

FOX BUILDING
(National Bank Building)
107-111 Huron Avenue
Port Huron
St. Clair County
Michigan

HABS No. MI-391

HABS
MICH
74-POHU,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

HABS
MICH
74-POHU,
1-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FOX BUILDING
(National Bank Building)

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Location: 107-111 Huron Avenue
Port Huron
St. Clair County, Michigan

UTM: 17.383760.4758950

Quad: Port Huron, Michigan, 1:24,000

Present Owner: Michigan Department of Transportation
Transportation Building
425 West Ottawa
P.O. Box 30050
Lansing, Michigan 48909

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Fox Building is a substantial alteration of the National Bank Building, a Neo-Classical Revival style commercial building constructed on this site in 1903-1904. The original building interior was gutted and the two principal facades, on Huron Avenue and Quay Street, were removed and replaced in 1936 to create a new two-story commercial building with two retail stores on the first floor and offices on the second floor. The Fox Building exhibits a combination of two important architectural styles of the 1930s--Art Moderne and Art Deco--applied to a commercial building. From 1936 to 1992, the building housed the third store of the Fox Jewelry Company, a jewelry store chain that began in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1917 and evolved into a mid-sized midwestern retail chain. It was the last building to occupy one of the premier corners on Port Huron's major commercial street. The architect, Charles M. Valentine of Port Huron, did some notable school designs in Detroit and in the Port Huron area and was well-known in southeastern Michigan in the 1930s.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Dates of Erection: 1903-1904, 1936.
2. Designer and builder: Charles M. Valentine (1901-1973) of Port Huron. Charles M. Valentine studied architecture with his father and practiced in Detroit and Bay City, Michigan, before moving to Port Huron in the mid-1930s. While in Detroit, he designed several schools for the Archdiocese of Detroit. His work in Port Huron included schools, a hospital, and numerous downtown Port Huron commercial buildings.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the structure stands, which is part of Lots 1-3 of Block 15 of the Butler Plat. Reference is to the Tract Books in the Register of Deeds Office of the County of St. Clair, Michigan, and the City Tax Assessor's Office, City of Port Huron, Michigan.

1901 Warranty Deed, 28 September 1901, recorded in Liber 150, p. 300. (West half of Lot 2). Harriet Hubbard and Nancy Sanborn to the First National Exchange Bank.

1901 Warranty Deed, 28 September 1901, recorded in Liber 150, p. 299. (Part of Lots 1 & 2). Harriet Hubbard and Nancy Sanborn to the First National Exchange Bank.

1901 Warranty Deed, 23 December 1901, recorded in Liber 152, p. 119. (Ten feet of Lot 3). Charles F. and Alice V. Harrington to the First National Exchange Bank.

1936 Warranty Deed, 12 August 1936, recorded in Liber 408, p. 497. First National Realty Company to the First National Trust and Savings Bank of Port Huron.

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 3)

A. Physical History (continued):

3. Original and subsequent owners (continued):

- 1938 Warranty Deed, 31 December 1938, recorded in Liber 440, p. 594.
First National Trust and Savings Bank of Port Huron to Martin M. Fox and Hilda R. Fox, husband and wife.
- 1974 Warranty Deed, 31 January 1974, recorded in Liber 1009, p. 609. (Half interest).
Martin M., Gloria, and Thomas S. Fox, coexecutors of the estate of Hilda R. Fox, to Fox, Inc., a Michigan corporation, for the sum of \$47,500.
- 1974 Warranty Deed, 13 February 1974, recorded in Liber 1009, p. 611. (Half interest).
Martin M. Fox to Fox, Inc., a Michigan corporation.
- 1977 Quit Claim Deed, 11 April 1977, recorded in Liber 1050, p. 817.
Fox, Inc., a Michigan corporation to Fox Jewelry Company, a Michigan corporation.
- 1991 Warranty Deed, 3 December 1991, recorded in Liber 1260, p. 853.
Fox Jewelry Company, a Michigan corporation, to Michigan Department of Transportation, for the sum of \$205,750.

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 4)

A. Physical History (continued):

4. Builders, contractors, suppliers: A special Fox Jewelry Section of the Port Huron Times-Herald (16 October 1936) provides extensive information on the builders and contractors, most of whom took out paid advertisements to boast of their work on the Fox Building. Charles M. Valentine of Port Huron is identified as the "general contractor and designer and builder for the structure." James Ferguson & Son, Steel Erection Contractors of Port Huron, completed the demolition work on the First National Bank Building and did the steel erection work for the new building. The Michigan Stone Company of Detroit refinished the stone from the old building and the Huron Engineering and Construction Company of Port Huron did all the stone and other masonry work. The Modern Steel Building Company of Detroit, a firm that specialized in porcelain store fronts, built the porcelain column at the main entrance to the store. The other contractors are also identified in the eight-page newspaper section, including the firms who did the plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, sheet metal work, and plastering.
5. Original plans and construction: No original plans or drawings have been found. The National Bank Building (1904) was a Neo-Classical Revival style building which was so severely altered in 1936 that only the south and west facades have survived. A photograph of the bank building and a description of the alterations appear in a special Fox Jewelry Section of the Port Huron Times-Herald of 16 October 1936.

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 5)

A. Physical History (continued):

6. Alterations and additions: 1936, 1977, 1978. The major alteration that took place in 1936 involved the gutting of the interior of the National Bank Building and the removal of the Huron Avenue and Quay Street facades, which were replaced with Art Deco style facades. The alteration included the erection of a new structural steel frame which eliminated the need for interior columns to support the second floor, which was in hung much like a suspended ceiling from the roof-level girders. The limestone and brick from the original bank building were used in the new structure. The white limestone blocks from the old bank building were hauled to the Michigan Stone Company of Detroit, which recut and refaced the stone to form the second story panels of the new building. The brick was used to build the second-story curtain walls which supported the limestone panels.

At the time of its opening, the Port Huron Times-Herald proclaimed that the building was "not only Port Huron's newest and most modern structure, it is one of the most modernistic-looking store buildings in the state." The circular marquee over the main entrance, only the third marquee of this design in Michigan, was its most outstanding feature. According to the paper, "This is one of the newest in modernistic trends and the Fox Building is one of the pioneers in developing the idea." Three separate articles considered the Fox Building's architecture and features in detail.

The interior was described as "the last word in modernistic effects, combining ideas from all parts of the world." The walls were painted in three shades of blue beginning with a dark blue above the display cases and ending with a light blue at edge of the ceiling, which was painted in pastel yellow shades. Multi-colored geometric designs appeared throughout the store as decorative elements. Finally, the floor was covered by mottled blue linoleum with white, blue, and orange stripes.

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 6)

A. Physical History (continued):

6. Alterations and additions (continued):

Alterations to the building exterior cannot be precisely documented because the City of Port Huron has retained no building permits prior to 1982. The original (1936) black structural glass panels enclosing the display windows are covered with dark grey metal panels, probably galvanized iron. The building facade of 1936 featured a wide horizontal band of white Georgian marble running from the band of black structural glass above the show windows to the second story windows. That band is also covered with light grey metal panels.

In 1977, the building's owners replaced all of the display cases and fixtures in the jewelry store portion of the building, added a drop ceiling, and basically destroyed what had remained of the original (1936) interior features. The City Directory for 1978 listed the adjoining retail store at 107 Huron as "under construction," presumably being remodeled to accommodate the My Place Restaurant, which occupied the space from 1979 until 1992. None of the original facade of this section of the building, which had included black structural glass bands surrounding the display windows and buff and wine-colored glass sections above the show windows, has survived. The black and red plastic tile squares under the first floor windows and the stucco above them was probably added in 1978.

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 7)

B. Historical Context:

The southwest corner of Huron Avenue and Quay Street had been the location of several commercial buildings and the home of at least two banks before the construction of the Fox Building. A brick commercial building which dated from before 1867 stood on this corner until replaced by the 1903-1904 National Bank building. Huron Avenue, which becomes Military Street south of the Black River, was Port Huron's main commercial street throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A four-block area straddling the Black River contained most of Port Huron's banks [Branstner and Neumann, pp. 19-26].

In 1870, a group of Port Huron investors incorporated the First National Bank, with a capital stock of \$100,000 and a twenty-year corporate lifespan. The bank was re-incorporated as the First National Exchange Bank in 1890 and again in 1910. Before moving into its new building at the southwest corner of Huron and Quay in 1904, the First National Exchange Bank had conducted business from at least three locations within a block of the intersection of Huron and Quay. The bank occupied its new building from 1904 until 1928, when it merged with the Federal Commercial and Savings Bank and moved into a new building nearby at Military and Water Street. City Directories show the National Bank Building as vacant in 1931, having three federal agencies (Internal Revenue, Customs, and the Public Health Service) as tenants in 1933-1934, and then vacant again in 1936-1937. The federal government rented space there only because the U.S. Post Office building in Port Huron was being renovated. [Jenks, I, p. 428 and the Port Huron Times-Herald, 16 October 1936].

Fox's Jewelry of Port Huron was the third jewelry store operated by Martin M. Fox. He opened his first store in Grand Rapids in 1917 and a second in Kalamazoo before locating in Port Huron. Fox made this decision at the urging of Stewart K. Crawford, a Port Huron native who was working as an assistant manager at Fox's Kalamazoo store. Crawford touted the business potential of Port Huron and took Fox on an extended tour of the city. Winfred Cooper, a local real estate agent, also convinced Fox to locate in Port Huron and arranged the sale of the vacant First National Bank building to him [Port Huron Times-Herald, 16 October 1936].

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 8)

B. Historical Context (continued):

Martin Fox purchased the National Bank Building in early July 1936 and immediately began reconstructing the building into an ultra-modern Art Deco style commercial building. According to Fox, alterations to the bank building cost \$85,000, with a total of \$20,000 paid out to over 150 workers during the construction project. The grand opening of the new store took place on 17 October 1936. Fox named Stewart Crawford as store manager, a position Crawford held until his retirement in 1970. This was a "full-service" jewelry store which featured a watch repair department with a full-time watch maker and large optical department that occupied the mezzanine level above the jewelry store.

Fox's Jewelry occupied only about one-fourth of the floorspace in the building. The southern part of the first floor was designed to be a separate commercial space (107 Huron) and was immediately occupied by the Arden Dress Shop. The second floor served as rental space, with a separate entrance on Quay for to the staircase to the second floor.

The Fox Building's tenants over the years, as delineated by City Directories, are worth noting. The Arden Dress Shop occupied the first floor space adjoining the jewelry store from 1936 until 1962, followed by Helen's Town & Casual (1963-1965), Town and Country Fashions (1965-1970), and Penthouse Fashions (1971-1978). All of these retail store sold women's clothing. The last tenant, My Place Restaurant, remained in business at this location from 1979 until 1992. The Household Finance Corporation was a long-term tenant of the second floor and occupied space there from 1946 until the early 1970s. Other business to locate in the second floor office space included a beauty salon (1946-1958), physician (1950-1956), real estate agent (1967-1982), and the Neighborhood Youth Corps (1970-1978).

Fox Jewelers became a mid-sized regional chain after the Second World War and by 1977, had 22 stores. The chain had grown to 39 stores in four states by 1990, when the company closed its downtown Port Huron store and relocated to the nearby newly-opened Birchwood Mall. The company cited declining sales and customer complaints about parking costs as the reasons for their move to the mall.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Fox Building fuses two architectural styles of the 1930s--Art Moderne and Art Deco. The Art Moderne style is apparent in the parallel bands of low horizontal relief on the second story, the fillet moldings and horizontal lines around the second story windows, the glass block windows situated above the Quay Street entrance, and in the single round window located near the latter entrance. The Art Deco style is recognizable in the reeding, vertical lines, and stylized lettering of "FOX BLDG" surrounding the Quay Street entrance,
2. Condition of fabric: The Fox Building continues to evoke its 1930s modernistic styling, despite the fact that a large section of exterior stone has come off the upper portion of the Huron Avenue frontage. Alterations to the interior, however, have removed virtually all traces of the original building style.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-story Fox Building is situated on the southwest corner of Huron Avenue and Quay Street. It is laid out in a trapezoidal pattern. The Huron Avenue facade is 51 feet long, the Quay Street facade is 60 feet long, the west facade is 42 feet in length, and the south facade is 75 feet long. The building has a basement and a small mezzanine between the first and second floors in the northwest section of the building.

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 10)

B. Description of Exterior (continued):

2. Walls: Exterior walls of the Fox Building consist of red-colored brick masonry. The brick is painted white on the southern and western facades. The western facade, the lower half of which abuts a neighboring building, displays "Fox Jewelers" in large red letters. The Huron Avenue and Quay Street exteriors are sheathed in several materials. Rectangular blocks of cut white limestone cover the second story and the area surrounding the Quay Street entrance. Square light-grey metal panels with baked-on enamel fill the mid-section of the building; the same material, but in dark grey, envelopes the first floor display windows. On Huron Avenue black plastic tiles of recent vintage occupy the space beneath the display windows. Black architectural glass appears at the base of the building around the Quay Street entrance. The same material fills the long vertical grooves that run from the base to the circular window. The second story windows are framed on the top and the bottom by decorative fillet moldings that run the entire length of the Huron Avenue and Quay Street facades. Indeed, the bottom moldings continue into the adjoining structure on Quay Street.
3. Structural systems, framing: The Fox Building has a steel-framed structural support system.
4. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: The Huron Avenue entrance is protected by a circular marquee, the side of which is sheathed in stainless steel. A fluted column, which was originally trimmed in blue porcelain enamel, is positioned below the center of the awning. Grey paint now covers the original enamel. The Quay Street entrance has a modest square marquee, which is similarly sheathed in stainless steel.
5. Chimneys: A simple rectangular-shaped brick chimney rises above the northwestern corner of the building.

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 11)

B. Description of Exterior (continued):

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The Fox building has five doors. Two are located at the southwest corner (back) of the building, with one leading into the basement and the second serving the first story by way of a wooden staircase. They are both solid steel doors. The two principal facades have three doors-- one on Huron Avenue leading into the store at the southern end of the building; one at the corner of Huron Avenue and Quay Street, serving as the main entrance to the Fox Jewelry Store; and a third at the west end of the building on Quay Street, leading to a staircase to the second story of the building. All three of these doors are nearly identical. They are framed with stainless steel and the middle of each door is bisected by two parallel stainless steel strips, to which a handle is attached. Each door has a single large sheet of plate glass.
- b. Windows and shutters: The principal extant windows are located on the second story. There are four windows on both the Huron Avenue and the Quay Street facades, each encased in a steel frame painted green, and each measuring 8 feet long and 5 feet high. Each window is divided into two halves by a mullion, with each half consisting of four window panes. The top and bottom panes are fixed, while the middle two swing outward. The first floor show windows were large rectangular panes of plate glass, all with stainless steel borders. Each of the two principal facades had only four plate glass windows, each 4 feet 4 inches high and 6 feet long. Opaque glass blocks fill the space above the Quay Street marquee. To the left of these is an Art Modern-style circular window.

FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 12)

B. Description of Exterior (continued):

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roof is flat.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans: See sketch plans.

2. Stairways: See sketch plans for location.

3. Flooring: Most of the floors are covered with wall-to-wall carpeting installed over floor tiles which date from the 1950s.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: First floor and mezzanine level spaces have dropped ceilings with ceiling tile squares. Second floor spaces have acoustic tile squares covering the original ceilings.

5. Mechanical Equipment:

- a. Heating: A gas-fired furnace is located in the northwest section of the basement. No nameplates were visible, but it appeared to be a unit dating from the 1950s that was later converted from burning fuel oil to burning natural gas.

6. Original furnishings: None have survived.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Fox Building is located at the southwest corner of Huron Avenue and Quay Street, with its two principal facades on Huron and Quay. Huron Avenue was and still is Port Huron's principal commercial street in its historic downtown commercial district.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural drawings: None have been found.
- B. Historic views: Two historic views of the National Bank Building were located at the offices of the Port Huron Times-Herald, 911 Military Street, Port Huron, MI 48060. A thorough search of public archives and private collections in Port Huron did not locate any additional historic views. The descendants of Charles Valentine, the Fox Building architect, had no materials. One possible source of photographs which was not investigated is the Fox Jewelry Company's main office in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
- C. Bibliography
1. Primary and unpublished sources: A devastating fire in 1949 destroyed Port Huron's City Hall and destroyed all building permits up to that time. Since 1949, the City of Port Huron has periodically discarded old building permits, so none have survived. Tract records extending into the 1940s are found at the office of the St. Clair County Register of Deeds, County Building, 201 McMorran Avenue, Port Huron, Michigan 48060. More recent tract records are held in the City of Port Huron Tax Assessor's Office, City Building, 100 McMorran Boulevard, Port Huron, Michigan 48060.
 2. Secondary and published sources:

Branstner, Mark C. and Richard Neumann, A Land Use History and Historic Evaluation of the I-69BL/I-94BL Military Street/Black River Bridge Replacement Project Area, Port Huron, Michigan, Report to the Michigan Department of Transportation, 15 October 1988.

First National Exchange Bank, Port Huron, Michigan. Souvenir booklet, ca. 1904.

C. Bibliography (continued)

2. Secondary and published sources:

Fox Jewelry Section, Port Huron Times-Herald,
16 October 1936, Second Section, pp. 1-8.

"Fox's Jewelers Celebrates 40 Years in Port Huron,"
Port Huron Times-Herald, 13 November 1977.

"Fox Wants No Meters, More Sales," Port Huron
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Michigan: First National Exchange Bank, 1871-
1921. Port Huron: Riverside Press, 1921.

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Huron: Earl Lester, 1923-1961.

"New Building Rises on Site of Old Bank," Port
Huron Times-Herald, 29 August 1936, p. 9.

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of Port Huron, Michigan. New York: Sanborn Map
and Publishing Company, 1898, 1903, 1911, 1940.

"Valentine, Charles M.," obituary, Port Huron
Times-Herald, 16 May 1973.

Wolverine Directory Company, St. Clair County
Directory. Port Huron: Riverside Printing
Company, 1899-1922.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This documentation is the result of a Memorandum of Agreement among the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Michigan State Historic Preservation Officer, the Federal Highway Administration, the City of Port Huron, the Port Huron Historic District Study Committee, and the Michigan Department of Transportation as a mitigative measure prior to the demolition of the Fox Building. Part of the land occupied by the Fox Building will be used for the approaches to the new Military Street Bridge to be opened in July 1993 and the remainder of the land will become a park.

Prepared by: Charles K. Hyde

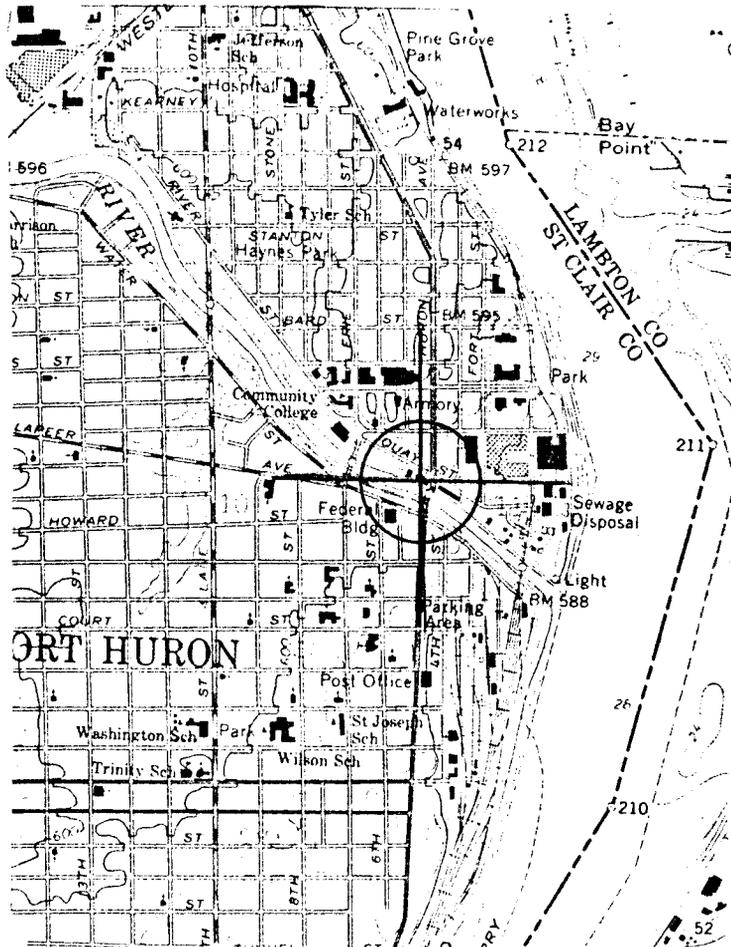
Title: Associate Professor of History

Affiliation: Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
48202

Date: May 1993

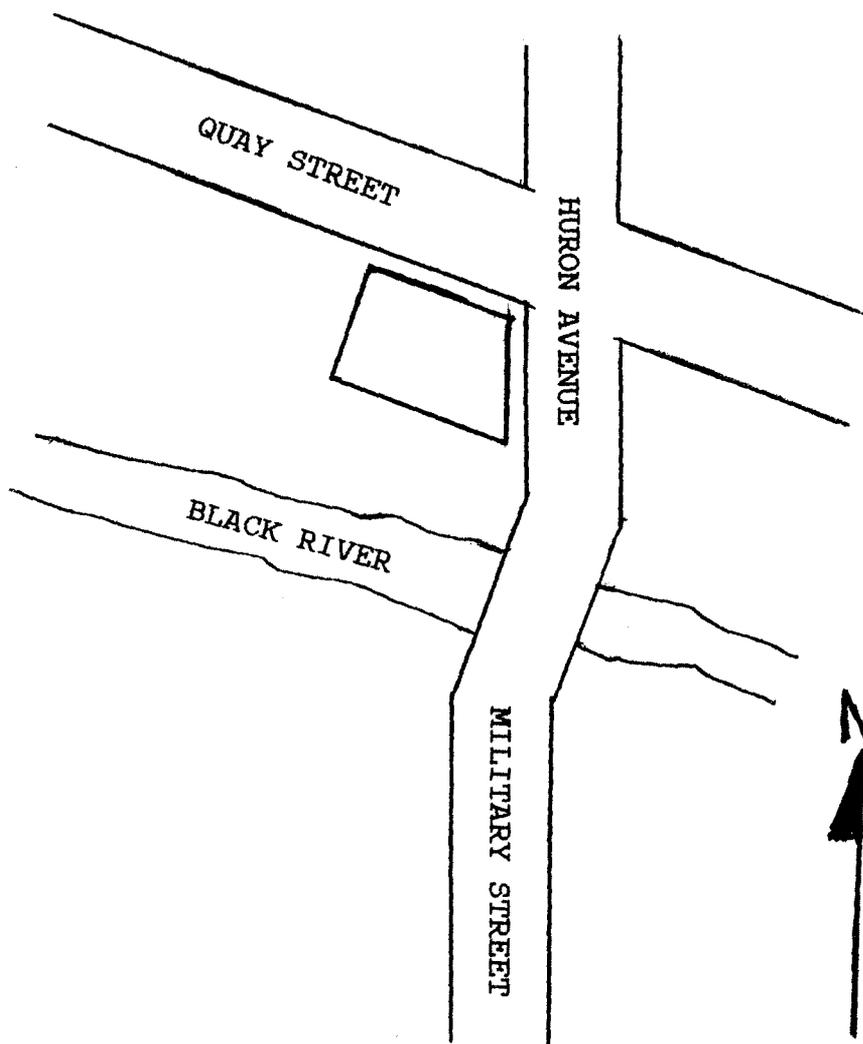
FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 16)

PORT HURON, MICHIGAN QUADRANGLE
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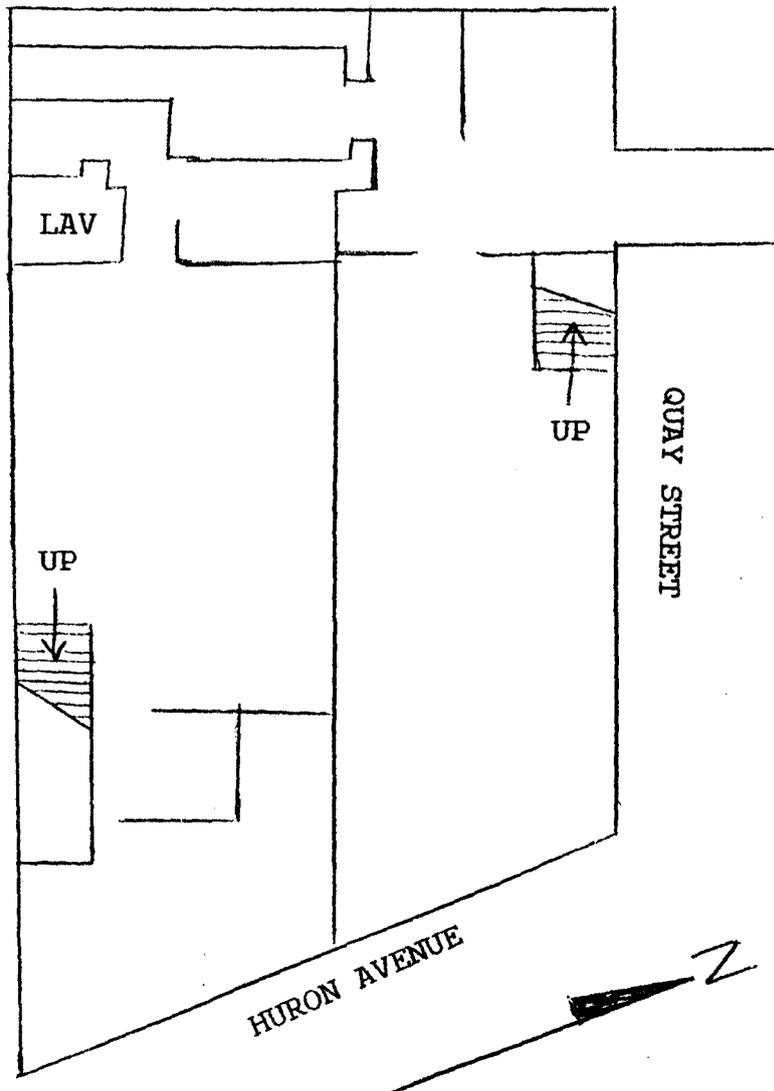
FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 17)

SITE PLAN



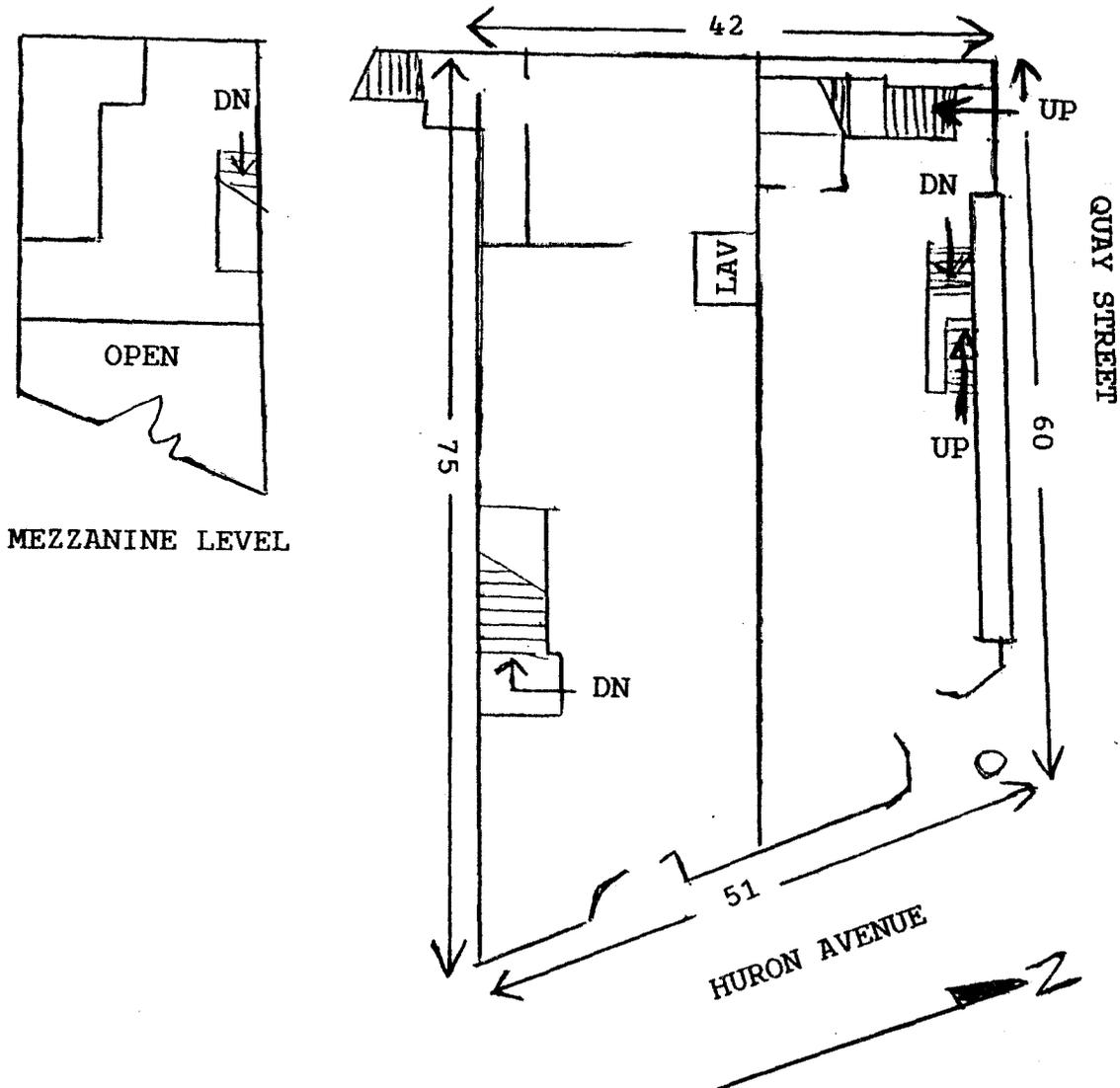
FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 18)

BASEMENT FLOOR PLAN



FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 19)

FIRST FLOOR AND MEZZANINE LEVEL FLOOR PLAN



FOX BUILDING (National Bank Building)
HABS No. MI-391 (page 20)

SECOND FLOOR PLAN

