

Starr Piano Factory & Richmond Gas Co.
G Street Bridge & Main Street Bridge
Richmond
Wayne County
Indiana

HAER IN-42

HAER
IND,
89-RICH,
13-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN AND HISTORICAL DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
IN-42
Starr Piano Complex
&
Old Richmond Gas Company Building

HAER
IND,
89-RICH,
13-

Location: Adjacent to the Whitewater River in the gorge between South "G" Street Bridge and Main Street Bridge, within a .5 mile radius southwest of the Municipal Building

UIM: See Attachment

QUAD:

Date of Construction: Starr Buildings - 1872, added changes thru 1935

Gas Company Building - 1854

Present Owner: City of Richmond
Dept. of Parks & Recreation
50 North 5th Street
Richmond, Indiana 47374

Present Use: Starr Buildings: Vacant
Gas Company: Storage & Maintenance Building

Significance: The area serves as a reminder and benchmark to the early industrial development of the City with the Whitewater River as a source of power. The buildings' architectural elements represent early industrial development, and their use in the piano manufacturing and recording industries contributed substantially to the development of the music industry

The Whitewater Valley, the site of buildings provided the necessities for the town first settled by Jeremiah Cox and Joseph Smith in 1806. The uplands provided excellent timber, and good soil and clay for bricks. The gorge was lined with springs and supplies of easily extracted building stones. The river provided water power for early mills. It was these assets that enabled the steady growth of Richmond. The valley was the site of grist mills, saw mills, linseed oil mills, tanneries, and quarries.

In the 1820's and 30's, some residences and mills were found in the valley. The early state road came down into this area and crossed the Whitewater at the ford located near present "G" Street Bridge before climbing the West bluff and continuing to the county seat at Salisbury and on to Indianapolis. The National Road crossed the river at the north end of the Starr property on a covered bridge and several early travelers were inspired by the beauty of the valley and the bridge, recording notes of their passage. By 1840, only mills and industry occupied the valley.

STARR COMPLEX

It was into one of those early mills that George Trayser moved his small piano forte company in 1872. James M. Starr was president of this company and a Mr. Richard Jackson, Secretary with Mr. Trayser as General Manager. In 1878 a four story addition to the mill was completed and employment rose to 35. In 1884 this company was reorganized as the James M. Starr and Company as a joint venture of James and Benjamin F. Starr. They produced the new "upright" that carried the "Starr" name, and stressed the quality of the material and the workmanship of their product. They could produce up to 15 pianos a week.

In 1893, John Lumsden and his son-in-law, Henry Gennett, who were piano retailers from Nashville, Tennessee bought into the company and reorganized it as the STARR PIANO COMPANY. A major fire destroyed the old mill and the four story addition early in 1894, but was rebuilt. By 1910 Starr in a promotional catalogue boasted of over 10 acres of factory floor space under roof, and 35 acres of lumber with a work force of 600 people. They referred to their company as the pioneer of the western piano industry. The company produced over 15,000 pianos in 1915 and won awards at every major exhibition or fair. (1880-Cincinnati; 1897-Nashville; 1904-St. Louis; 1909-Alaska-Yukon; 1915 Panama-California).

But the real significance of Starr came in 1915 with the development of the recording industry. STARR was one of the first companies to promote folk music-hillbilly and spirituals. Many early musicians traveled to Richmond, Indiana to record for the Starr Records under the Gennett label. Hoagy Carmichael, Gene Autry, Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong were brought before the record buying public for the first time by STARR.

Good marketing placed Gennett Records as competitors to larger manufacturers such as Victor. In 1928, Victor cut 1,900 master records and Gennett cut 1,250. Gennett took Victor to court over alleged patent infringement and won. (Several patents for the manufacture of pianos were granted to the Starr Piano Company previously). Gennett produced records under many different labels, including one for the use of Sears, Roebuck and Company. The factory produced record players and even refrigerators that were marketed under the name STARR FREEZE.

This complex of buildings contains seven major buildings of brick and concrete construction, with some frame and metal dependencies. The first building of this complex was built in 1872 and this section was added to over several years.

until the complex includes over 40,000 sq. ft. of space under roof. Buildings were built, changed, and enlarged between 1872 and 1935. A major fire destroyed the buildings in 1894, except the warehouse. This warehouse was enlarged and is the two story section of the largest building. All existing buildings other than this date from 1894 to 1935. All but one of the structures are of load bearing brick construction on concrete foundations, with combination of frame beam and steel supports for the upper floors. Full 2 inch tongue and groove flooring, sometimes covered with concrete are used for the upper floors. Buildings range from 1 to 6 stories in height. Architecturally, the most interesting of the buildings is the Administration Building (#3). Fenestration for most buildings are paired double hung wood 6 x 6 light sash units. Window openings have arched brick lintels. A five story reinforced concrete structure is the newest of the existing buildings. The center section of building #2, is in the worst structural shape, but is built on the site of the original buildings. The boiler plant and the brick stack are still extant, but deteriorating. The brick stack rises to the height of the bluffs and is visible from most approaches during the winter months, the rest of the complex is difficult to see because of the steep valley walls. Some modern commercial buildings, a Pizza King and warehouses are located on the south side of Main Street, a gas station to the east of the Gas Company building is another intrusion. The block east of the Gas Company is the location of an 1850's industrial foundry, still in use "Swayne Robinson & Company".

The Richmond Gas Company was incorporated in 1854 and completed the building in 1855. Charles Collier was the builder. Robert Morrison, John T. Plummer, and Benjamin Starr, all familiar names to local historians, were the first shareholders. Pipes were laid and gas supplied to several city streets in 1856. The building is still in the possession of the local Gas Company.

Richmond Gas Company Building is an early Victorian two story commercial building of brick. It was built in 1855 for the Richmond Gas Company. The original structure is an "L" shaped building of load bearing brick walls, with the west wing end with one angled wall. Interior walls are stud, lath and plaster construction and much of the original trim remains intact, even though the building has been remodeled periodically. The major change to the exterior is the inclusion of an overhead garage door and the closing of three windows. An unusual corbeled brick cornice and gable are distinctive features of this structure. Four round windows in the south wall of the west wing are surrounded with corbeled brick trim and the arched windows of the rest of the building have corbeled brick lintels. This building is situated at the east end of the Main Street Bridge and sits on the edge of the east bluff of the Whitewater River. It is a highly visible structure. There is a one story storage building in the courtyard of the "L". A similar two story rectangular warehouse with similar brick corbeling, built ca 1870 is separated from the main building by the elevated tracks of the C & O Railroad. The main building is well maintained, and later additions could be removed without damage to the fabric of the original section.

The unusual geological features of the valley; the sites of Indian trails; the sites of several early mills; the Starr buildings; the early retaining

walls; the site of the state road ford; the site and remaining abutments of the National Road Bridge; the early gas company building; and the twentieth century electric station building, present a broad historic continuum of the industrial development of the City of Richmond. Assessment of the impact of the Starr Piano and the later recording studios on the City of Richmond and the music industry is just now beginning. All of these factors, plus the location immediately adjacent to a National Register Historic District where restoration activity is increasing, make this proposed district a potentially significant contribution to the understanding of the contributions of earlier times to our cultural and physical environment. Much could be gained by the preservation and use of this industrial valley for present day citizens of Richmond.

- 5 -

U.T.M. REFERENCES

Starr Building I	16-679690	-	4410240
Starr Building II	16-679740	-	4410220
Starr Building III	16-679690	-	4410320
Starr Building IV	16-679640	-	4410350
Starr Building V	16-679680	-	4410370
Starr Building VI	16-679735	-	4410330
Starr Building VII	16-679810	-	4410060
Gas Works VIII	16-679740	-	4410740
Johnson Street Station IX	16-679740	-	4410860