

M.M. Secor Trunk Company, Central Office  
(Northwestern Trunk and Traveling Bag Manufacturing  
Company, Central Office)  
401 Lake Avenue  
Racine  
Racine County  
Wisconsin

HABS No. WI-304-A

HABS  
WIS,  
51-RACI,  
6-A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Rocky Mountain Regional Office  
Department of the Interior  
PO Box 25287  
Denver, Colorado 80225

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

M.M. SECOR TRUNK COMPANY, CENTRAL OFFICE  
(Northwestern Trunk and Traveling Bag Manufacturing Company, Central Office)  
HABS No. WI-304-A

Location: 401 Lake Avenue, City of Racine, Racine County, Wisconsin  
Present Owners: City of Racine  
Present Occupant: Vacant  
Present Use: Vacant

Statement of Significance:

By the most conservative account, the M. M. Secor Trunk Company was one of the largest trunk and traveling bag manufacturers in Southeastern Wisconsin. It was possibly one of the largest in the country. This building is one of the factory buildings which are remnants of a large industry which once thrived on the lake shore in Racine.

Secor, himself, was important as a major industrialist, a two term mayor, and a source of local amusement. Secor played a significant role in the immigration movement as an employer of his countrymen. He influenced labor history in Racine in pioneering high wages, unionization, and paid vacations.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Date of Erection: c. 1875  
Architect: Unknown

Historical Narrative

This building was the central office and main building of the M. M. Secor Trunk Company. By 1876, the M. M. Secor Trunk Company was listed in the Racine City Directory at the southeast corner of Chatham (Lake) and Fourth. Secor and his partner, Hayek, had acquired this property by May, 1874. This building was illustrated in Eads History of 1884 and appears on the 1887 Sanborn map. Thus, the building could be as early as c. 1875 and was definitely completed by 1884. After the Secor Trunk Company went out of business in 1918, the building was used as incubator space for many manufacturing and business uses. The City acquired the building from the Schaefer family (also known as the Racine Investment Company) in 1983. The Schaefer family bought the building after the Secor Trunk Company went out of business, possibly from the company holdings.

M. M. Secor's business grew steadily from its beginning, with one or two employees, in 1861. By 1872, Secor employed 70 hands and was producing 20,000 trunks annually. In the 1870's, Secor was associated with Joseph and Anthony Hayek with the firm name of M. M. Secor and Co. The M. M. Secor Trunk Co.

was listed in the City Directory at the southeast corner of Chatham (Lake) and 4th in 1876. By January, 1878, Secor had resumed control of the company. An 1879 report boasts of 70 to 80 employees producing 100 trunks per day and a yearly business in excess of \$100,000. By 1888, when the firm incorporated, and the name changed to the Northwestern Trunk and Traveling Bag Manufacturing Co., the works had a ground surface of about 2 1/2 acres covered with substantial buildings four and five stories in height. In that year, the business employed 175 with a payroll of \$5,000 - \$6,000 per month and manufactured 72 grades of trunks. The company had established a branch in Chicago on State Street. In addition to the Chicago Sales Room, the company kept four traveling salesmen on the road constantly. By 1892, Secor was producing "80,000 trunks and 9,000 dozen satchels and traveling bags". In 1900, the company was listed as a major manufacturing employer in southeastern Wisconsin. Though Secor died in 1911, the company continued and in 1916 still had 100 employees. The Northwestern Trunk and Traveling Bag Manufacturing Co. closed in 1918. The factory was claimed by various sources to have been: (1) One of the largest trunk and traveling bag manufacturers in the world (54 Years of Progress, 1888) (2) One of the largest in the country (Stone, 1916 and Brown Atlas, 1888); (3) One of the largest in Wisconsin (Racine Daily Journal, January 5, 1911 - P.1). The trunks were distributed throughout the United States.

Secor, a Bohemian immigrant, was well-known for hiring any of his countrymen who needed employment. According to John Buenkers account in the latest County history, legend was that many Bohemian immigrants' first words on American soil were "Where is Secor? I want a job." Secor was a benevolent employer and even used his own elegant home as a boarding house for newly arrived workers. A pioneer in labor practices, Secor paid high wages, unionized his workers, and paid vacations.

#### Biographical Information - Martin Mathias Secor

Martin Mathias Secor was born in Strakonitz, Bohemia Austria, on February 4, 1841 and died in Racine on January 5, 1911. In December, 1851 the Secor family came to Caledonia Twp. in Racine County. A farmhand by the age of 14, Secor subsequently apprenticed to a harness maker, then learned the trunk business opening his own business in 1861-62, the success of which is detailed above.

As his obituary states, Secor was "identified with progress of the manufacturing industry and improvement of the municipality". In addition to his role as a major industrialist, Secor served two terms as Mayor of the City of Racine in 1884 and 1888 and was an unsuccessful candidate for Mayor three other times. One of his achievements as Mayor was getting the first street paved in Racine. Secor also served as School Commissioner from 1870-74.

Secor is remembered as colorful, controversial, and eccentric and stories about him abound. He was the target of an assassination attempt in 1884. The case involving the unsuccessful assassination attempt was argued before the State Supreme Court by then District Attorney Henry Allen Cooper, later to become Congressman Cooper serving from 1893-1931.

Secor sued the Chicago Tribune for a story it printed about him, won the case, and in 1884, gave the money to the City for the purchase of a clock for City Hall Tower (City Hall now demolished).

In 1893, Secor's eccentricity as illustrated in a broadside he wrote and distributed on the Philippine question:

"The American Circus"

You Filipinos don't know what you are missing by not wanting to become citizens of this grand country of ours. There isn't anything like it under the sun. You ought to send a delegation over to see us - the land of fine churches and 40,060 licensed saloons, Bibles, forts and guns, houses of prostitution, millionaires and paupers, theologians and thieves, liberalists and liars, politicians and poverty, Christians and chain gangs, schools and scalawags, trusts and tramps, money and misery, homes and hunger, virtue and vice.

A land where you can get a good Bible for 15 cents and a bad drink of whiskey for five cents, where we have a man in Congress with three wives and a lot in the penitentiary for having two wives, where some men make sausage of their wives and some want to eat them raw, where we make bologna out of dogs, canned beef out of horses and sick cows, and corpses out of the people who eat it, where we put a man in jail for not having means of support and on the rock pile for asking for a job, where we have bawdy houses and fine men preaching Christ on streets...where good whiskey makes bad men and bad men make good whiskey, where newspapers are paid for suppressing the truth and are made rich for teaching a lie, where preachers are paid \$25,000 a year to dodge the Devil and tickle the ears of the wealthy...where men vote for what they do not want for fear they won't get what they do want by voting for it.

Upon his death, Racine newspapers considered one of Secor's greatest accomplishment his establishing the Turkish Baths in the Secor Block (now known as 245 Main Place and entered in the National Register).

There are too many stories to enumerate, but to say he was colorful is an understatement. He seems to have singlehandedly entertained the town for over half a century.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

1. Architectural Merit and Interest: None.
2. Condition of Fabric: Poor (to be demolished)
3. Summary Description: The central office and main building of the M. M. Secor Trunk Co./Northwestern Trunk and Traveling Bag Manufacturing Co. is four stories high with a basement story built into the hillside which is partially above ground. The industrial building is constructed of cream brick probably from local Racine brickyards. The two main facades feature rectangular windows set in round-arched openings accented by a projecting brick course above the arch. The Lake Avenue facade is four bays wide and the Fourth Street facade extends to ten bays. The building has a 40 foot frontage on Lake Avenue and 80 feet on Fourth Street. Vertically, the building is divided between the 2nd and 3rd floors by a horizontal course consisting of a projecting brick string course on the bottom, a corbelled

brick course on the top tied together periodically by a vertical projecting brick course. The building is capped by a simplified metal bracketed cornice.

The major exterior change is at street level where the original facade has been altered to accommodate show windows and corrugated metal has been affixed to the brick.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EXTERIOR

1. Foundation: Brick
2. Wall Construction: Brick
3. Structural Systems: Wooden post and beam and wooden floors and roof.
4. Porches, Stoops, Etc.: Not applicable.
5. Openings, Doorways, and Windows: See summary description.
6. Roof - Shape and Covering: Flat roof.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF INTERIOR

The interior is a simple industrial open building with no significant detail.

#### SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

The building is located on the southeast corner of Lake Avenue and Fourth Street. The Lake Avenue ground elevation has no setback and is about 13 feet higher than the east elevation which is adjacent to the City's Festival Park now under construction. The north elevation is separated from Fourth Street by a retaining wall.

#### SOURCES OF PROJECT INFORMATION

This summary has been prepared by the City of Racine's Department of City Development staff using the "National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form".

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### Books:

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- Elwood, W. Irish, Fifty-Four Years of Progress of the City of Racine  
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Maps and Atlases

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- Illustrated Atlas of Racine and Kenosha Counties Wisconsin.  
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Survey

- Johnson, Johnson & Roy. Racine Architectural Survey, 1974
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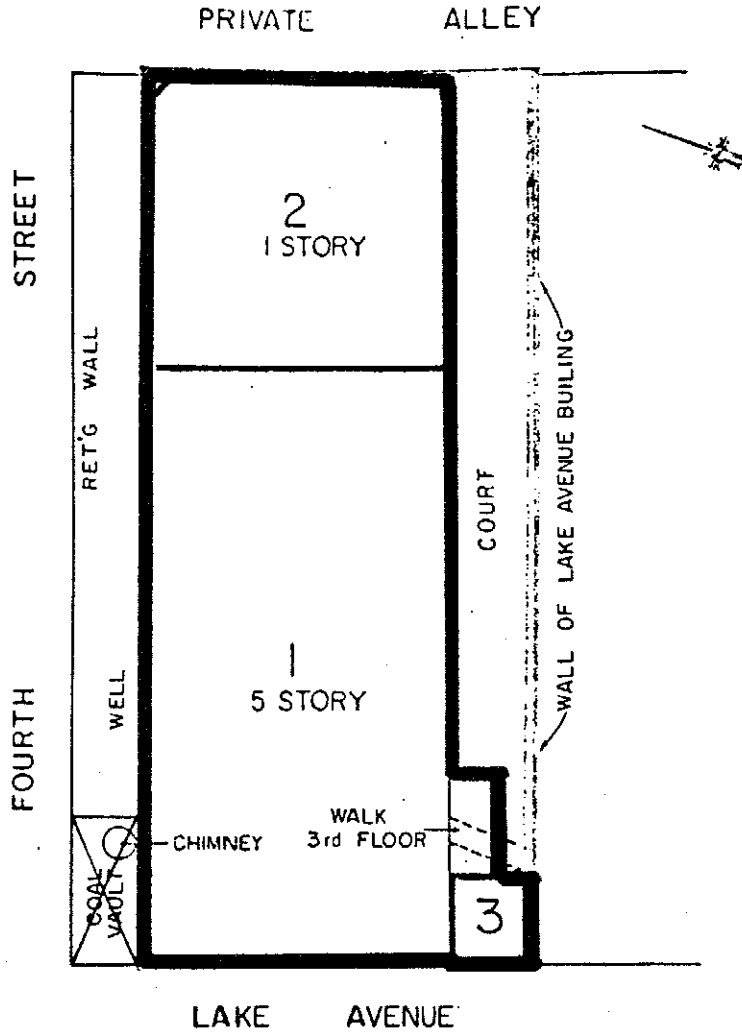
Records

- Racine County Property Records  
Tax Assessors Records of the City of Racine.

Newspapers

- |                      |              |
|----------------------|--------------|
| Racine Daily Journal | Jan. 5, 1911 |
| " " "                | Jan. 7, 1911 |
| " " "                | Jan. 9, 1911 |
| Racine Journal Times | Jan. 7, 1911 |
| " " "                | Jan. 9, 1911 |

Transmitted to the Library of Congress in January, 1988 by Holly K. Chamberlain,  
HABS historian.



Land Size:  
 Dimensions 51'6" Lake Avenue  
120'0" Fourth Street  
 Square Foot 6,180

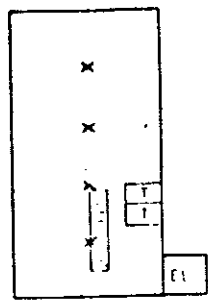
Building Size:  
 Square Foot 18,026  
 Cubic Foot 216,426

Scale 1" = 20'

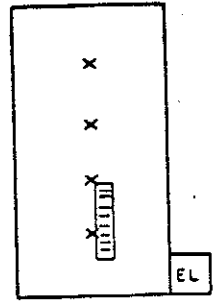
PROPERTY PLAT

Project: Lakeshore Development  
 The American Appraisal Company

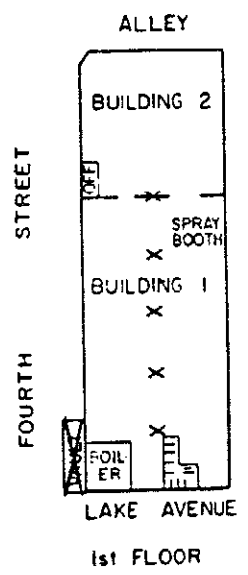
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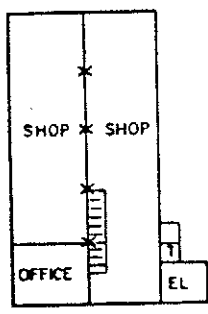
4th FLOOR



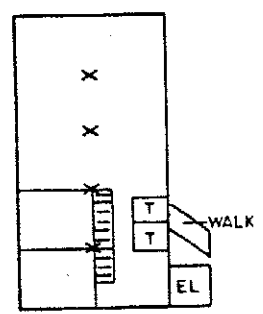
5th FLOOR



1st FLOOR



2nd FLOOR



3rd FLOOR

Front Floor Plans

Project: Lakeshore Development  
 The American Appraisal Company

Parcel No. B-1