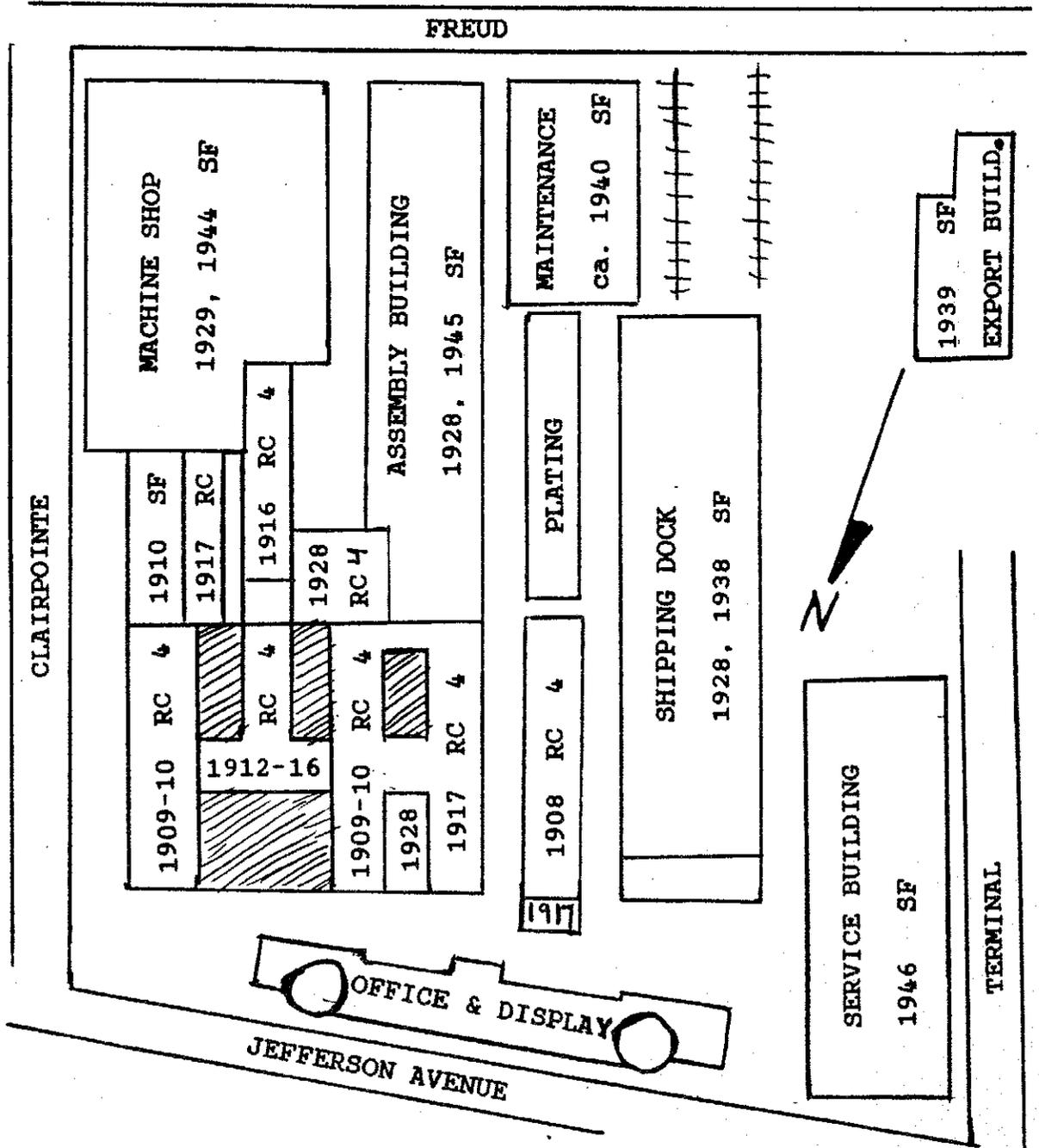
SITE PLAN, 1918



SITE PLAN, 1929

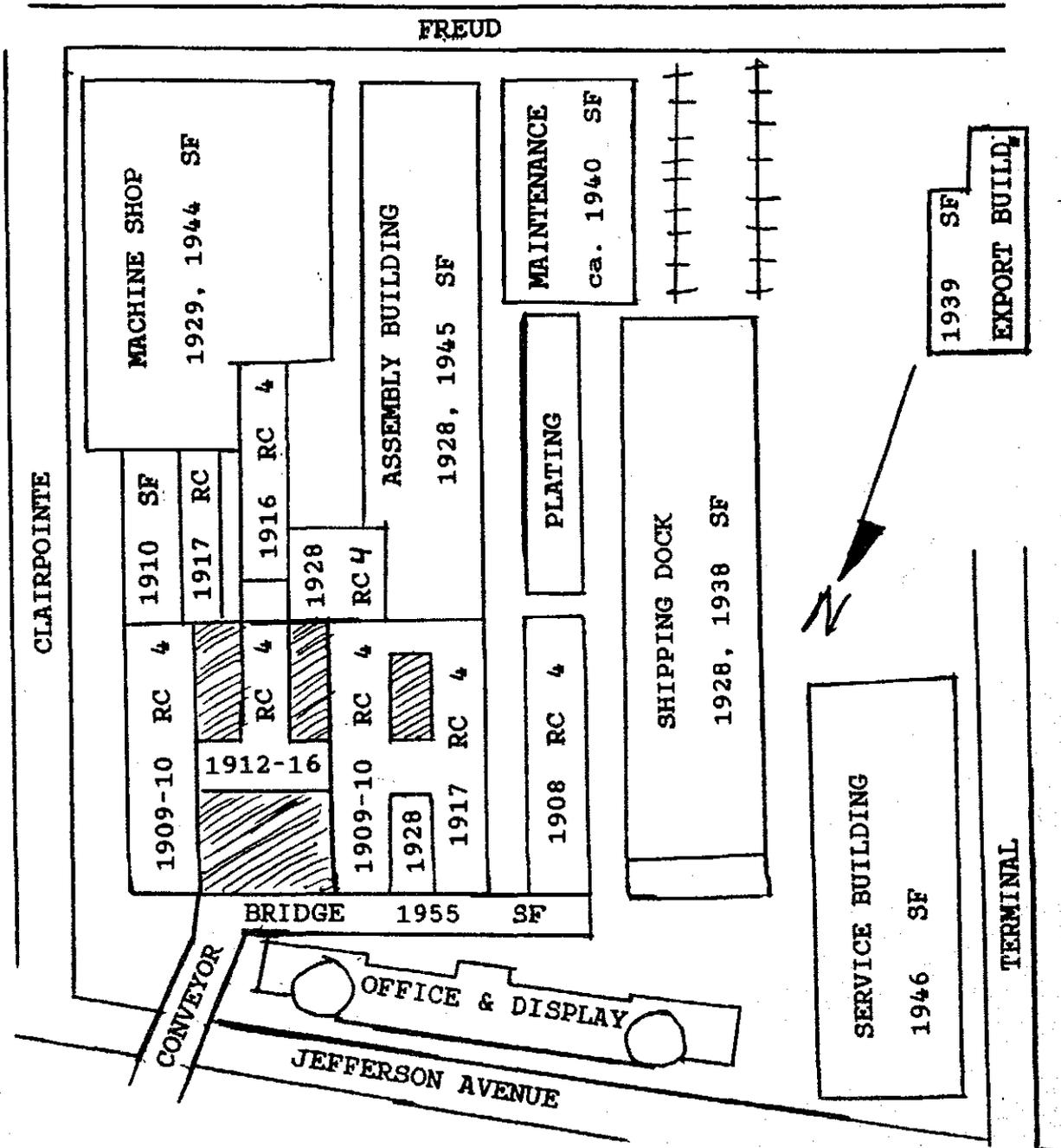


SITE PLAN, 1946



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SITE PLAN, 1955-1991



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FIELD RECORDS

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