

FORM B – BUILDING

Assessor's Number USGS Quad Area(s) Form Number

22/5	Reading		406
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MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
 MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
 220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
 BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Town: Reading

Place: (*neighborhood or village*) Downtown

Photograph



Address: 640-648 Main Street

Historic Name: Pfau Block

Uses: Present: commercial

Original: commercial

Date of Construction: 1930

Source: Town Valuation Records

Style/Form: Classical Revival Commercial

Architect/Builder: unknown

Exterior Material:

Foundation:

Wall/Trim: concrete/granite

Roof: tar & gravel

Outbuildings/Secondary Structures:

none

Major Alterations (*with dates*):

1954 – two additional storefronts at north end demolished

1959 – alterations to southern storefronts

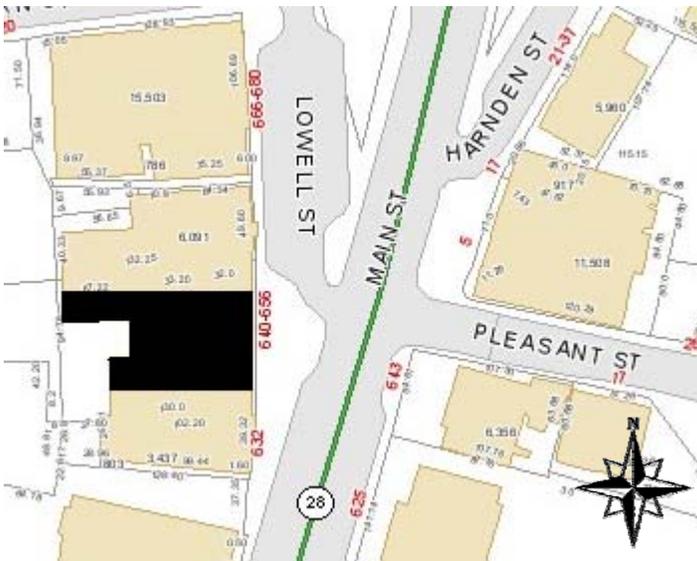
Condition: good

Moved: no | x | yes | | **Date** _____

Acreage: 0.38 acre

Setting: mixed downtown area

Topographic or Assessor's Map



Recorded by: Lisa Mausolf

Organization: Reading Historical Commission

Date (*month / year*): December 2009

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INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

READING

640-648 Main Street

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Recommended for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

If checked, you must attach a completed National Register Criteria Statement form.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

Describe architectural features. Evaluate the characteristics of this building in terms of other buildings within the community.

Located on the west side of Main Street, this simple, 20th century single-story, masonry block is one of downtown Reading's better-preserved commercial blocks and is embellished by a variety of decorative, cast concrete, classically-derived moldings. The cornice of the flat-roofed building includes a reel-like motif at the top as well as two different foliate moldings below. Each of the storefronts features a frame of cast concrete rope molding with foliate cornerblocks. All of the storefronts have sizable plate glass windows. The two storefronts on the north end of the building retain polished granite aprons which are punctuated by rectangular bronze vent grilles. The two southern storefronts were combined and altered in 1959 and have replacement aprons with aluminum trim. The flooring of the entrance alcove in this space still retains tiles reading "Eugene's", the tenant at that time. The two north shops share a recessed entryway. Leaded glass transoms with intersecting, elongated hexagons and diamonds are located above the display windows, with simple signboards set above the transoms.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Discuss the history of the building. Explain its associations with local (or state) history. Include uses of the building, and the role(s) the owners/occupants played within the community.

This one-story commercial block (originally 198-210 Main Street) contained seven stores when constructed in 1930. Today, five of the seven remain. When built, the downtown landscape and scale was changed dramatically. In order to make way for the new stores, the three-story Bacigalupo Block (1902) that housed retail on the street level and tenements above was torn down along with the old Sukey Parker house that had been converted to retail.

Town valuation records indicate that the block was completed in 1930. The April 1, 1930 valuation initially lists the block as unfinished with the value of \$15,000. This was later crossed out and the value was increased to \$35,000. The owner is listed as Anna Goldberg of 23 Province Street in Boston but references in the newspapers of the day refer to the building as the Pfau Block. Anna Goldberg (b.1904) was the daughter of Sam Pfau (1879-1946). The Pfau Block is an excellent example of the kind of improvements being made at the time by out-of-town investors. Information in the local newspaper suggests he had hoped to attract a large chain store. Ironically, in 1930 both Woolworths and Grants moved into the new Masonic Block addition instead. In 1931 Pfau proposed adding a large 1,000 seat theater to the rear of the new block but the town selectmen refused to grant him a license.

Rachmiel Sam Pfau was born in Poland in 1879 and immigrated to this country in 1909. Initially Sam Pfau found work doing painting and wallpapering. In 1930 he was the proprietor of the Boston House Painting Company at 23 Province Street in Boston and was living in Roxbury. According to an interview with his son Erving (see familytreemaker.genealogy.com), gradually Sam started buying rental properties all over the Boston area including Dorchester, Roxbury and Chelsea. In time he started building. Clients included Woolworth's – he would act as a broker to find them space and then sign a 99 year lease. As a result, he constructed buildings in Somerville, Winter Hill, New Bedford and Lynn. Sam was fluent in Polish, Russian and Yiddish. He could speak English (with a heavy accent) but had difficulty reading or writing English. In time, he got into difficulties with the IRS and lost all of his properties. Reportedly, he thought his accountant and secretary were taking care of the taxes. Despite his financial difficulties, Pfau was identified with many Jewish philanthropic causes in Boston including the Men's Council of the Home for Jewish Children and the Jewish Tuberculosis Sanatorium of New England.

According to Town valuation records, in 1939 Anna Goldberg sold the property to Pfau who resold the property to Capitol Realty Inc. at 309 Broadway in Somerville. The property was later owned by New England Properties, Inc.

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HISTORICAL NARRATIVE (continued)

The two storefronts at the south end of the block were occupied for many years by Eugene's clothing and shoe store which opened in the 1930s and expanded in 1959. The next space to the north was occupied by Merrick's Drug Store and after 1952 by Case Drug. Santoro's occupied one of the other storefronts in the mid 1950s. In the early 1950s the two northern storefronts were occupied by Steele's Music Store and Loralane, Inc., a women's clothing store. About 1954 the two northern storefronts were demolished to make way for a new F.W. Woolworth Co. Store (now CVS), leaving five remaining storefronts.

For years unregulated signage covered the tops of the shops. In 1997 the shop owners collectively removed the ugly, oversized signs to reveal the original detailing. Attractive signage was then installed within the appropriate sign boards. The Reading Historical Commission awarded the shop owners certificates of commendation in recognition of their efforts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES

Boston and Reading Directories.

Reading Chronicle, April 11, 1930.

Reading 350th Book Committee. *At Wood End – Reading, Massachusetts 1644-1994, A Pictorial History*, 1994.

Town of Reading. *Valuation of Real and Personal Estates*, various dates.

U.S. Census.

<http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/a/b/e/Martin-Abeshaus/WEBSITE-0001/UHP-Index.html> (information on Sam Pfau)

