NPS Form 10-900 OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Baxter Building
Other name/site number: Rio Grande National Life Building; McKelvey Building; Los Nueve Pisos; Blaschka Tower
Name of related multiple property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 106 South A Street
City or town: Harlingen State: Texas County: Cameron
Not for publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this (☑ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility) meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property (☐ meets ☐ does not meet) the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:
☐ national ☐ statewide ☐ local

Applicable National Register Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D

State Historic Preservation Officer
Signature of certifying official / Title **Date**

Texas Historical Commission
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official **Date**

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

___ entered in the National Register
___ determined eligible for the National Register
___ determined not eligible for the National Register.
___ removed from the National Register
___ other, explain: _____

Signature of the Keeper **Date of Action**

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

X	Private
	Public - Local
	Public - State
	Public - Federal

Category of Property

X	building(s)
	district
	site
	structure
	object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: NA

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions: COMMERCE/TRADE: Business

Current Functions: VACANT/NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification: LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN MOVEMENTS: Skyscraper

Principal Exterior Materials: BRICK, CONCRETE

Narrative Description (see continuation sheets 7-6 through 7-10)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

X	A	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
	B	Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
X	C	Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
	D	Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations: NA

Areas of Significance: Commerce; Architecture

Period of Significance: 1927-1956

Significant Dates: 1927

Significant Person (only if criterion b is marked): NA

Cultural Affiliation (only if criterion d is marked): NA

Architect/Builder: Elwing, Birger A. and Mulhausen, Roy Winfield (Architects); Blythe, R.P. (Builder)

Narrative Statement of Significance (see continuation sheets 8-11 through 8-23)

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography (see continuation sheets 9-24 through Section 9-26)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):
- X preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. (Part I approved—2/20/18)
- _ previously listed in the National Register
- _ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- _ designated a National Historic Landmark
- _ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- _ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:
- **x** State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission*, Austin)
- _ Other state agency
- _ Federal agency
- _ Local government
- _ University
- X Other -- Specify Repository: Harlingen Public Library

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): NA

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: 0.08 acres

Coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

1. Latitude: 26.192460° Longitude: -97.696870°

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundary of the nominated property is the legal boundary of the parcel, Harlingen Original Townsite, Lot 5, Block 60. The rectangular parcel is 25-feet wide and 140-feet long.

Boundary Justification: The boundary includes the property historically associated with the nominated resource.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Rachel Nugent (National Register Coordinator), Alison Dunleavy (Sr. Historic Preservation Specialist)
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Date: June 1, 2018

Additional Documentation

Maps (see continuation sheets MAP 27 through MAP 28)

Additional items (see continuation sheets FIGURE 29 through FIGURE 48)

Photographs (see continuation sheets PHOTO 49 through PHOTO 58)

Photograph Log

R.W. Baxter Building
Harlingen, Cameron County, Texas
Photographed by Brad Finch, f-stop Photography, October 2017

Photo 1
Northeast elevation, view southwest

Photo 2
East elevation, view west

Photo 3
East elevation, view west

Photo 4
South elevation, view north

Photo 5
West elevation, view northeast

Photo 6
North elevation, view south

Photo 7
First floor, entrance, view southwest

Photo 8
First floor, view east

Photo 9
Second floor, staircase, view west

Photo 10
Third floor, door, view west

Photo 11
Fourth floor, corridor, view north

Photo 12
Fifth floor, view southwest

Photo 13
Fifth floor, view west

Photo 14
Sixth floor, view northwest

Photo 15
East elevation, detail of masonry at ninth floor column capitals and parapet ornament, view west

Photo 16
East elevation, detail of masonry at eighth floor, columns and cartouches, view west

Photo 17
East elevation, detail of masonry canopy tie rod hooks, view west

Photo 18
East elevation, detail of storefront opening and basement stair, view west, 2017

Photo 19
Interior of adjacent structure, plywood wall and temporary roof, view north

Narrative Description

The 1927 Baxter Building in downtown Harlingen, Texas is a nine-story, narrow rectangular plan office building. As the tallest edifice in Harlingen, it towers over the commercial district, and the flat regional topography provides unobstructed views of the Baxter Building on all sides. Designed by Birger A. Elwing and Roy Winfield as a speculative office tower, it exhibits features typical of 1920s skyscrapers in the 3-part vertical block configuration. It is a high-rise concrete and steel frame construction with brick cladding, a regular fenestration pattern, and multiple ground-level storefronts. Modestly ornamented, the Baxter Building features contrasting bricks that simulate pilasters and concrete cast stone stringcourse, cornice, and pendants for decorative emphasis. The historic commercial and upper floor configurations were altered over time to accommodate a variety of professional tenants, and apartments replaced some upper floor offices in 1956. In recent years, the Baxter Building has been vacant and shows signs of deferred maintenance. Overall, it retains a high degree of architectural and historic integrity, including its character-defining exterior design, plan, and workmanship.

Setting

The Baxter Building is at the corner of South A and Jackson streets in Harlingen, Cameron County, Texas. Harlingen is in western Cameron County at the southeastern edge of Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley.[1] The city is approximately ten miles north of the Rio Grande, the United States-Mexico border, and less than 20 miles west of the Gulf of Mexico. Brownsville, a city three times larger than Harlingen and the county seat, is 25 miles southeast on Interstate 69E. The region is relatively flat and is a floodplain for the Rio Grande. What had once been a "quasi-desert rangeland," now natural creeks with oxbow lakes and manmade canals help irrigate county farms and ranches.[2] The Arroyo Colorado, the 2nd largest natural flowing watercourse in the area, cuts a winding northeasterly path through south Harlingen and was the informal city boundary until the 1970s. Modern subdivisions and large complexes constructed at its banks have since extended the city limit beyond its banks.

Harlingen has an orthogonal city grid that is centrally-bisected by the railroad (historically the *St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway*) that cuts a diagonal path around which the city was planned. Two roads, Commerce Street (formerly East St.) and West Street, run parallel to the rail line. East-west roads in the central core are named for American presidents and four streets cross the tracks: Jackson Avenue, Van Buren Avenue, Harrison Avenue, and Tyler Avenue. North-south roads east of the railway are ordinal numbers, while roads west of the railroad have lettered street names. Historically, Jackson Avenue was the dividing line for north and south streets while 1st Street, one block east of the nominated property, was the dividing line for east and west streets.

The modern commercial district spreads east and west of the railroad, and it is bounded by Monroe Avenue (north), 6th Street (east), Tyler Avenue (south) and J Street (west). Harlingen's first businesses were constructed on Jackson Avenue, particularly the portion east of the tracks, and buildings on blocks near the Baxter Building evidence that period. The nominated building is surrounded by one- and two-story edifices constructed in the first half of the 20th century *(Photos 1 and 2)*. Historic-age buildings on Jackson Avenue are masonry with brick or stucco cladding, and some commercial storefronts show mid-century and modern modifications.

The diagonal orientation of the railway created triangular and trapezoidal-shaped blocks immediately east and west of the tracks. The Baxter Building is on one such trapezoidal-shaped block that is bounded by West Jackson

[1] The Rio Grande Valley is a four county-region at the southernmost tip of Texas that includes Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy.
[2] *Handbook of Texas Online*, David M. Vigness and Mark Odintz, "RIO GRANDE VALLEY," accessed August 6, 2018, https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryr01.

Avenue (north), South A Street (east), West Van Buren Avenue (south), and South Commerce Street (west) *(Maps 2 and 3)*. Three commercial buildings and the nominated property, face Jackson Avenue and share party walls. The Baxter Building occupies an entire 25' x 140' rectangular parcel at the northeast corner of the block. As the tallest building in Harlingen, it dominates the skyline of the flat city.

Between 2005 and 2011, a brick party wall between the Baxter Building and its neighboring building (203 W. Jackson) was partially-removed to join the two interior spaces. Constructed before 1929, the adjoining building originally replaced an earlier commercial edifice and operated as a paint and wallpaper store.[3] It has undergone significant changes in the last ten years. The Mission Revival-style façade was removed, and plywood currently covers that elevation *(Photo 19)*.[4] It has a non-historic metal roof that is not structurally-integrated, and the building envelope is not sealed making it vulnerable to the elements. Portions of the nominated property's west exterior walls have been removed and are open to this structure.[5] Significant changes to the adjoining building diminished its integrity as it no longer resembles or functions as a commercial edifice. It is not included in the boundary because it was originally constructed as a separate building from the Baxter Building and later connected. Furthermore, the current and historical legal boundaries for each property are separate.

Exterior

The nine-story, 1927 Baxter Building is a 3-part vertical block with a concrete foundation, steel frame, buff-colored brick cladding, and a flat roof *(Photo 1)*. The building's narrow width exaggerates its height. It is 140-feet by 25-feet with 12 vertical bays on the long elevations (east and west), and three vertical bays on the north and south elevations that are defined by window openings *(Photos 3 and 6)*. Modest architectural detailing—brick-simulated pilasters and projecting cornice pendants— also help demonstrate its vertical form. Concrete stringcourses above the 2nd and 8th floors create the façade organization of a three-part commercial block. The regular fenestration pattern on both public elevations and subtle-projecting end bays evoke stability, order, and permanence. Wide openings on the ground floor indicate the commercial function of the ground level while the repetitive fenestration pattern of the upper floors communicates its historic function as an office building. While the east elevation has the main entrance to the building, both the north and east elevations have entrances to individual ground-floor commercial spaces. There is a full basement with interior and exterior access that was also used for commercial space (*Photo 18)*.

East (Primary) Elevation
The east (primary) elevation is one of two street-facing facades and features architectural details that characterize the Baxter Building. Although the overall building design projects symmetry, the ground level retail and office openings are unbalanced, and the main entrance is not centered. The configuration from south to north is: four office/storefronts, main entrance, and three large commercial spaces that includes the large corner retail space. Historically, two large canopies, connected to three cartouches by tie rods at the 2nd floor, covered the main entrance and another storefront to visually-balance the façade *(Figure X)*. Current photos evidence the historic

[3] The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for 1925 Sheet 2 *(Figure 5)*, 1929 Sheet 3 *(Figures 6 and 7)*, and 1950 Sheet 3 *(Figure 8)* show that the nominated building and the adjacent building to the west do not share a party wall and they were built independent of one another.
[4] Google Street View from 2011 shows the same plywood façade as is currently in place.
[5] Wayne Blaschka of Every Enterprises, Inc. purchased the Baxter Building in 1988. It is unknown whether he purchased the adjacent building at 203 W. Jackson Avenue at the same time. However, at some time prior to 2000, Every Enterprises, Inc. purchased 203 W. Jackson and owned both buildings. By 2007, the building at 203 W. Jackson contained a restaurant that may have had an opening into the first story of the Baxter Building. This alteration was made after the period of significance ended. At the end of the period of significance, in 1956, the Baxter Building and 203 W. Jackson operated as separate businesses under separate ownership. Google Earth Street View from 2007-2018 helped establish the timeline for its alterations.

configuration despite alterations to exterior materials *(Photo 1 and Figure 12)*. Other historically-unifying elements on the ground floor were glass block transoms (now removed or covered), wood frame window displays (now replaced with aluminum) with soldier-course brick lintels, and tile bulkheads.

The ground floor and the 2nd floor of the Baxter Building constitute the "base" of the 3-part vertical block. Unlike the middle and upper zones, bays 4/5 and 8/9 project from the façade at the same depth as the end bays *(Photo 18)*. The subtle pattern of recessed and projecting walls adds visual weight to the building's base.

A concrete stringcourse above the 2nd floor defines the transition to the middle zone, above which rises the six-story "shaft." Each floor on the east elevation has ten paired 1/1 double-hung wood windows and single 1/1 windows in the projecting end bays; a total of 12 windows per floor. Columns of contrasting-colored brick with soldier course "capitals" separate the bays in the six-story middle zone (or "shaft") *(Photo 16)*. Other decorative elements in the middle zone include six, small cast concrete cartouches in between Bays 3-6 and 7-10 *(Photos 3 and 16)*.

The upper zone ("capital") is separated by a concrete stringcourse that defines the 1-story cap. Nine, paired vertical pendants with projecting points are spaced between bays along the cornice *(Photo 15)*. Both end bays feature additional architectural details that differentiate the 9th floor from those below. Windows in the outer bays of the ninth story are rounded with blind arches that have concrete bas-relief urn and floral scrolls. Two, diamond-shaped concrete tiles are above each end bay window.

North Elevation

The north elevation, which faces Jackson Avenue is an extension of the eastern façade in form and ornamentation. Only three bays wide, this elevation also exaggerates the verticality of the Baxter Building. The ground floor and 2nd floor, the "base," projects slightly from the floors above it. The historic central entrance is recessed and once provided access to a single retail space. Its transom, door, and tile bulkhead are removed, and an aluminum window fills the opening. Originally, wood-frame window displays were on either side of the entrance. Currently, one is infilled with plywood; the other has a modern, glazed aluminum door with sidelight and transom. Each upper floor has three historic, 1/1 double-hung wood windows with concrete sills; windows in Bays 1 and 3 on the 9th story have a blind arch with cast concrete ornamental panel *(Photo 6)*. Like the eastern façade, concrete stringcourses separate the building into three zones and the end bays project. The ornamentation in the upper zone seems concentrated on this façade because of the building's narrow width. Three concrete pendants with projecting points are in the central bay at the cornice.

West Elevation

The west elevation has twelve irregularly-spaced bays and is devoid of architectural ornamentation *(Photo 5)*. The adjoining building (203 W. Jackson Ave) obscures the first and second stories of Bays 1-8 and the first story of Bays 9-12. Portions of the first-floor party walls of the nominated property were removed to create several openings (one large, two door-sized) into the adjacent structure. The missing portions of the walls do not structurally-compromise the nominated building and has a minimal effect on its overall integrity.

Windows with concrete sills and soldier brick lintels fill the opening in each bay; some of the openings are infilled with plywood or are missing window sashes and open to the elements. Small, historic 1/1 double-hung wood windows fill the openings in Bays 6-8 and a small, historic hopper-sash windows fill the openings in Bay 9 on the third to ninth stories. The large gap devoid of fenestration between Bays 8 an 9 delineates the elevator shaft, which projects above the ninth story on the west side of the building in a narrow penthouse. Two, historic 1/1 double-hung wood windows pierce the north side of the elevator shaft at the penthouse.

South Elevation

The south elevation is three bays wide and faces the alley *(Photo 4)*. A small hopper window covered with plywood and a door opening infilled with brick pierce the west bay of the first story; the center and east bays are devoid of fenestration. Historic 1/1 double-hung wood windows with concrete sills and soldier brick lintels fill the openings in each bay on the second to ninth story; some of the openings are infilled with plywood or are open to the elements. A metal fire escape projects from the elevation and runs from the ninth story to the first story. A metal ladder on the ninth story fire escape accesses the roof.

Interior

The ground floor building plan features a central lobby, with elevator and stair access, and bisects the ground-level retail spaces into three tenant spaces to the south and three storefronts on the north (*Figure X)*. It differs from the historic layout that provided four 1st-floor office spaces to the south, and north of the lobby were two large storefronts and an office *(Figure X)*. The 16' x 10' lobby entered from South A Street is one of the most historically-intact spaces in the building. Its terrazzo floors, inlaid with the name "McKelvey," wainscot, trim, plaster walls and ceilings date to the 1947 renovation *(Photo 7)*. The elevators retain historic paneled, glazed doors with metal trim on floors two through nine, but the cabs in both are modern *(Photo 10)*. Historic and non-historic partitions subdivide ground floor retail spaces. Currently, there are openings in the partitions that connect each space, but no central corridor historically-existed *(Figure 1)*. Three historic offices at the southernmost end of the Baxter Building were later converted to one open room, but the other commercial spaces retain the historic layout. Historic materials still extant on the ground floor include terrazzo and hex-tile floors walls, but rooms south of the lobby are concrete.

Originally, the upper floors were configured around a double-loaded central corridor that ran north-south and provided access to office spaces on either side. The layout included public bathrooms, still extant, north of the elevator shaft on every floor. The current 3rd floor plan best reflects the historic layout *(Figure 3)*. It shows small, interconnected offices east and west of the corridor and corner office suites. The 2nd and 8th floors illustrate the 1956 renovation that reconfigured some of the building's offices into apartments *(Figures 2 and 8)*. On the 2nd floor, the central corridor was moved to border the eastern exterior wall and larger rooms are clustered opposite. The typical current configuration for upper floors is either open-floor plan or a mix of open-floor and modern-partitioned spaces *(Figures 4,5,6,7,9)*.

Alterations

Typical of an early twentieth-century speculative office building, the Baxter Building has been renovated periodically throughout its history. A mixture of historic and non-historic storefronts, floor plans, and finishes remain. Plaster walls, plaster ceilings, and sections of tile and terrazzo flooring are historic materials that are intact. Non-historic material is typically additive rather than subtractive, with non-historic wood paneling covering historic plaster or attached to non-historic partitions. The dates of these alterations are unknown, but an examination of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps provides some information about historic alterations. The first floor currently has a single space with historic and non-historic partitions. Punched openings in the partitions provide access between the spaces that were historically separate. A centrally-located stairwell and two elevators at the center of the west wall provide access from the main lobby to the floors above. The building was designed to have approximately eight offices per floor, although they could be reconfigured to accommodate the needs of tenants. The configuration of each of the upper eight floors is different, because each floor was modified as needed to meet the requirements of those particular tenants. The 1929 Sanborn Map shows that the first floor had two stores at the north end of the

building, one office north of the building lobby, and four small offices south of the building lobby *(Figure 22)*. The 1950 Sanborn Map shows one large retail space north of the building lobby and two narrow stores south of the lobby *(Figure 23)*. Five of the upper floors were renovated in 1956 when some offices were combined and converted to apartments.[6] Because the configuration of rooms was not consistent from floor to floor, it is unknown how many offices were combined to form the apartments on floors two, three, four, eight, and nine.

Integrity

The 1927 Baxter Building retains good architectural integrity that communicates its era of construction and its historic function as an early 20th-century office building. The overall high integrity of its exterior design and workmanship are intact and architectural details—the brick façade with simple, brick and cast concrete ornament, and subtle projecting masses—emphasize its three-part composition and verticality. Alterations to storefronts adversely impacted the historic materials like bulkheads, window displays, and transoms. Despite exterior updates, and subsequent deterioration, of ground floor storefronts, the historic fenestration pattern of the masonry openings is intact and mitigates the loss of materials. The building retains most of its historic paired and single 1/1 wood windows with a low proportion of infill. Periodic interior renovations, to suit different commercial tenants and residents, negatively impacted the historic layout on upper floors. Some levels, however, retain the historic plan. As the tallest building in Harlingen, it still towers over the commercial district as the setting provides unobstructed views of the Baxter Building on all sides.

[6] The eleven apartments are Units #201, 301, 305, 402, 410, 801, 803, 901, 904, 906, and one unit with no number. Without architectural plans for this conversion, it is unknown how many offices were combined and/or converted. Available city directories prior to 1956 do not list tenants by their office number.

Statement of Significance

The 1927 Baxter Building is a 9-story speculative office building named for Robert W. Baxter who had the foresight to construct a skyscraper commensurate with the potential he saw embodied in Harlingen in the late-1920s. Constructed during a local building boom on Harlingen's most-prominent commercial street, Jackson Avenue, the nominated building towered over the city. Its tenants were prominent businessmen, medical professionals, and government agencies. In 1956, the building owners renovated several floors for residential leasing, and commercial tenancy declined. Designed by local architects Birger Elwing and Roy Winfield Mulhausen, the Baxter Building was conceived as a 7-story office building, but two additional floors were added during its construction when another building threatened to be the area's tallest. The Baxter Building held the title of tallest building in the Rio Grande Valley until 1971. It is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A for Commerce because its construction represented prosperity and modernity that paralleled and encouraged investment in Harlingen through the 1950s. It is also nominated under Criterion C for Architecture. Although the Baxter Building is modestly-ornamented, its scale and form nevertheless represent 1920s modern skyscraper design. The period of significance is 1927-1956.

Commercial Development of Harlingen

The development of Harlingen is intertwined with the history and development of the greater Rio Grande Valley.[7] The geographic area of the Rio Grande Valley encompasses four counties—Starr, Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy— that line roughly the last 100 miles of the Rio Grande before it reaches the Gulf of Mexico. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Spanish, as the first European settlers in the area, used the flat floodplain north of the Rio Grande for cattle ranching and established San Juan de los Esteros (currently Matamoros) on the south side of the river in 1765.[8] A small number of herders and farmers from Matamoros built huts on the ranch land and eventually, by 1836, established a settlement. Within a decade of Texas declaring independence from Mexico, the United States Army constructed Fort Brown (originally Fort Texas) near this existing settlement as a defensive post during the Mexican War (1846-1848) when Zachary Taylor led U.S. troops to establish by force the Rio Grande as the southern border of the country.[9] Shortly after the Mexican War ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo determining the area as part of the state of Texas, the newly established Brownsville was made the county seat of Cameron County.[10] The city of Brownsville flourished during the latter half of the nineteenth century, through the Civil War, while the rest of the Rio Grande Valley remained minimally inhabited as ranch land.

The construction of two ambitious improvement systems facilitated the large-scale development that occurred in the lower Rio Grande Valley in the early twentieth century: networks of irrigation systems and the railroad. The former facilitated cultivation of the land for agricultural purposes through a series of canals, while the latter provided access to markets outside the region which made the agricultural industry viable and profitable.[11] While citrus fruit (grapefruit and select varieties of oranges) was the main crop, due to the salinity of the soil and the high water table, other crops successfully grown in the Rio Grande Valley included tomatoes, cabbage, carrots, potatoes,

[7] Unless otherwise noted, information about the Rio Grande Valley comes from the Vigness and Odintz article "RIO GRANDE VALLEY" published in *The Handbook of Texas Online*.
[8] *Handbook of Texas Online*, Alicia A. Garza and Christopher Long, "BROWNSVILLE, TX," accessed August 22, 2018, https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hdb04.
[9] *Handbook of Texas Online*, Elizabeth Pettit Davenport, "FORT BROWN," accessed August 22, 2018, https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qbf07.
[10] Garza and Long.
[11] Vigness and Odintz.

beets, corn, green beans, and onions, as well as cotton and sorghum.[12] Farmers from Mexico and U.S. descended upon the Rio Grande Valley to take advantage of the fertile soil and newly available water sources through a network of surface streams and manmade canals.[13] Enterprising individuals recognized the opportunity to capitalize on the rapid influx of people. They purchased land throughout the Rio Grande Valley, established companies to layout new towns, and started businesses that provided the goods and services necessary to support the local industry and grow the community.

Railroad developers also recognized the opportunity for accessing new markets in the Rio Grande Valley and began exploring opportunities to connect to existing lines from the north in the early years of the twentieth century. The St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway Company, chartered on June 6, 1903, planned a new rail line that, after several amendments to its charter, would run from Houston, through Corpus Christi, to Brownsville. This rail line was designed to link Chicago, St. Louis, Memphis, Baton Rouge, Houston, Brownsville, Tampico, and Mexico City.[14] Construction of the *St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railroad* began in August 1903 and the last section that completed the line between Houston and Brownsville opened in just under four years.[15] Branch lines provided towns up to fifty-five miles away from the primary alignment with access to the main line.[16]

Expansion of the railroad triggered a dramatic increase in the population of the Rio Grande Valley in the early twentieth century. *Missouri Pacific Lines* acquired the *St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railroad* on January 1, 1925.[17] The *Southern Pacific Railroad*, a competitor of *Missouri Pacific*, was the second railroad to build a line through Harlingen. *Southern Pacific* started in San Antonio and ran south to Edinburg and McAllen before heading east to Harlingen and Brownsville. The *Southern Pacific* reached Harlingen in February 1927 and Brownsville later that year.[18] Cameron County, including Brownsville and Harlingen, grew by almost 500% from 16,000 in 1900 to 77,540 in 1930, while Hidalgo County, including McAllen, grew by nearly 1200% from 6,543 to 77,000 in the same time frame. Starr and Willacy counties had a combined population of more than 21,400 in 1930.[19]

In addition to individuals purchasing agricultural properties, real estate developers and speculators also began investing in the Rio Grande Valley. Agriculture remained the dominant industry, competing only with tourism as the area developed as a resort center beginning in the 1940s.[20] While Texas had long ranked among the top ten cotton producers in the country, production having started with the Spanish missionaries prior to statehood, the mid-twentieth century brought a geographical shift in production, from East and Central Texas to the Rio Grande Valley.[21] The flat land and extensive irrigation system readily available in the Rio Grande Valley, coupled with the use of fertilizers, enabled large-scale production.

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[12] Vigness and Odintz. *Handbook of Texas Online*, Morris E. Bloodworth and Paul T. Gillett, "IRRIGATION," accessed August 22, 2018. https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ahi01.
[13] Bloodworth and Gillett.
[14] *Handbook of Texas Online*, George C. Werner, "ST. LOUIS, BROWNSVILLE AND MEXICO RAILWAY," accessed August 6, 2018. https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/esq30.
[15] Werner.
[16] Werner.
[17] Werner.
[18] Norman Rozeff, "Rio Grande Valley Railroads: Southern Pacific Railroad," *Valley Morning Star*, April 12, 2015. https://www.valleymorningstar.com/life/southern-pacific-railroad/article_748be7b4-dfca-11e4-8d0f-279aa92d17a9.html
[19] Vigness and Odintz.
[20] Vigness and Odintz.
[21] *Handbook of Texas Online*, Karen Gerhardt Britton, Fred C. Elliott, and E.A. Miller, "COTTON CULTURE," accessed August 22, 2018. https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/afc03.

Harlingen

In 1902, Leonidas Carrington Hill (1862-1935) purchased large tracts of land in the Rio Grande Valley near the Arroyo Colorado River, and amassed 300,000 acres with the intention of developing the site into farmland by creating gravity-fed irrigation canals.[22] Hill left his law practice in Beeville in 1903, moving his family south to Brownsville to develop the site. After settling in Brownsville, Hill headed the committee responsible for soliciting bonuses (donations of land and cash) from property owners and towns that dictated the alignment of the railroad.[23] The line reached Brownsville from the north on July 4, 1904, running through Hill's land north of the Arroyo Colorado.[24] As part of the agreement, Hill negotiated that a branch of the railway connect from his land to Sam Fordyce, fifty-five miles west, and eventually the western edge of Starr County.[25] Construction on Hill's negotiated branch line began in May and ended in December 1904. That same year, Hill founded Harlingen, platted a 534-acre town site originally named "Lon C. Hill's Town." The plat was organized around the northwest-southeast alignment of the *St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway*. After filing the plat, Hill petitioned for a post office and changed the name of the town to "Harlingen" to honor Uriah Lott, whose ancestors came from Harlingen, Holland.[26] Construction of the Harlingen Depot was completed in 1905. Six months later, Western Union completed a telegraph line along the right of way.

Hill marketed the town to midwestern businessmen and farmers, touting the area's cheap land, fertile soil, and mild climate (temperatures rarely go below freezing for sustained periods of time) as the perfect agricultural landscape, capable of growing crops year-round, such as grapefruit, oranges, tomatoes, and cotton. The presence of the railroad, in both the branch line to communities west and the main line to major eastern cities, was an important promotional feature for the nascent city. Harlingen developed quickly as the railroad brought more people to the town.[27] A school house, church, and saloon were built in 1905. In 1906, Santos Lozano opened the first general store, a two-story wood-framed building at the corner of Jackson Avenue and Hill Street (present-day A Street).[28] The Mooreland Hotel, a two-story building constructed by the *St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railway* opened at the corner of Fordyce Street (present-day 1st Street) and Harrison Avenue. In 1907, 450 men excavated the first irrigation canal from the Arroyo Colorado to Harlingen; by 1908, twenty-six miles of canals capable of irrigating 75,000 acres were completed. As the town continued to develop, other businesses such as a blacksmith, barber shop, real estate sales, and lumber yards opened near the depot.[29] The South Texas Lumber Company, established in 1907, was one of Harlingen's first businesses and supplied the lumber for many of the city's early commercial buildings.

Harlingen was incorporated as a city in 1910 with a population of 1,126.[30] Midwestern farmers flocked to Harlingen, eager to expand their agricultural operations by taking advantage of the year-round growing season.

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[22] *Handbook of Texas Online*, Verna J. McKenna, "HILL, LEONIDAS CARRINGTON, SR. [LON]," accessed August 6, 2018, https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryr01.
[23] McKenna.
[24] "Harlingen Founder Lon C. Hill Followed a Dream," *Valley Morning Star*, April 11, 2010. This is the land upon which Hill platted Harlingen.
[25] Werner.
[26] Eileen Mattei, *At the Crossroads: Harlingen's First 100 Years, 1910*-2010 (Harlingen, TX: Topp Direct Marketing, 2009), 75.
[27] The population of Cameron County was approximately 16,000 in 1900. The population of Brownsville was 6,305 in 1900 and the population of Harlingen was only 1,126 in 1910. This implies that most of the people in Cameron County lived on farms or small towns outside of the two cities.
[28] The building is no longer extant.
[29] Mattei, *36*-37, 74-77.
[30] "Harlingen, TX," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hdh02.

Most of these people lived in rural areas of Cameron County through the first decade of the 20th century. Economic opportunities provided by the railroad drove the expansion of Harlingen's commercial district in the 1910s. While the area's economy was based on the buying and selling of local agricultural products, the shipping of produce to markets outside of Harlingen soon became an important secondary trade. The town developed into a regional commercial center because the main line of the *St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway* that connected Brownsville and Houston, stopped in the center of Harlingen. A major branch line continued westward from Harlingen to Starr County, stopping in each town along the way. These two rail lines provided access to larger regional markets than other surrounding towns.

The commercial development of Harlingen mirrored statewide trends in small Texas railroad towns: rapid development yielded relatively dense commercial cores with a mixture of businesses that served a wide variety of community needs.[31] The earliest commercial buildings on Van Buren and Jackson Avenues adjacent to the depot were wood-frame and housed a variety of businesses: saloons and pool halls, grocery markets, restaurants, drugstores, banks, general stores, and furniture stores. Cotton gins, a sugar mill, and produce warehouses lined the railroad tracks, making the export of local goods more convenient. The commercial area west of the railroad retained its shallow, narrow wood frame buildings into the 1920s. Many of the city's first brick buildings were constructed on both sides of the two blocks of Jackson Avenue east of the railroad. These two blocks formed the original commercial core of Harlingen with banks anchoring two corners and the post office anchoring a third corner. The telephone exchange occupied the second floor above one of the bands. Grocers, dry goods, and furniture stores occupied the other buildings.

In 1919, narrow frame buildings filled the north portion of the triangular block upon which the nominated building was eventually constructed *(Figure 18)*. Within six years, brick edifaces replaced nearly all of the wood frame buildings, particularly in the block containing the nominated property. In 1925, the parcel on which the Baxter Building was constructed was empty and the adjacent building to the west had been constructed. The brick buildings filled the width of the parcel and were generally deeper than their frame predecessors. In addition to buildings that provided essential goods and services, Harlingen had a movie theater on Jackson Avenue by 1919; the narrow one-story building had wood frame construction clad in iron. By 1925, a two-story brick building on the corner of Jackson Avenue and Fordyce Street (now 1st) housed the theater.[32] The Harlingen Commerce Club constructed a building at Commerce and Monroe Avenues that was later used as City Hall. East of Harlingen's commercial district, churches occupied the corner lots of Jackson and Harrison Avenues and auto-related businesses such as garages and tire shops occupied Van Buren Avenue.[33]

By the early 1920s, agricultural business in Harlingen was thriving. The city was given the nickname "Howling Gin" after the five cotton gins in the area that processed over 12,000 bales of cotton per year. In addition to cotton, other crops thrived in Harlingen's mild climate, which provided a boon to farmers. Wholesale grocers, packing sheds, canning plants, and ice plants opened along the railroad. Between 1920 and 1930, Harlingen's population grew from 1,784 to 12,124, a 680% increase.[34] Sustained population and economic growth through the 1920s and 1930s supported a boom in the construction of commercial buildings. While some of the earlier small wood structures remained, the majority of new buildings constructed during this time were multi-story brick structures with metal or composition roofs that had a larger footprint than the older wood-framed buildings.

[31] Stephen Fox, "Lessons Learned with 20/80 Vision," *Texas Architect*, Vol. 38, no. 2, March-April 1988, 17.
[32] The theater building at 111-121 W. Jackson Avenue is extant.
[33] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, *Harlingen, Cameron County, Texas*, (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1919), 1-4.
[34] Mattei, 82, 86.

The commercial district grew steadily following the town's founding and into the 1950s. The original commercial core centered on the intersection of West Jackson Avenue and South A Street (then Hill Street), which housed drugstores, offices, hotels, banks, barber shops, jewelry stores, and department stores like Sears, Roebuck, and Company and F.W. Woolworth. By 1917, Harlingen had two silent movie theaters, although the commercial core did not extend more than one block from the intersection of Jackson and A (Hill) *(Figure 18)*. In the 1920s, the commercial center expanded east and west along Jackson Avenue, and south to Van Buren *(Figure 19)*, and Harrison and Tyler avenues *(Maps 6 and 8, Figures 18, 19, and 20)*. While most of these buildings had long, narrow storefronts on the first story, if the building was wide enough to contain more than one storefront, walls would divide only the first-story spaces and the upper floors had offices or large open halls for social gatherings. The five-story Wittenbach Building, constructed in 1925 at the northeast corner of Van Buren Avenue and South A Street, was, briefly, the tallest building in Harlingen *(Figure 20)*. In 1930, the Wittenbach Building housed a confectionary, printshop, the American Legion, a doctor, and other professional offices.[35] Businesses on smaller streets such as Jackson Avenue west of the railroad tracks and Monroe, Madison, and Jefferson avenues east of the tracks served more industrial functions and had larger footprints. These lots housed lumber yards, warehouses, mills, and the Harlingen Light and Water Plant.[36] The character of the area surrounding the commercial center was strictly residential with some institutional and religious resources scattered throughout.

Harlingen experienced explosive growth in the 1920s. Land prices rose exponentially from the $1.25 per acre in 1903 to over $200 per acre for the same land in 1919. City Council records show the sale of $250,000 in bonds for public improvement projects such as street paving, extending the city's sewer lines, creating parks, additions or new buildings for City Hall, the fire station, and the city jail, and upgrades to the Harlingen Light and Water Plant.[37] In addition to municipal improvements, 1926 and 1927 saw a building boom in Harlingen's commercial district; by 1928, the city had 128 businesses. Most large-scale buildings constructed during this period were hotels; the five-story, 150-room Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel and the three-story, eighty-four room Hotel Moore both opened in 1928. The Baxter Building, the city's tallest and one of its most prominent commercial buildings, was constructed during this building boom.

While Harlingen was initially unaffected by the early years of the Great Depression, eventually the negative effects did catch up with the city. Downtown businesses continued to thrive and new businesses opened; the eighty-four-room Plaza Hotel, at the southeast corner of West Madison Avenue and North A Street two blocks north of the Baxter Building, opened in 1930. As Harlingen's agricultural economy grew, new packing and canning plants, warehouses, cold storage facilities, and cotton gins opened along the railroad tracks.

On Labor Day of 1933, a hurricane ravaged the city and the surrounding Rio Grande Valley. Valley-wide flooding and 125 mile-per-hour winds decimated Harlingen's agricultural community, wiping out ninety percent of the Valley's citrus crop and almost all of the vegetable crops. The strong winds knocked over KRGV's antennas, forcing the radio station to relocate to Weslaco. Despite the damage to the radio antennas, the Baxter Building remained relatively intact while other downtown businesses along Jackson Avenue, as well as the Municipal Auditorium and the city's high school, sustained significant but not irreparable damage. Damage from the flooding and the loss of crops, combined with the financial crisis of the Great Depression, put Harlingen into a slow

[35] Interstate Directory Company, *Interstate Directory Company's Harlingen, Texas, City Directory* (Springfield, MO: Interstate Directory Co, 1930). Information on earlier occupants of the building is unavailable because the 1930 directory is the earliest in Harlingen. The Wittenbach Building was demolished in 1984.
[36] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, *Harlingen, Cameron County, Texas*, (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1925), 2-5; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, *Harlingen, Cameron County, Texas*, (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1929), 2-5; Mattei, 38-39.
[37] "Not Allowed," *Valley Morning Star* clipping, Baxter Building Vertical File, Harlingen Public Library, N.D.

economic decline that was far less dramatic than other cities across the country. While most citizens could subsist through barters and trades, Harlingen was cash-poor and no new civic or commercial construction projects were undertaken. By 1936, however, Harlingen's economy was improving. The city had 288 stores, the most ice plants in Texas, and new processing plants and gins for the Rio Grande Valley's cotton crops.[38] The 1939 Harlingen City Directory lists seventeen medical professionals such as doctors, dentists, and orthodontists, five insurance companies, and eighteen other businesses in the Baxter Building. Established businesses, such as the United States Department of Agriculture and the Southern Pacific Railroad, rented office space in the building.[39]

By 1940, Harlingen's population reached 13,306 and the downtown commercial district continued to grow. While Jackson Avenue remained the principal commercial artery, auto-related resources such as garages, car dealerships, and filling stations opened on the outskirts of Harlingen's commercial district. The sunny, mild climate of the Rio Grande Valley won Harlingen the title of "Winter Vegetable Capital of the World." The regularity of clear skies and warm temperatures made the city an ideal site for a military air gunnery training base where most of the instruction occurred outside. The Harlingen Army Gunnery School (HAGS) opened at the Harlingen Army Air Field three miles northwest of the city on August 1, 1941. By the end of World War II, the school had trained 48,000 gunners.

Post-World War II economic growth brought another building boom to Harlingen in the 1950s through the 1960s. The expanding cotton industry in the Rio Grande Valley drew more speculators and agricultural workers to the area. By 1950, the city's population had almost doubled to 23,202 and sixty new subdivisions were added to the city. These subdivisions, located north of the commercial center and east of the *St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico* tracks or south of the irrigation canal that paralleled the Arroyo Colorado, had gridded streets lined with single-family homes. The start of the Korean War brought even more growth to Harlingen when the Air Force reactivated the Harlingen Base in 1952. The 960-acre base grew to 1,400 acres and was used for navigator training. After hitting a peak of sixty-one apartment buildings in 1952, Harlingen experienced a drop off in the number of apartment building, down to fifty-one in 1954 and thirty-seven in 1956.[40] Harlingen's commercial district expanded in response to the city's increasing population *(Figure 22)*. Businesses such as department stores, dress shops, and menswear shops, jewelry stores, flower shops, grocery stores, banks, and drugstores opened on Jackson, Van Buren, and Harrison Avenues east and west of the original commercial district on both sides of the railroad tracks. Harlingen had eleven hotels, all in the downtown commercial district.

By 1960, Harlingen's population swelled to 40,798 due to the families posted at the Harlingen Air Force Base. However, in 1961, the base announced it was closing, and by 1962, one-third of Harlingen's houses were vacant or for sale.[41] The popularity and ubiquity of the automobile, along with the completion of the Highway 77 and 83 (present-day I-2 and I-69E) interchange on the west side of the city in 1962 brought a decrease in the number of railroad passengers to the area, and the last passenger train through Harlingen ran in 1962. As the population dwindled and downtown businesses moved into suburban malls, the downtown commercial district began to decline.[42]

[38] Mattei, 85-88.
[39] B.A. Wilmot, *Wilmot's Harlingen, Texas City-Suburban Directory* (Harlingen, Texas: B.A. Wilmot, 1939), 228-229.
[40] Harlingen city directories 1939-1956. Directories included cabins and tourist courts under the heading of "Apartments."
[41] Norman Rozeff, *The Chronological History of Harlingen*, n.d., 369, available online, accessed August 23, 2018. http://www.myharlingen.us/upload/page/0338/docs/09%20Decade%201960%20to%201969.pdf.
[42]

The Baxter Building

Robert Wylie "Bob" Baxter (1885-1984), an Arkansas native, began his career as a door-to-door salesman *(Figure 22)*. After studying law at the University of Michigan, Baxter became the city attorney for Warren, Arkansas, in addition to owning a lumber yard business with his father.[43] In 1917, Baxter purchased his father's interests in the lumber business, expanded the company by purchasing lumber yards, and sold rehabilitated sawmills.[44] On a land-excursion trip to Texas in 1922, Baxter purchased a ten-acre citrus grove near La Feria (Cameron County), roughly nine miles west of Harlingen. Enticed by the development potential in what seemed like a promising town in the Rio Grande Valley, Baxter travelled back to Arkansas, liquidated his assets, and moved with his family to Texas *(Figure 24)*. In 1926, Baxter purchased the vacant lot on the southwest corner of Jackson Avenue and South A Street for $17,000, and developed his 25' x 140' lot in Harlingen's commercial district.[45] By the time he was ready to start construction on the Baxter Building, *Southern Pacific Railroad* had nearly completed the track from San Antonio, making "Harlingen a hub of the Rio Grande Valley."[46] Within a year of completion of the nominated building, Baxter organized the Rio Grande National Life Insurance Company and served as president. The company had grown so successful in just two years that in 1930, Baxter moved it to Dallas, at which point he sold the Baxter Building to the Rio Grande National Life Insurance Company.[47] Baxter continued to serve as president of the insurance company into the 1950s. He was also very active in the Dallas community and served on the boards or was a member of many governmental, civic, and social organizations.[48] Robert W. Baxter died in Dallas in 1984 at the age of 98.[49]

A 1926 article in the *Harlingen Star* announced, "Harlingen Will Have 7-Story Office Building."[50] In September of that same year, Baxter hired a local architecture firm, Elwing and Mulhausen and contractor R.P. Blythe to design and build the $125,000 building. Construction began on November 1, 1926. After the construction of an eight-story hotel in neighboring Brownsville in late 1926, Baxter decided to add additional floors to his building, bringing the total height to nine stories and the construction costs to $160,000 *(Figure 10)*.[51] The local newspaper covered its construction, writing "The Baxter Building now is looming on the horizon like a blazing comet. It is visible for many miles on the highway and causing considerable comment."[52] The Baxter Building was completed in June of 1927 and was one-hundred percent occupied within two weeks.[53] The building was the tallest in the Rio Grande Valley *(Figure 11)*. Comprised of about eight small offices per floor, the building's first occupants were insurance companies, financial firms, physicians, dentists, attorneys, architects, realtors, and other professionals. A drugstore and beauty shop occupied the ground-level and basement retail spaces *(Figure 12)*.

Beginning in 1930, the top floor of the Baxter Building housed the KRGV radio station, which used the height of the building to take advantage of a stronger antenna signal. The "Valley Voice" had two rooftop antennas and

[43] Norman Rozeff, "Harlingen's Tower," Special Edition to *Valley Morning Star*, September 27, 2008, accessed August 23, 2018. https://www.valleymorningstar.com/news/harlingen-s-tower/article_435a3f50-da98-50f4-b35d-7fb99ed12658.html.
[44] "Arkansas Man Liked Texas, Stayed to Broaden Career." *Dallas Morning News*, February 26, 1950.
[45] "Robert Wiley Baxter was the founder of the Rio Grande National Life Insurance Company," *Dallas Times Herald*, February 26, 1950.
[46] "Arkansas Man Liked Texas, Stayed to Broaden Career."
[47] "Arkansas Man Liked Texas, Stayed to Broaden Career."
[48] "Arkansas Man Liked Texas, Stayed to Broaden Career."
[49] "Robert Wylie 'Bob' Baxter."
[50] "Harlingen Will Have 7-Story Office Building," *Harlingen Star*, July 30, 1926.
[51] Norman Rozeff, "Harlingen Skyscraper History," Unpublished manuscript, September 2008, 1-3.
[52] *Harlingen Star Semi-Weekly*, February 18, 1927.
[53] "Robert W. Baxter, on the occasion of his 75th birthday in 1960, Dallas, Texas," Video. https://youtu.be/A1Z2E_lJlV8.

broadcast to 25,000 radios in the Rio Grande Valley daily. The 1930 Harlingen City Directory lists eighteen medical professionals such as doctors, dentists, and orthodontists, seven insurance companies, and thirty-seven other businesses in the Baxter Building, including offices for the United States Department of Agriculture and the Texas Department of Agriculture as well as lawyers, architects, and credit bureaus *(Figure 14)*.[54] The concentration of medical professionals in a single building rather than operating from separate small clinics was an early-twentieth century trend in growing cities.[55] The first floor of the building housed the Baxter Building Drug Store, Hertz Style Shop, R & H Candy Factory, and Mitsch Shoe Shoppe.[56] The variety of professional services provided conveys the significance of the building.

While most citizens could subsist through barters and trades, Harlingen was cash-poor and no new civic or commercial construction projects were undertaken. By 1936, Harlingen's economy was improving. The city had 288 stores and the most ice plants in Texas as well as new processing plants and gins for the Rio Grande Valley's cotton crops.[57] The 1939 Harlingen City Directory lists seventeen medical professionals such as doctors, dentists, and orthodontists, five insurance companies, and eighteen other businesses in the Baxter Building. Established businesses such as the United States Department of Agriculture and the Southern Pacific Railroad rented office space in the building.[58]

During World War II, the United States War Department and a branch of the Red Cross had offices in the Baxter Building. In addition to organizations related to the war effort, the Baxter Building housed 13 medical professionals, five insurance companies, and 17 other offices.[59] In 1947, the Harlingen Air Field, formerly the HAGS training site, reopened as the municipal airport. That same year, John Walker McKelvey, a Harlingen developer, purchased the Baxter Building from the Rio Grande National Life Insurance Company, based in Dallas businessman and still headed by R.W. Baxter. The building was renamed the "McKelvey Building" and the first-floor lobby was remodeled *(Photo 7)*. While the building's name changed, the variety of professional tenants remained constant.[60]

The year 1956 represents a significant shift in the function of the Baxter Building and signifies the end of the period of significance. In that year, offices on five floors of the Baxter Building were converted into the Skyview Apartments. These apartments were scattered throughout the building on selected upper floors *(Figure 16)*.[61] After the apartments were added in 1956, no additional units were constructed, and the building never fully transitioned to strictly residential use. However, the apartments were not successful. The building maintained the professional

[54] Interstate Directory Company, *Interstate Directory Company's Harlingen, Texas, City Directory* (Springfield, MO: Interstate Directory Co, 1930).
[55] John T. Campo, Jr., National Register of Historic Places Registration Form "Fisk Medial Arts Building," Amarillo, Potter County, Texas, National Register listed December 4, 2012.
[56] *Harlingen, Texas, City Directory*, 1930. The 1930 city directory used abbreviations to denote the race or ethnicity of the entity listed, as indicated on the first page of the directory, "(c) for colored, (m) for Mexican, and (em) for English speaking Mexican)." None of the companies listed as occupants of the Baxter Building have any of these abbreviations. Without these designations it is unclear if the building was segregated or if it was common practice for these abbreviations to be reserved for individual residents rather than companies. The names associated with the businesses appear to be Anglo/European rather than Hispanic.
[57] Mattei, 85-88.
[58] B.A. Wilmot, *Wilmot's Harlingen, Texas City-Suburban Directory* (Harlingen, Texas: B.A. Wilmot, 1939), 228-229.
[59] B.A. Wilmot, *Wilmot's Harlingen, Texas City-Suburban Directory* (Harlingen, Texas: B.A. Wilmot, 1944), 251.
[60] "Harlingen Air Force Base," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qbh01; Mattei, 89-90; B.A. Wilmot, *Wilmot's Harlingen, Texas City-Suburban Directory* (Harlingen, Texas: B.A. Wilmot, 1950), 335.
[61] The 1956 city directory lists occupied apartment units as #201, 301, 305, 402, 410, 801, 803, 901, 904, 906, and one un-numbered unit. There are no other commercial/professional occupants listed for these floors, except the fourth floor.

office use into the 1960s in the remaining offices but did not convert the apartments back to offices *(Figures 15 and 17)*.[62] Ownership of the Baxter Building changed hands several times without any change to the functional (residential and commercial) use of the building until 1988 when the building was sold to Every Enterprises and renamed Blaschka Tower after Wayne Blaschka, the company's principal. Every Enterprises, Inc. did not make any substantial improvements to the building after an unsuccessful attempt to convert the building to public housing, and vacancies mounted. The City of Harlingen bought the Baxter Building in 2013 and the building has been vacant since, and likely before, that time.[63] In 2018, MRE Capital purchased the nominated building for the purposes of rehabilitation.

Criterion C: Architecture

The Baxter Building is locally significant under Criterion C for Architecture as an example of an early twentieth century skyscraper in the context of a small town. Skyscrapers, particularly speculative office buildings, were "monuments to aspiration, placards of power and prestige" that expressed the economic prosperity and optimism that pervaded real estate development in the 1920s.[64] Booming industries in the Rio Grande Valley, such as ranching and agriculture (citrus), generated a large influx of capital that property owners reinvested in rapidly urbanizing communities.[65] Technological advances in construction methods (steel frame and reinforced concrete) paired with the desire to assert local prominence and modernity through a physical display of wealth spurred developers and architects to design buildings that reached new heights.[66] Robert W. Baxter explicitly stated that he wanted to construct the tallest building in the Rio Grande Valley. Following announcements that Brownsville intended to construct a ten-story tower and McAllen intended to construct an eleven-story tower, Baxter proclaimed that he would build a fifteen-story tower.[67] This architectural one-upmanship played out on a slightly lower scale; when Brownsville completed the eight-story El Jardín Hotel in 1926, Baxter added two stories to his seven-story design for the Baxter Building.[68] The nominated building derives its significance from the rarity of the tall building architectural type in the flat region of the Rio Grande Valley and the message of prominence it was originally designed, and continues, to convey.

While ornament was an important part of the architectural expression of the tall building and reflected the wide variety of architectural styles popular in the first half of the twentieth century, ornament was typically an applied treatment rather than a strict adherence to the tenets of a given style, which placed more emphasis on the form of the building. Tall buildings typically represented one of two forms, as defined in Richard Longstreth's *Buildings of Main Street*: the Two-Part Vertical Block and the Three-Park Vertical Block. The former has a clear visual separation between the first story, or the "base," and the upper stories, or the "shaft." These buildings are taller than four stories and the design of the upper stories identifies the building's architectural influences. Tall buildings often used decorative or structural elements to emphasize the verticality of the building. The Three-Part Vertical Block is a tall building that contains the same distinct zones of "base" and "shaft" as the Two-Part Vertical Block. The uppermost one to three stories form the third part of the vertical block, becoming the "capital." This creates an analogy between the façade organization and the parts of the classical column. It is therefore common for these buildings to be designed in the Classical Revival style or a related style, such as Beaux Arts. The Baxter Building,

[62] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, *Harlingen, Cameron County, Texas*, (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1950), 2-5; B.A. Wilmot, *Wilmot's Harlingen, Texas City-Suburban Directory* (Harlingen, Texas: B.A. Wilmot, 1950), 335; B.A. Wilmot, *Wilmot's Harlingen, Texas City-Suburban Directory* (Harlingen, Texas: B.A. Wilmot, 1956), 412.
[63] Rozeff, "Harlingen Skyscraper History," 1-3; "Diamond in the Rough," *Valley Morning Star*, October 24, 2013.
[64] Jamie Lofgren, "Texas Skyscrapers in the 1920s," *Texas Architect*, Vol. 38, no. 2, March-April 1988, 22.
[65] Lofgren, 22.
[66] Lofgren, 22.
[67] "Arkansas Man Liked Texas, Stayed to Broaden Career."
[68] "Baxter Building to be 9 Stories," *The Harlingen Star Semi-Weekly*, February 15, 1927.

while not an example of high-style architecture, exemplifies the tall building form as an expression of progress and aspiration. The simple ornament serves to highlight the symmetry and repetitive architectural features of the three-part vertical block form. Simple, concrete stringcourse above the 2nd and 8th stories define the first two stories as the "base," the middle six stories as the "shaft," and the top story as the "capital." Vertical bands between window bays simulate pilasters through the use of brick that is a different color from the primary façade brick. Applied ornament in the form of cast concrete cartouches in selected locations and abstracted stylized forms at the parapet is minimal and does not express a specific formal style.

R.W. Baxter's decision to construct two additional stories to the building, perhaps at the expense of ornamentation, indicated his intention to create a commercial monument in downtown Harlingen. Within Harlingen, there are no comparable tall buildings. Contemporary local buildings that also expressed the rapid 1920s development of Harlingen were the five-story Wittenbach Building, constructed in 1925, and the five-story Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel, built in 1926. The Wittenbach Building was a nearby rectangular five-story building that occupied the northeast corner of the intersection of South A Street and Van Buren Avenue. Referred to as the Embee Building in the 1939 city directory, the Wittenbach Building functioned similar to the Baxter Building with ground-level retail and professional offices on the upper floors. With fewer floors, there were fewer offices than in the Baxter Building, although the proportions of insurance agents, medical professionals, and lawyers were consistent between the two buildings.[69] The Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel is a U-shaped building located at one block south and east of the Baxter Building at the southwest corner of Van Buren Avenue and South 1st Street, facing 1st Street. While its primary function was as a hotel, the ground level had multiple small storefronts that housed professional offices and retail spaces that lined Van Buren Avenue while the primary hotel entrance faced 1st Street *(Figure 25)*.[70] The façade of the hotel was arranged in the classically-inspired three-part organization with a one-story base, three-story "shaft," and a one-story "capital." Carved stone ornament with round-arched bays expressed the Classical Revival style. This ornament is no longer extant *(Figure 26)*.

While other towns in the Rio Grande Valley constructed relatively large buildings, primarily hotels, in the early twentieth century to convey their modernity and prosperity, these hotel buildings were typically four or five stories in height, such as the Cortez Hotel in Weslaco, constructed in 1928 *(Figure 27)*.[71] The only comparable building in the Rio Grande Valley was El Jardín Hotel in Brownsville. Constructed in 1926 at eight stories, El Jardín Hotel is similar to the nominated building in context and physical description. El Jardín Hotel is long and narrow, similar to the Baxter Building, although the ratio of the length to the width of the building is not quite as exaggerated as the Baxter Building *(Figure 28)*. El Jardín Hotel, designed by San Antonio architects the Kelwood Company, also has a three-part vertical block form, but has stucco cladding and Classical Revival ornament that is more elaborate than the Baxter Building. Two mid-century tall buildings contribute to the skyline in Brownsville: the eight-story building at 835 Levee Street and the fourteen-story Villa del Sol Apartments at 700 East St. Charles Street. The building at 835 Levee Street is a commercial or governmental office building that was built between 1953 and 1970 and exhibits elements of the Modern Movement style with its enameled metal cladding and banded fenestration *(Figure 29)*. Constructed in 1971, Villa del Sol Apartments claimed the title of tallest building in the Rio Grande Valley. This building is distinctly different from the Baxter Building in multiple ways: it is a purpose-built

[69] Harlingen City Directory, 1939. The Wittenbach Building is no longer extant at 119 South A Street. It was demolished between 1970 and 1995. The physical appearance of the building is unknown, as no historic images of the building were found.
[70] The Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel is extant at 202 South 1st Street, but it appears to have undergone at least two major renovations, including one in the 1950s or 1960s that significantly altered the second story and replaced the windows, and a second renovation within the past decade that created references to those lost features, but in total compromises the building's ability to communicate the original date of its construction.
[71] Pino Shah and Stephen Fox, *Architecture of the Lower Rio Grande Valley: An Introduction*, (Pharr, TX: ArtByPino.com, 2017).

apartment building that exhibits the Modern Movement style with banded windows and stylized ornament *(Figure 30)*. In McAllen, the seventeen-story Chase Tower was constructed in 1980 and the eleven-story Bensten Tower was constructed c.1985, both of which are different expressions of the Late Modern Movement style. Outside the Rio Grande Valley, Corpus Christi has one tall building that would be a contemporary of the Baxter Building. The Wilson Building was constructed in 1926 as a twelve-story office tower with ground-level stores. Two years later, the owner constructed an eight-story addition that more than quadrupled the footprint. A sixteen-story addition to the west end of the eight-story wing more than doubled the size of the building *(Figure 31)*. These tall buildings share an intention of projecting monumentality and dominate their local sky lines, however they are rare in the flat land of the Rio Grande Valley.

Architects

Birger August Elwing (1867-1935), considered a "pioneer [Rio Grande] Valley builder," was born in Linkoping, Sweden. After earning an architecture degree at the University of Gothenburg, Elwing immigrated to the United States with his wife, Signe, in 1898. The couple settled in Arizona before moving to Santa Ana, California. Between 1901 and 1919, Elwing practiced architecture in California with Clarence Purrington Tedford (1889-1977). Elwing and Tedford designed classical revival-style residences and commercial buildings in Santa Ana. The Beaux Arts-influenced 1917 Rankin Building, a 3-story commercial edifice, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.[72] He was most influenced, however, by California Mission Revival and Spanish Revival-style architecture, and many buildings he later designed in Texas exhibited that style. Despite his local success, in 1919 Birger accepted a staff architect position for Frances Z. Bishop's ("the Land Man of South Texas") real estate development company. The Elwing Family moved to Harlingen, and after working briefly for Bishop, Elwing established a firm with Roy Winfield Mulhausen.[73] Between 1928 and 1934, Elwing practiced independently. He designed institutional buildings and residences in the Rio Grande Valley. The 1928 L.E. Snavely House "La Bonita," northwest of Harlingen, is a picturesque Norman Revival brick house is one of the few known Elwing-designed residences still extant in Texas. It is a Record Texas Historic Landmark.

Roy Winfield Mulhausen (1889-1974), a Nebraska native, moved to Texas from Oklahoma City around 1914. His professional training is dubious, his architectural career was short-lived, and he left Texas in 1929 bankrupt never to practice architecture again. In Oklahoma City, Mulhausen built doors for a lumber mill before moving to Texas. The 1914 Dallas city directory indicates architect Lewis E. Frantz hired the 25-year-old as a draftsman. Mulhausen returned to Oklahoma City in 1915 when, it is likely, he married his wife, Grace. The couple moved to Waxahachie, Texas in 1916, and newspapers from that year report his designed the 3-story Waxahachie Sanitorium (demolished). It is the only known building individually-attributed to Mulhausen.[74] Three years later, the Mulhausen's moved to San Benito, Cameron County to work for a land developer. Mulhausen may have met Elwing through that affiliation. The Baxter Building was the firm's final project together, and Mulhausen opened a private practice on the 8th floor of the Baxter Building in 1927. Apparently in debt, Mulhausen declared bankruptcy the next year and liquated all his assets in Harlingen.[75] His family returned to Oklahoma City before settling in Oregon where Mulhausen operated a wholesale food distribution company.

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[72] National Register of Historic Places, Rankin Building, Santa Ana, Orange County, California, National Register #83001220.
[73] Ancestry.com. *California, State Court Naturalization Records, 1850-1986* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014; "Birger Elwing Looks for Big Year in Construction," *Santa Ana Register*, January 4, 1917; "School Building," *Santa Ana Register*, May 7, 1919; "Kays Succeeds to Architect's Business," *Santa Ana Register*, April 1, 1919; "F.Z. Bishop, Founder of Bishop", by Mrs. Gail Tubbs and Leon Bertram, *Bulletin Nueces County Historical Commission* 3, No. 1 - Whole #4, November, 1990; B.A. Elwing, Architect and Pioneer, Dies," *Brownsville Herald*, October 29, 1935.
[74] *Waxahachie Daily Light*, October 10, 1916; *Waxahachie Daily Light*, September 15, 19193
[75] *Brownsville Herald*, July 10, 1928.

Elwing and Mulhausen collaborated on institutional and commercial projects, including the Baxter Building, from 1921 to 1928. The firm completed numerous commissions for public schools in Harlingen, Brownsville, and communities in other neighboring counties. These edifices reflected a range of eclectic styles. The Stuart Place School (1923), El Jardin School (1925), and Harlingen High School (now Vernon Middle School) were Spanish Revival-design. The 1925 Donna Central School, a Record Texas Historic Landmark, is a red brick masonry school building with Tudor Revival architectural details. In Willacy County, the firm constructed a vaguely-Romanesque school at Raymondville that was completed in 1924. Historical newspapers attribute other public buildings to the Elwing and Mulhausen—the Harlingen City Hall and local commercial buildings—but there is no known record of what these looked like. Stylistically, the Baxter Building is the least eclectic and ornamented design the firm produced when compared with the extant school buildings.[76]

Conclusion

The Baxter Building at 106 S. A Street in Harlingen, Cameron County, Texas, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level under Criterion A in the area of Commerce for its associations with the commercial development in downtown Harlingen during the 1920s. Significant also under Criterion C for Architecture, the nine-story building has been the tallest structure in Harlingen since its construction and is a symbol of the aspirations of Harlingen's early developers. Constructed during a city-wide building boom, the Baxter Building is representative of Harlingen's commercial development; and prominent business, medical, and government professionals rented offices throughout the period of significance, 1927-1956. In 1956, the owner renovated several floors for residential leasing. After nearby military operations closed, the Baxter Building experienced vacancies that reflected the larger decline of the Harlingen's commercial development in mid and late 20th century.

[76] *The Waxahachie Daily Light*, September 25, 1919, page 6, accessed January 18, 2018, www.Newspapers.com; Rozeff, "Chronological History of Harlingen," n.d. page 6. Accessed August 23, 2018. http://www.myharlingen.us/page/open/8052/0/Education%20in%20Harlingen.pdf; Donna Central Elementary School, Recorded Texas Historic Landmark File, Texas Historical Commission; Jay C. Henry, *Architecture in Texas: 1845-1945*, University of Texas Press, Austin: 1993, 96-97.

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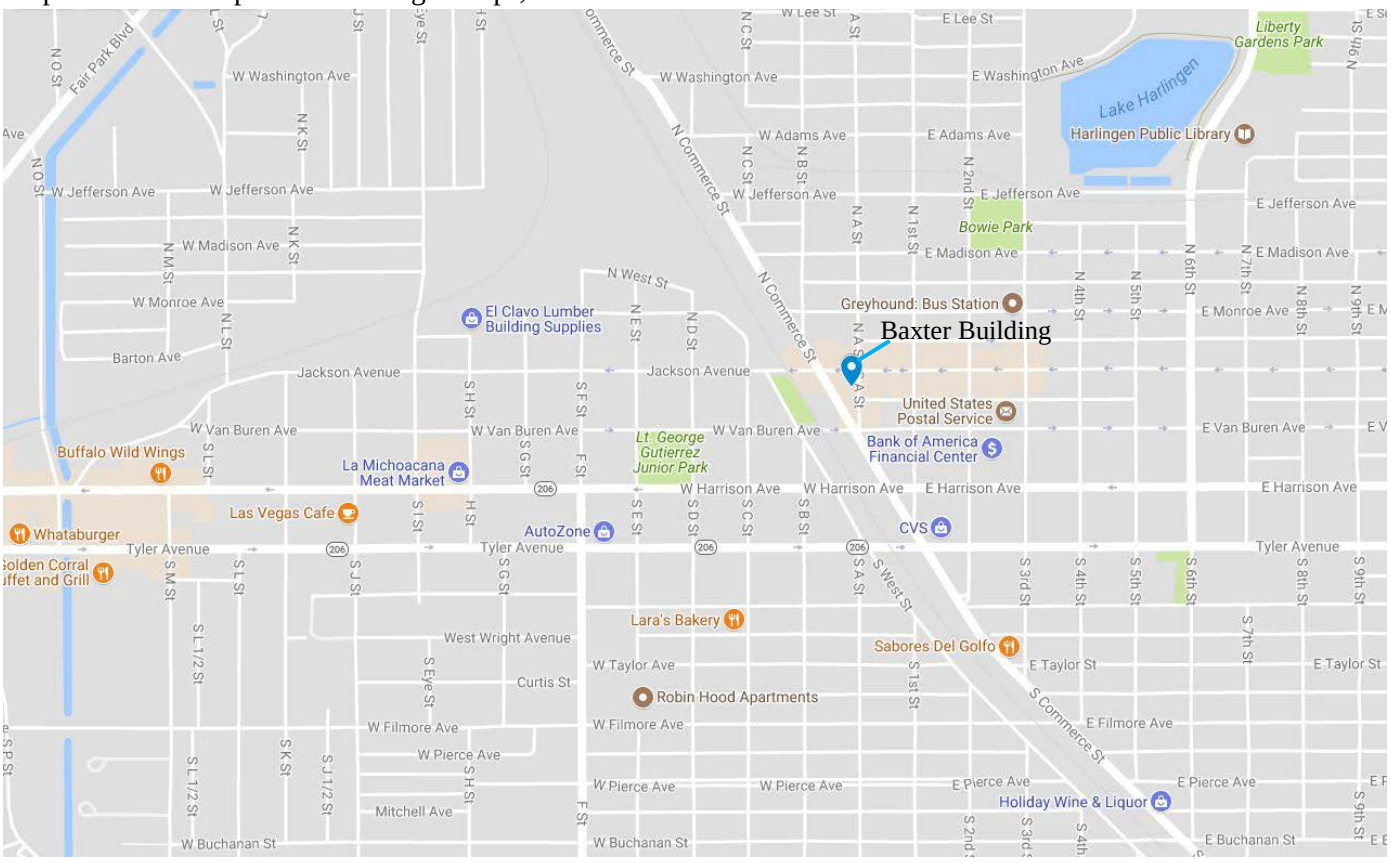
Maps

Map 1: Cameron County, Texas

Map 2: Context Map. Source: Google Maps, 2017.



Map 3. Baxter Building, Harlingen, Cameron County. Source: Google Earth. Accessed August 19, 2018.

Figures

Figure 1: Baxter Building exterior and first floor current plans and photo map. Each floor has a different plan. Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

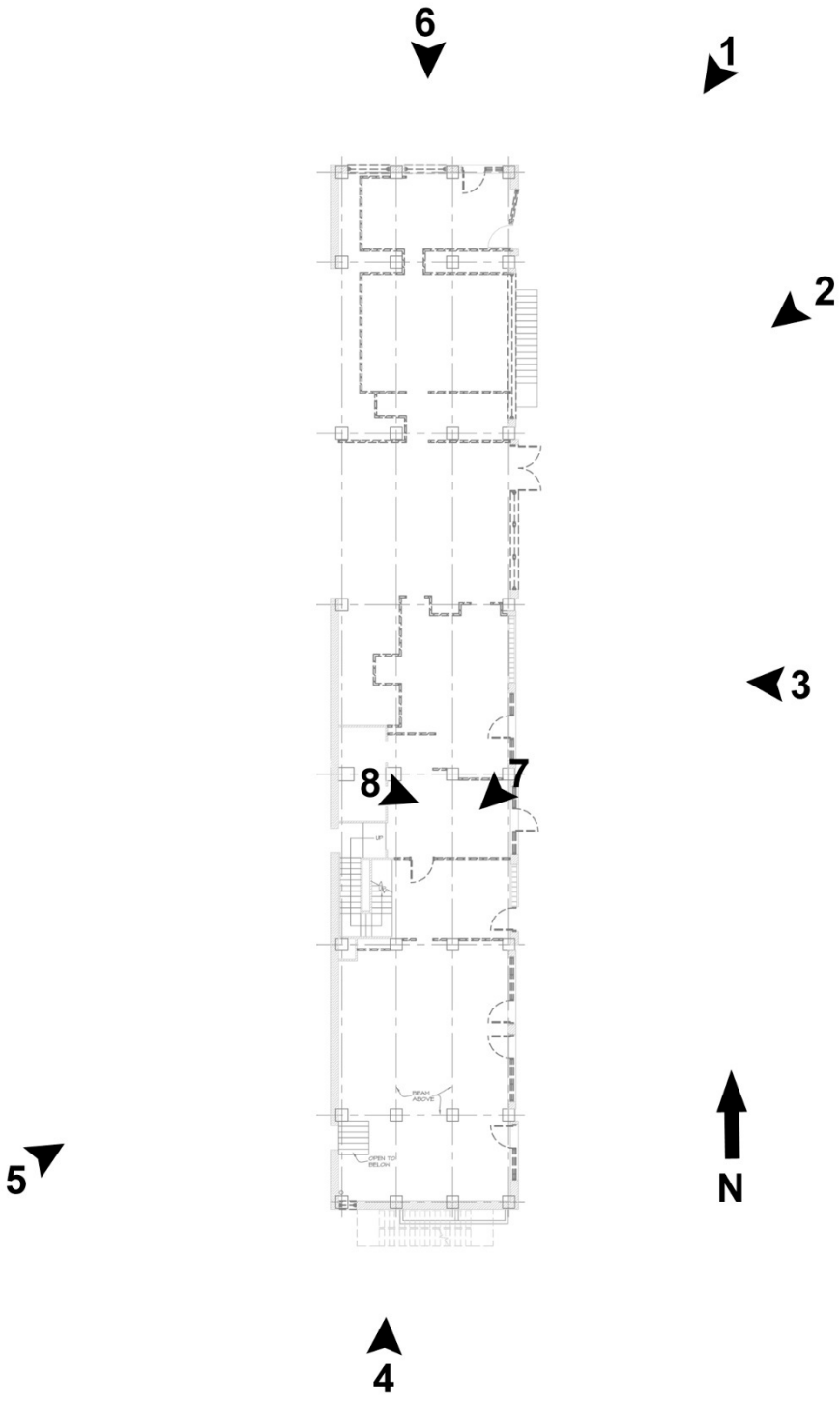


Figure 2: Second Floor current plans and photo map. All offices were converted to apartments in 1956. Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

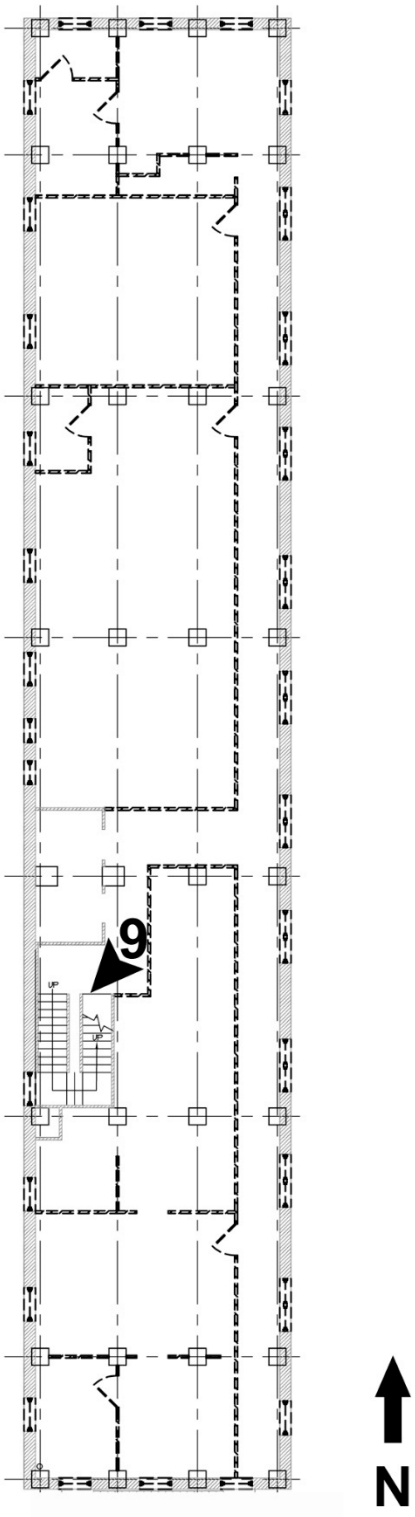


Figure 3: Third floor current plans and photo map. This floor retains the original corridor and offices. Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

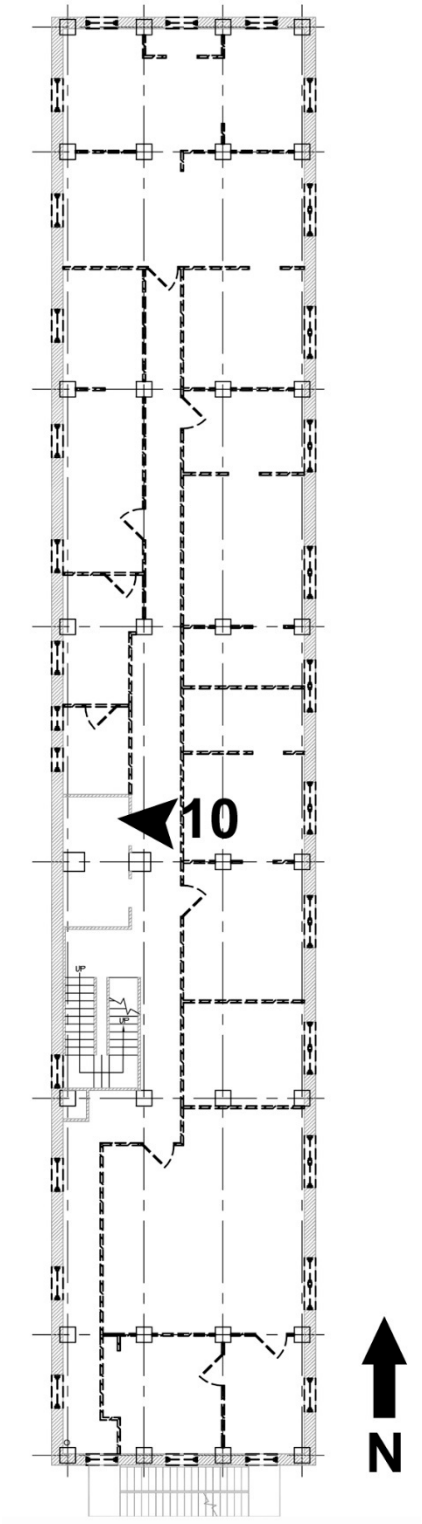


Figure 4: Fourth floor current plans and photo map. This floor has part of the original corridor and 1956 apartments. Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

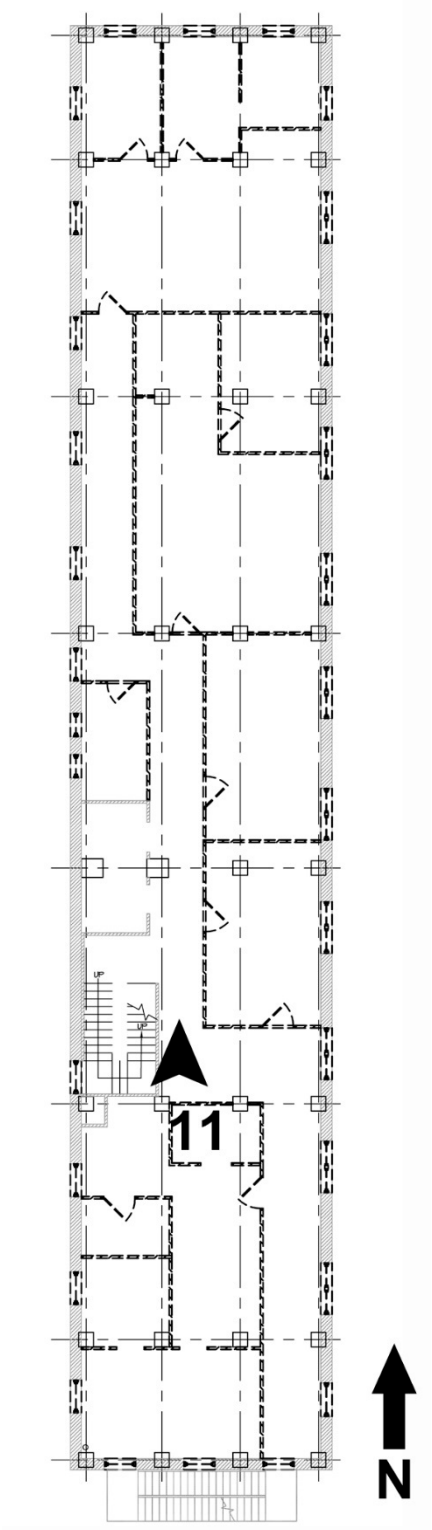


Figure 5: Fifth floor current plans and photo map. This floor has original corridor and offices.
Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

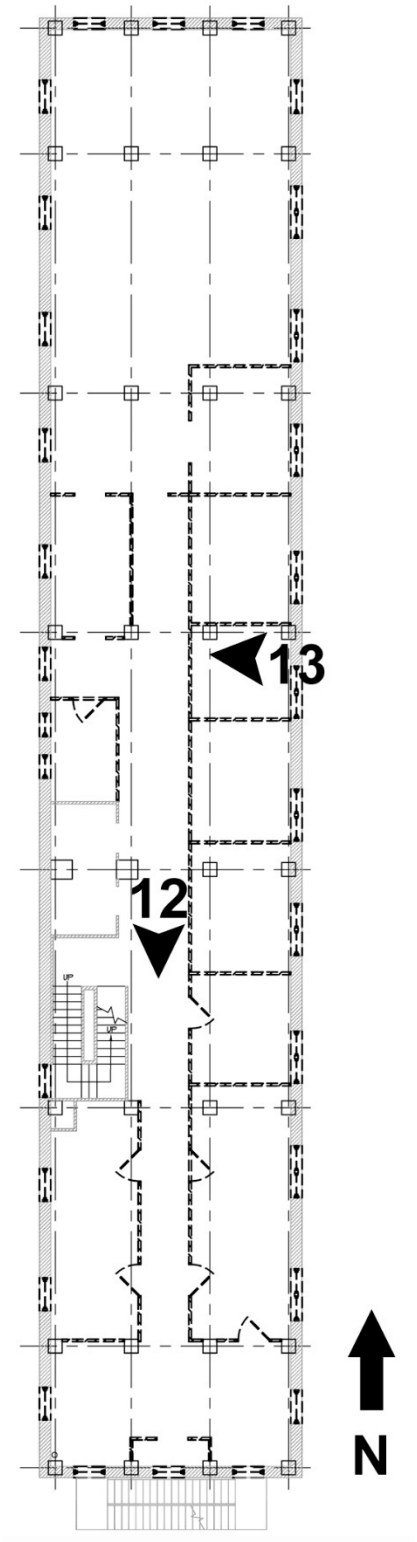


Figure 6: Sixth floor current plans and photo map. This floor is almost entirely open.
Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

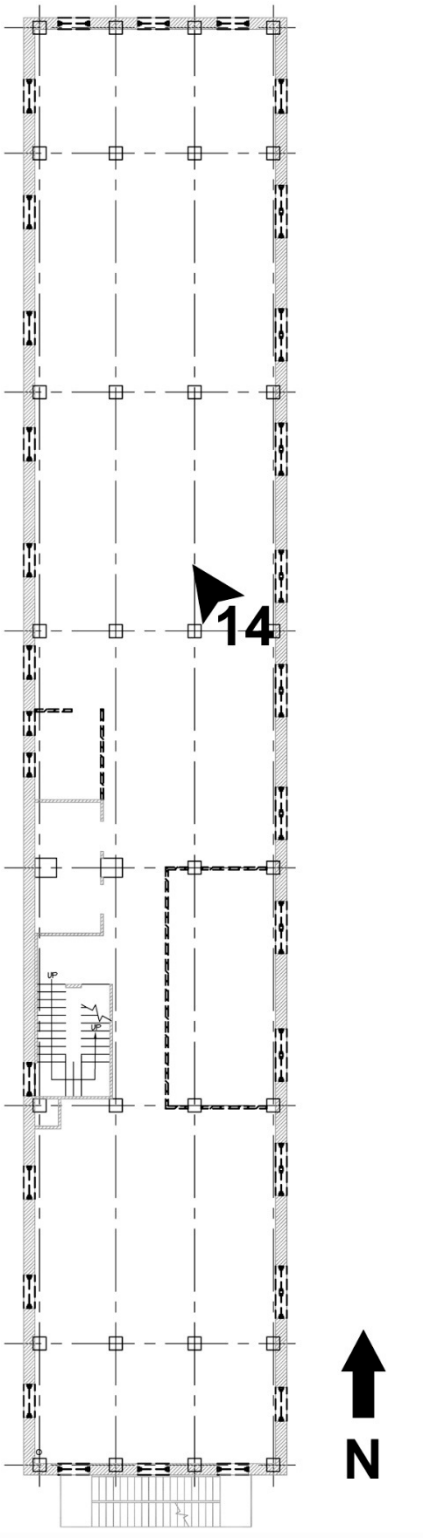


Figure 7: Seventh floor current plans. This floor is almost entirely open.
Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

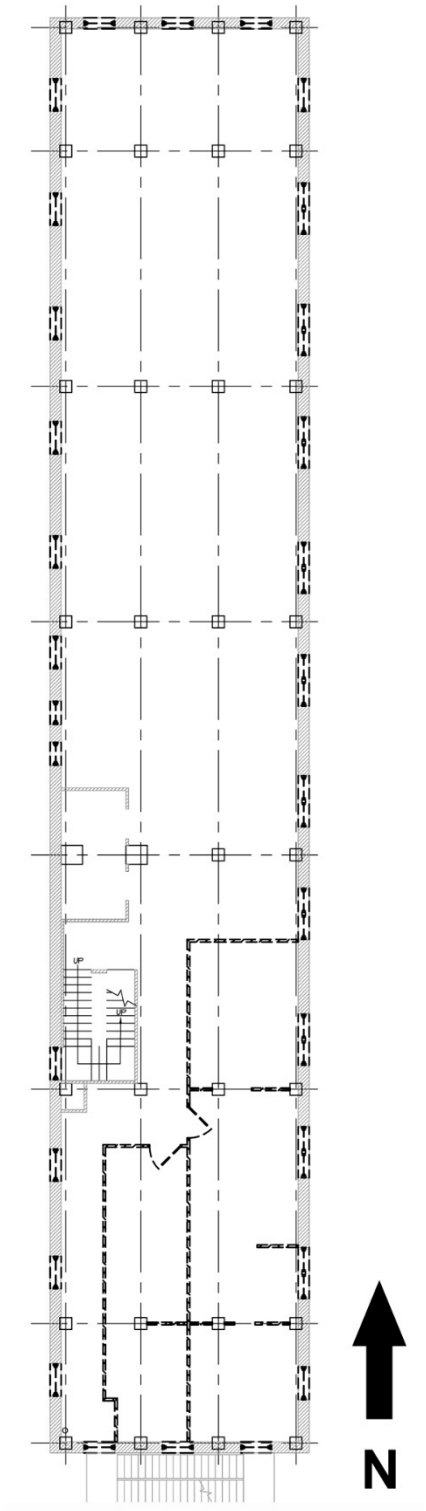


Figure 8: Eighth floor current plans. This floor has 1956 apartments.
Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

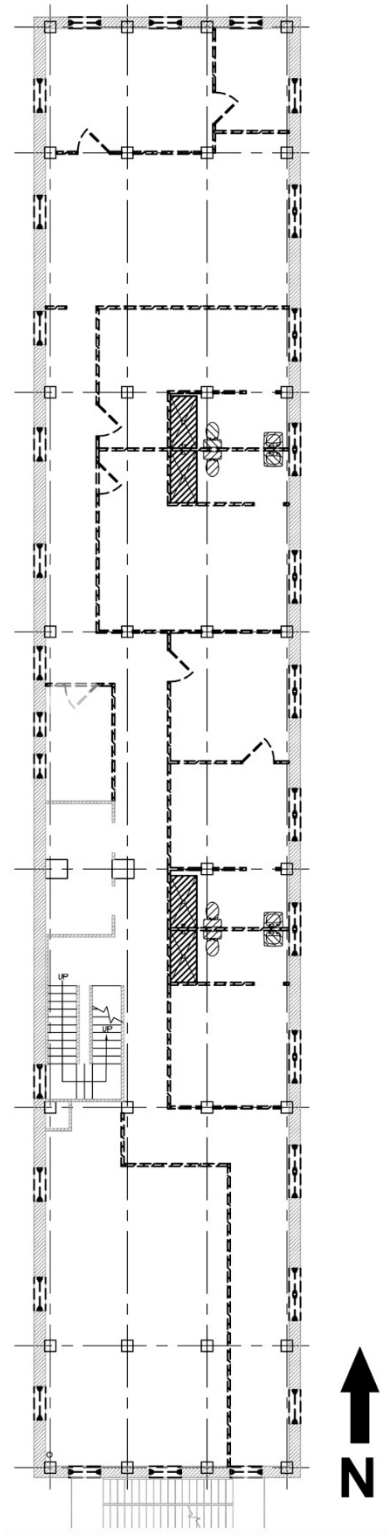


Figure 9: Ninth floor current plans. This floor is almost entirely open.
Source: Wallace Architects, "Baxter Lofts Rehabilitation Plans," 2017.

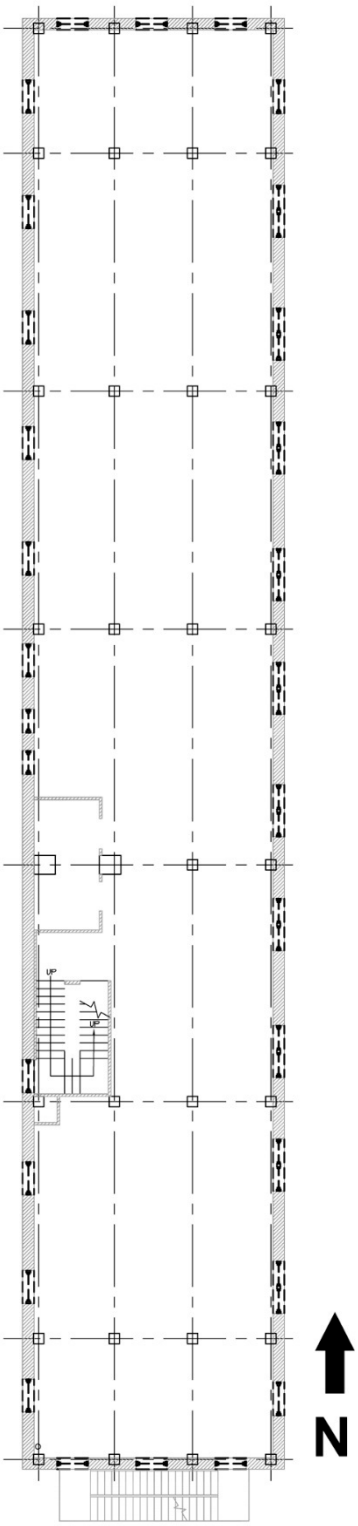


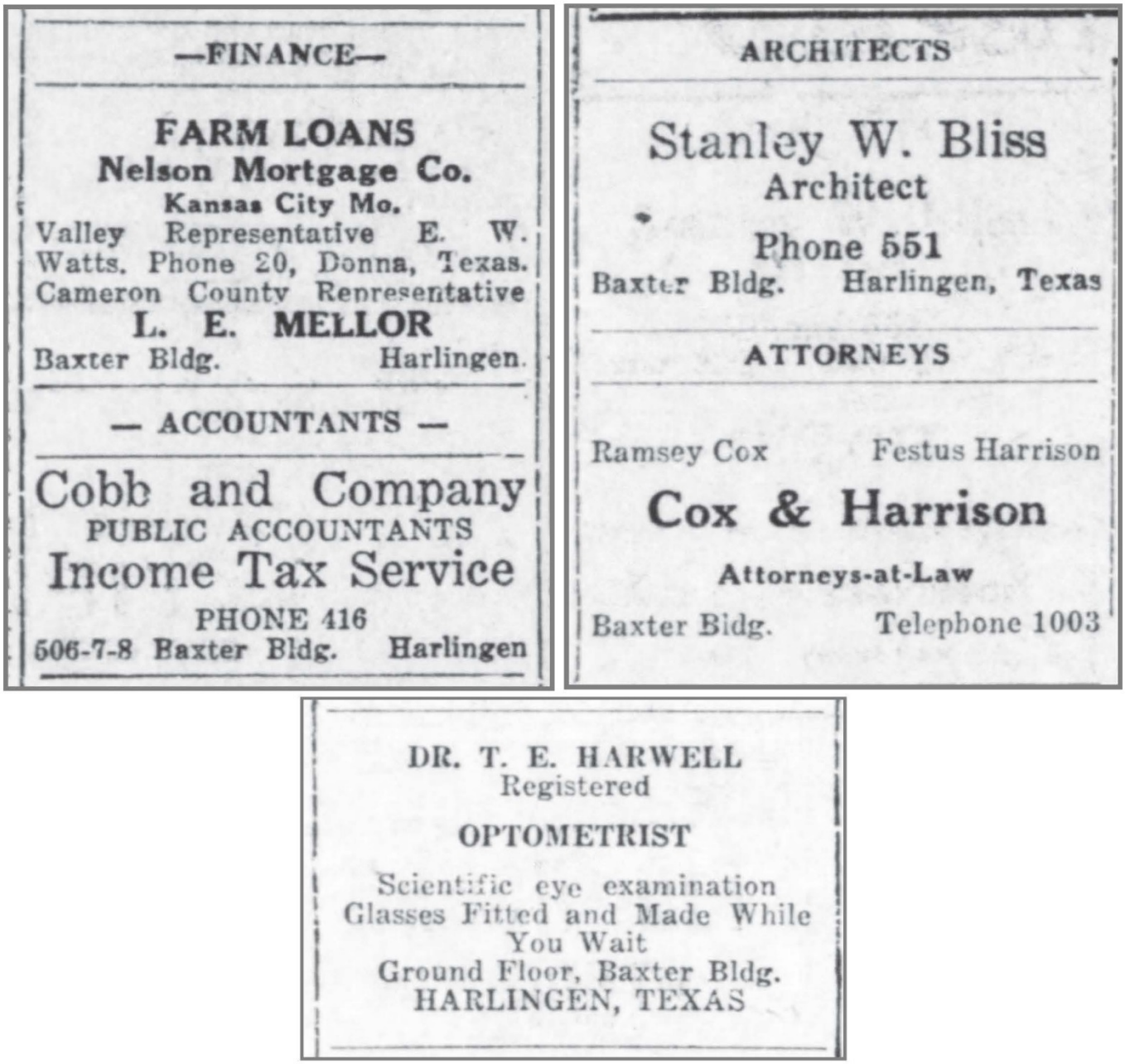
Figure 10. Baxter Building during construction, view northeast from the *St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railroad* depot, 1927. Source: Valley Morning Star Archives, valleystar.com.

Figure 11. Aerial Photo of Harlingen, c.1940, looking southeast. The nominated property (red arrow) towers over the commercial district below.
Source: Pinterest, https://www.pinterest.com/pin/159526011780695359/

Figure 12. Baxter Building, c.1940, view southwest. This photograph highlights the relatively extreme height achieved on a narrow city lot as it towers above its one- and two-story neighbors.
Source: Texas Historical Commission.

Figure 13. Downtown Harlingen, c.1950, view west southwest. The Baxter Building was a prominent edifice in Harlingen's busy commercial district.
Source: Mattei, 92.

Figure 14. Classified ads from 1930 illustrate the typical professional businesses that operated from the Baxter Building. Source: *Valley Morning Star*, September 30, 1930.



—FINANCE—

FARM LOANS
Nelson Mortgage Co.
Kansas City Mo.
Valley Representative E. W. Watts. Phone 20, Donna, Texas.
Cameron County Representative
L. E. MELLOR
Baxter Bldg. Harlingen.

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PUBLIC ACCOUNTANTS
Income Tax Service
PHONE 416
506-7-8 Baxter Bldg. Harlingen

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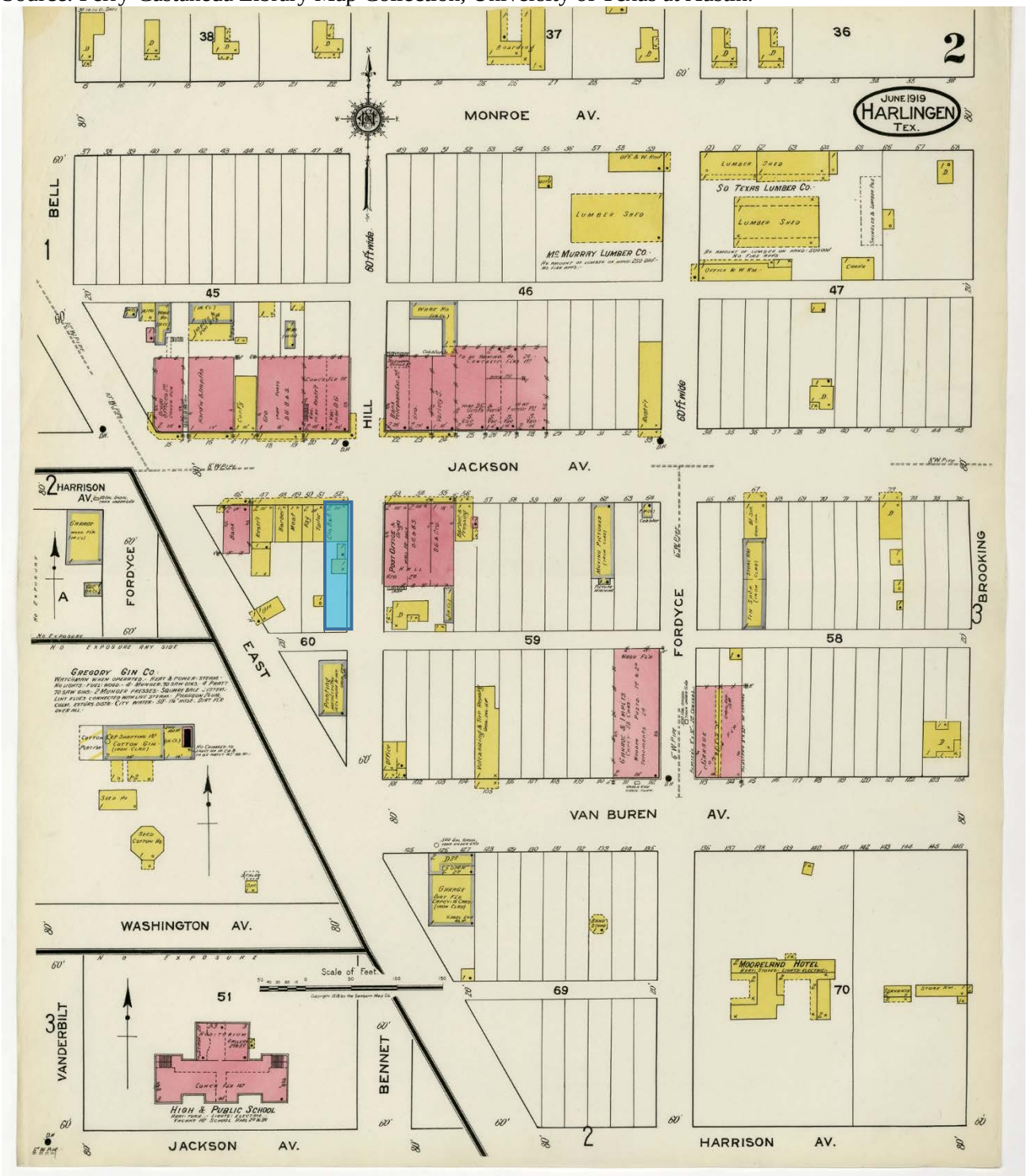
Baxter Bldg. Telephone 1003

DR. T. E. HARWELL
Registered
OPTOMETRIST
Scientific eye examination
Glasses Fitted and Made While You Wait
Ground Floor, Baxter Bldg.
HARLINGEN, TEXAS

Figure 15. Classified ads for SkyView Apartments in the Baxter Building (McKelvey Building) in 1958. Source: *Valley Morning Star*, April 11, 1958.

Figure 16. Classified ads for a business operating from the Baxter Building (McKelvey Building) in 1960. Source: *Valley Morning Star*, August 28, 1960.

Figure 17: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Harlingen, TX. 1919, Sheet 2. The intersection of Jackson Avenue and Hill (now A) Street is the original commercial core of Harlingen with the city's earliest brick buildings. The Baxter Building was constructed on the southwest corner of that important intersection (blue rectangle).
Source: Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin.



Original located at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin

Figure 18. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Harlingen, TX. 1925, six years, the commercial core has filled in with more brick buildings and expanded south. The lot where the Baxter Building (in blue) will be constructed is vacant. The adjacent building has been constructed.
Sheet 2. Source: Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

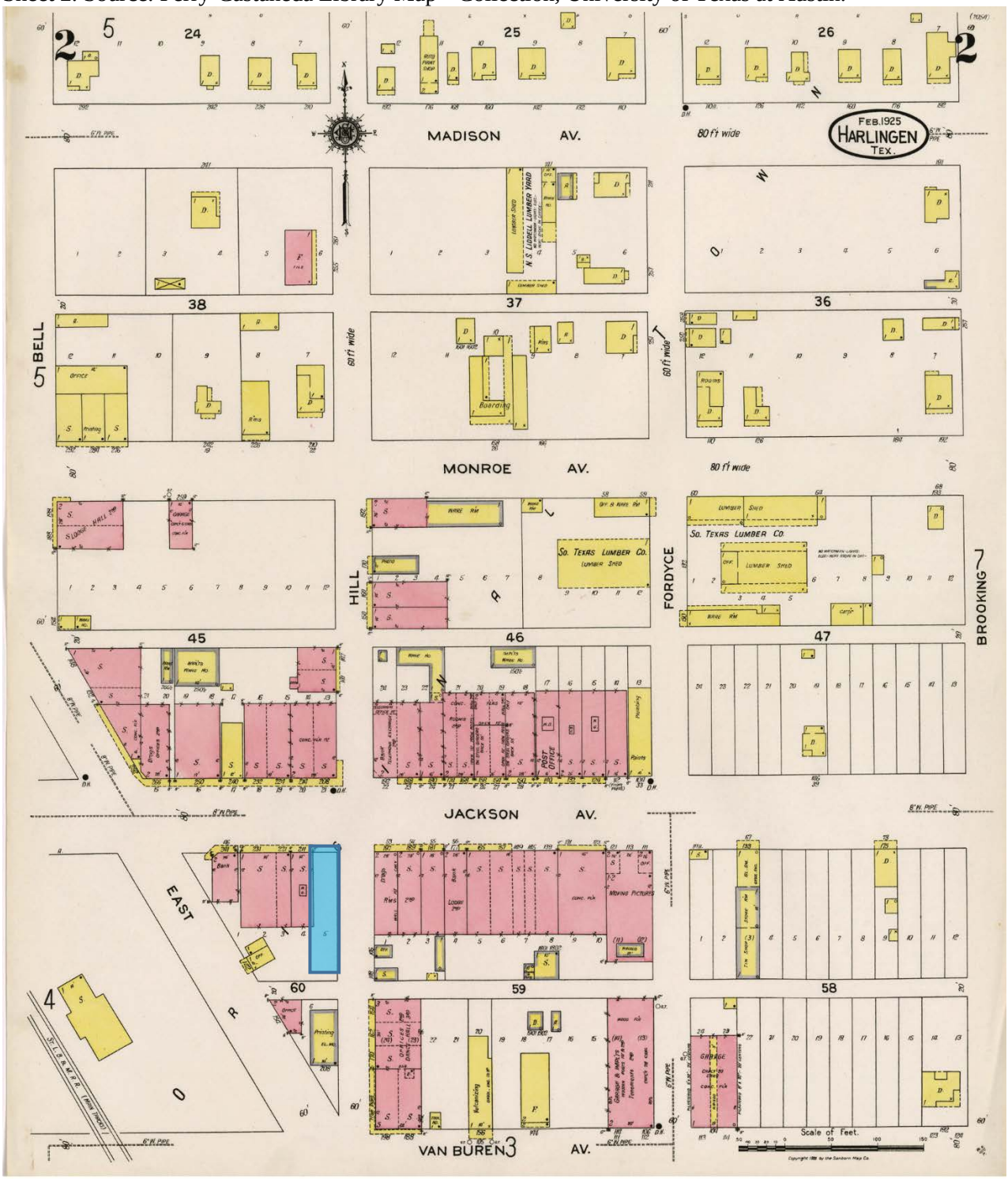


Figure 19. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Harlingen, TX. 1929, Sheet 3. The red line encircles the Baxter Building.

Figure 20. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Harlingen, TX. 1929, Sheet 3, detail. The red line encircles the Baxter Building. The map shows the separation between the Baxter Building and the adjacent building. Both buildings have fire walls.

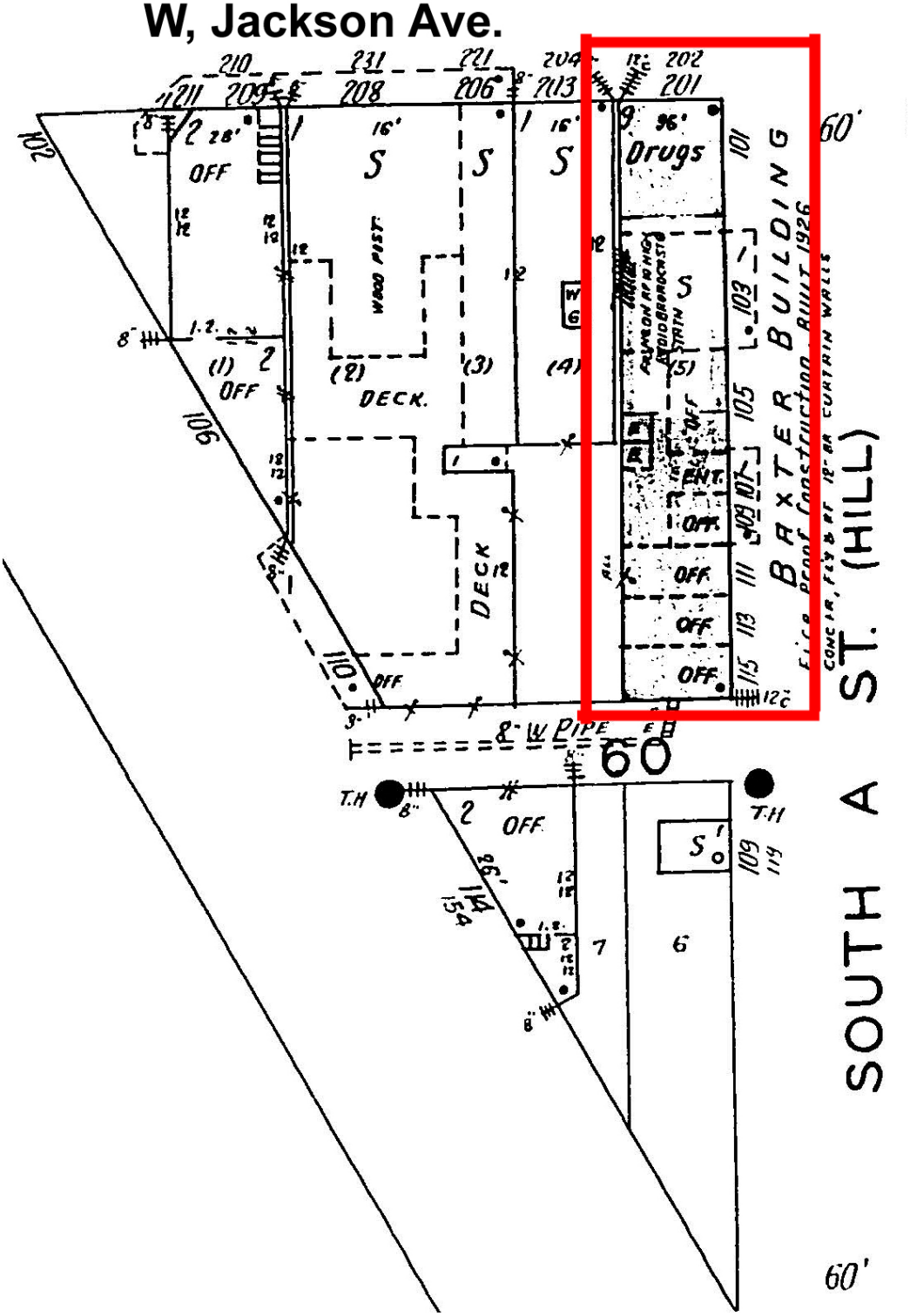


Figure 21. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Harlingen, TX. 1929 corrected to 1950, Sheet 3. Detail showing the Baxter Building (McKelvey Building) with a ground-level floor plan that is different from the 1929 floor plan. It also shows the adjacent structure as a separate building.

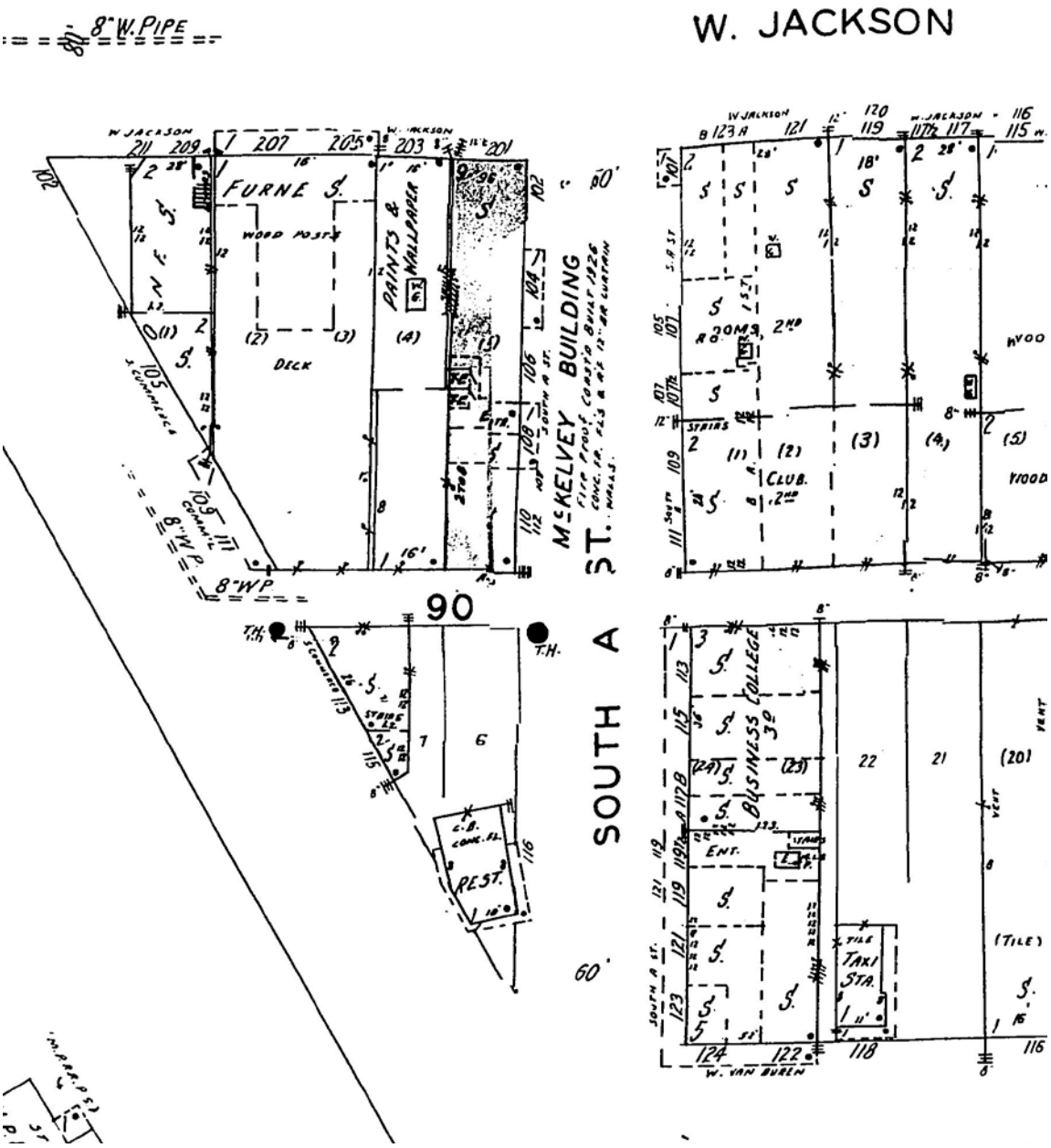


Figure 22. Historic photograph of Robert W. Baxter, 1927. Baxter was 42 when this photo was taken, around the time the Baxter Building was completed. *Source: "Robert Wylie "Bob" Baxter. Find a Grave.com*

Figure 23. Historic photograph of El Jardine Hotel in Brownsville , just after completion. *Source: Bronsbil Estation blogpost, May 16, 2015. http://bronsbilestacion.blogspot.com/2015/05/el-jardin-gets-buyer-brownsville-herald.html.*

Figure 24. Current image of the Wilson Building, constructed in phases between 1926 and the 1940s or 1950s. This building is the earliest extant tall building in Corpus Christi. Mid- to late-twentieth century towers contribute to the skyline in Corpus Christi, but the Wilson Building is the only extant early-twentieth century tower. *Source: Google Street View, 2018.*

Photographs

Photo 1
Northeast elevation, view southwest

Photo 2
East elevation, view west

Photo 3
East elevation, view west

Photo 4
South elevation, view north

Photo 5
West elevation, view northeast

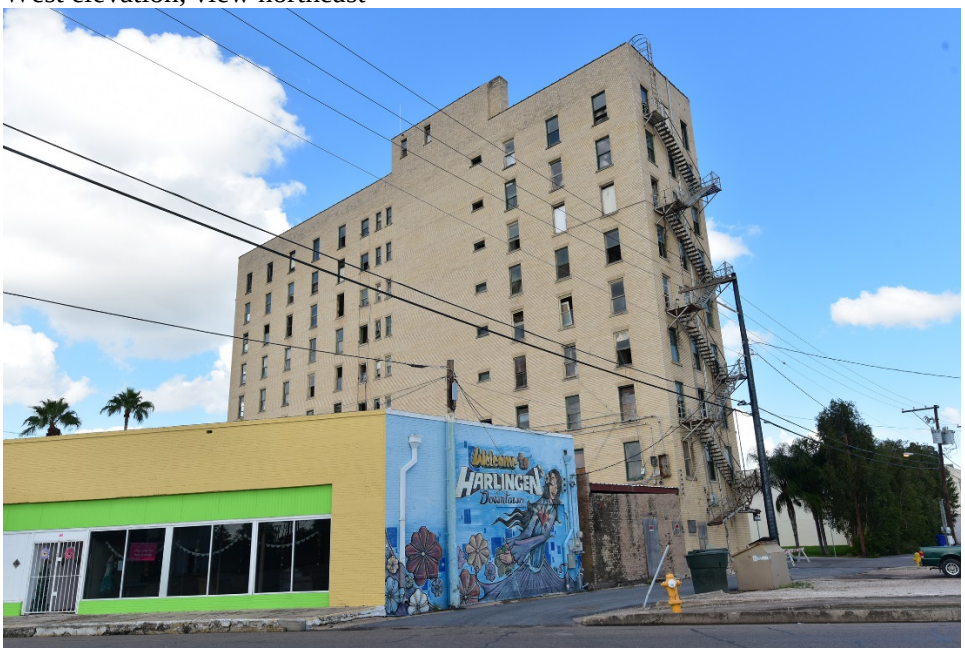


Photo 6
North elevation, view south

Photo 7
First floor, entrance, view southwest

Photo 8
First floor, view east

Photo 9
Second floor, staircase, view west

Photo 10
Third floor, door, view west

Photo 11
Fourth floor, corridor, view north

Photo 12
Fifth floor, view southwest

Photo 13
Fifth floor, view west

Photo 14
Sixth floor, view northwest

Photo 15. East elevation, detail of masonry at ninth floor column capitals and parapet ornament, view west, 2017.

Photo 16. East elevation, detail of masonry at eighth floor, columns and cartouches, view west, 2017.

Photo 17. East elevation, detail of masonry canopy tie rod hooks, view west, 2017.

Photo 18. East elevation, detail of storefront opening and basement stair, view west, 2017.

Photo 19. Interior of adjacent structure, plywood wall and temporary roof, view north, 2017.