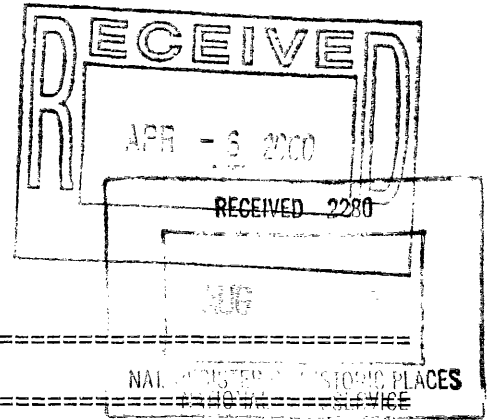


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

1. Name of Property

historic name Gaston, A.G., Building

other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 1527 Fifth Avenue North (SW corner of 5th Avenue and 16th St. North)

city or town Birmingham vicinity: N/A state: Alabama code AL

county Jefferson code 073 zip code 35203

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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 nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature]
Signature of certifying official

July 28, 2000
Date

Alabama Historical Commission (State Historic Preservation Office)
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register

See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the

National Register

See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the

National Register

removed from the National Register

other (explain):

[Signature] 9-11-00

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

=====
5. Classification
=====

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property:

| Contributing | Noncontributing |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <u>1</u> | <input type="checkbox"/> buildings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> sites |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> structures |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> objects |
| <u>1</u> | <input type="checkbox"/> Total |

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
N/A

=====
6. Function or Use
=====

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: COMMERCE/TRADE Sub: Business Office
EDUCATION Business School
SOCIAL Public Auditorium

Current Function(s):

Cat: COMMERCE/TRADE Sub: Professional Association

=====
7. Description
=====

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN
International Style

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CEMENT
roof ASPHALT
walls GLASS
BRICK
other METAL

7. Description, continued:

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

See attached Continuation Sheets.

=====
8. Statement of Significance
=====

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- 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.
- 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 (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance: 1959-1968

Significant Dates 1959-60
1968

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

GASTON, Arthur George

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Langston, Perry C., Architect
Bank Building and Equipment Corporation.
Contractor

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

See attached Continuation Sheets.

9. Major Bibliographical References

=====
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

- Previous documentation on file (NPS) N/A
- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- 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 N/A

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: less than 1 acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

| | Zone | Easting | Northing | Zone | Easting | Northing |
|---|-----------|---------------|----------------|------|---------|----------|
| 1 | <u>16</u> | <u>517260</u> | <u>3708190</u> | 3 | _____ | _____ |
| 2 | _____ | _____ | _____ | 4 | _____ | _____ |

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

=====
11. Form Prepared By
=====

name/title Linda Nelson, Consultant, and Trina Binkley, National Register Coordinator, AHC
organization FuturePast date March 9, 2000
street & number 4700 Seventh Court South telephone (205) 592-6610
city or town Birmingham state AL zip code 35222

=====
Additional Documentation
=====

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

=====
Property Owner
=====

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Richard A. Walker, M.D.
street & number P.O. Box 55597 telephone (205) 933-55781
city or town Birmingham State AL zip code 35255
=====

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Description of Physical Appearance

The A.G. Gaston Building is a three-storey-with penthouse commercial office building, incorporating a 50 X 99-foot auditorium within its dimensions of 128 X 100 feet; it is situated on the southwest corner of 5th Avenue North and 16th Street in downtown Birmingham, just across the street from Kelly Ingram Park in a district long associated with African-American life and commerce and, since the 1960s, with the Civil Rights Movement. Built over the winter of 1959-60 and Modern in style and construction, its reinforced concrete frame provides an exterior support skeleton with rib piers that define the bays and their slightly recessed window planes. The ground level has buff brick wall facings on its non-street sides; on its primary street faces the structural piers become pylons in front of a recessed metal-framed storefront that runs continuously behind them. The main entry to the building is near the middle of the 5th Avenue facade, differentiated very little from the office-bay framing around it except for a gold leaf "A.G. Gaston Building" in the transom plane. Interior spaces with their windows and doors are regularly articulated by the stainless steel framing members. Along 16th Street some of the original stainless steel storefront framing has been replaced with aluminum.

The upper storeys on three of the four sides contain panels that define window patterns for the upper offices and former classrooms. These window areas are not true curtain walls in that they are not hung on the structure but are set slightly behind its face line between the ribs. These structural ribs define six facade bays along Fifth Avenue North, five matching ones on the western parking-lot side, and three larger ones along the 16th Street side. The window walls between are composed of Mondrian-like series of panels: the grid is composed of aluminum framing pieces and panels of either clear glass or acrylic material tinted in some cases gray and in some aqua blue. The most visually arresting of these are the opaque blue panels set in rows delineating the second- and third-floor plates, with a narrower band of them at the top directly beneath the concrete parapet beam; this gives the building a degree of horizontal continuity that balances the verticality of all the rest of its face elements. The narrow vertical central-window panels are consistently clear in all three faces of the building, while the larger flanking panels are clear only along the 16th Street side and translucent gray elsewhere. On the long facade and west side the translucent panels actually face interior plastered walls, leaving only the center panels as functional windows with bottom operable hoppers that are the sole elements that can be opened to the outside air.

This regular grid of panels is surmounted on top of the building by a set-back metal pavilion that houses the utility and elevator systems, enameled in aqua blue to match the acrylic bands. Mounted on this penthouse along the 16th-Street side is a company sign in free-standing modern-font stainless letters: Ecker T. Washington . . . Co. The intervening *Insurance* is made in a cursive red glass, originally with neon but inactive in recent years. This sign is not original to the building (see History below).

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 2

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

=====

The rear of the office building abuts the auditorium that runs along the alley for its length. This alley wall is windowless with a primarily buff brick ground level and upper panels of concrete; this arrangement is reversed in the higher rear wing of the office building behind the auditorium, which is brick above and concrete panels on the ground level. In the one hundred feet of the auditorium wall are set two service doors; a third door serves the rear building wing.

The auditorium front on 16th Street is 50 feet wide and is the approximate height of two storeys of the office building; it is faced in buff brick on the ground level and the rest to the parapet is the stuccoed face of a metal grid, iniaid with colorful glazed tiles in Klee-like triangles randomly splashed on the plain background. This plastered face overhangs the entry slightly and is creased in the center, angling out toward the corners of the facade. The entry below it consists of two pair of glass doors with different vintages of translucent replacement glass. A solid panel between the doors is presently papered with old announcements. A shallow flat metal canopy shelters the slightly recessed door assembly and also bisects the upper glass area and produces a transom effect above it; the fascia of the canopy is missing its letters, but the grimy shadow remains of cut-out letters for "L.R. Hall Auditorium". The shallow foyer served as a lobby, from which one entered the auditorium through aluminum-and-glass doors. The concrete auditorium floor is flat and without fixed seating, so that the hall could be used for meetings and events as well as for performances. The simple stage at the west end has an elliptical apron about four feet high, and no real proscenium but a rectangular wall frame. Lighting in the house is recessed in the ceiling in square panels.

The interior arrangement in the office building is based on corridors along the street and west sides that give access to offices and classrooms on the street faces, with service and technical spaces on the inner side. The interior finishes are utilitarian, with only Dr. Gaston's suite of offices having any distinction of material or finishing; the one exception to this is the twisted stainless steel staircase balustrade. The lobby is modest and without ornament, with the staircase and elevator opposite the double-door entry; terrazzo covers the lobby floor. Elsewhere on the first floor the concrete slab is carpeted or retains an overlay of vinyl composition tile in the store spaces. Upper floors are covered in VCT throughout, again with the exception of the carpet in the Gaston suite. Walls are plastered; one partition in the Gaston suite that separates the corner office from ancillary conference rooms is faced with square panels of a light wood. Door framing is metal, the doors are wood, and baseboards are rubber strips. Office ceilings are laid-in grids with recessed fluorescent strip lighting; corridor and service-area ceilings are concrete, with lights flush-mounted. Dr. Gaston's office has a distinctive ceiling: a square consisting of five long panels of an accordion-bellows milky plastic above which the fixtures are mounted, giving the entire ceiling an even distribution of light with the source invisible. Windows are floor-to-ceiling, although only on the 16th Street side is anything clear but the narrow center panel. Bathroom windows are filled with translucent panels.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 3

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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History of the Building:

The A.G. Gaston Building was announced by the Birmingham *World* of March 7, 1959 and by the *News* about a month later. It was designed by Perry C. Langston and built by the Bank Building and Equipment Corporation; both architect and contractor were based in St. Louis, and it is assumed that Mr. Langston was a staff architect for the building company. The *World's* article reported that the building would "house the home and Birmingham district offices of the Booker T. Washington Insurance Company, Citizens Federal Savings and Loan Association, Vulcan Realty and Investment Corporation, and will have training rooms." The "training rooms" were classrooms and offices for the Booker T. Washington Business College, which had been founded by Dr. and Mrs. Gaston in 1939 and been operating as well as it could in houses in the neighborhood. Local anecdote states that the Gaston Building was in fact built at the urging of Mrs. Gaston, who was Director of the Business College and desperately wanted an appropriate home for it.¹ Her influence, however, was not noted in the ecstatic publicity at the time, which was devoted to the building's significance for Negro business and economic interests.

A major aspect of the building was the 500-seat auditorium, "expected to make Birmingham more attractive as a convention city. Some business men have expressed the need for a small auditorium downtown which could accommodate activities of small-sized conventions. Adequate hotel and meeting facilities are the two prime essentials for conventions."² What was not belabored in the newspaper but understood at the time was that, prior to the building of the Gaston Building, there were not any convention or meeting facilities for Negroes in Birmingham, other than what Mr. Gaston had already provided at his motel. The starkness of this fact was recently confirmed for the present generation in a letter to the editors of the Birmingham *News*:

Birmingham's blacks will ever be grateful to Dr. A.G. Gaston, not only for the motel, but for the L.R. Hall auditorium, another first for the race, as well as the Booker T. Washington Business College, which he and Mrs. Gaston founded so that our people could be prepared professionally for secretarial work.³

Nearer to the time of the building's completion, it was announced that the auditorium would be named in honor of L.R. Hall, an officer for many years of the Smith & Gaston interests who had died on January 26, 1960. It functioned not only as a convention hall but as a social venue for events such as wedding receptions, dances, performances, and informal meetings, the kinds of things that theretofore had been held only in the churches: it is fondly remembered by people in the black community as a favorite place of their youth. One woman, revisiting it recently, said "Oh, the memories . . ."⁴

When it opened, the building housed, on the first floor, Citizens Federal Savings and Loan Association with drive-through window on the west side, Vulcan Realty and Investment Corporation, and Citizens Drug Store on the 16th Street corner. The second floor housed the Business College, including administrative offices, a library, and classrooms. The office of the Booker T. Washington Insurance Company occupied the third floor, which in addition to offices included a recreation room and darkroom.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 4

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Attorney Arthur Shores also had his legal office on the third floor near the park corner; from these offices there, both Mr. Gaston and Mr. Shores could look down into Kelly Ingram Park and see history being made, painful as it must have been for them to watch. It was from this office, in fact, that Dr. Gaston finally told Mayor David Vann that he would no longer serve as negotiator between the demonstrators and the white community: he was watching the fire hoses being turned on the children, and he said there was nothing else he could do.⁵

By 1968 Citizens Federal had outgrown its Gaston Building quarters, and the company remodeled and moved into the former Parisian building on the corner of Third Avenue and 18th Street North. At this time both Mr. Gaston and Mr. Shores moved their offices into the new building as well. This allowed for the expansion of the insurance company, and when it became the primary tenant in the building the roof sign was mounted on the penthouse. The ground floor was remodeled in 1976 to accommodate WENN-FM radio, and Citizens Drug eventually left their corner location to occupy a small building adjacent to the parking area on the west along 5th Avenue.

In 1973 Booker T. Washington Insurance Company subsequently joined Citizens Federal in their Third Avenue building, and that left the Business College the sole major tenant in the Gaston Building, other than WENN. Finally, its *raison d'être* having been subsumed by the general society, the college discontinued operations. The building was put up for sale in 1994 and was purchased in 1996 by Dr. Richard A. Walker, a Birmingham physician, who is undertaking a historically appropriate adaptive rehabilitation of this landmark structure to be the headquarters of the Southwestern Athletic Association (SWAC).

The Gaston building is in the vicinity of several other extant Gaston-associated buildings including the old A.G. Gaston Motel mid-block across 5th Avenue North, since 1983 a facility for the elderly, and the Smith & Gaston Funeral Home on the northeast corner of the 15th-Street intersection with 4th Avenue. Booker T. Washington Insurance Co. is still in the original Parisian building on the northwest corner of 18th Street and 3rd Avenue North, while Citizens Federal has recently (1995-96) completed a new headquarters building on the other end of that block on the northeast corner of 3rd Avenue North and 17th Street. Citizens Drug Store, originally in the ground-floor corner of the Gaston Building, now occupies a small building of its own to the west of Gaston down the block, and next to that is a more original portion of the motel that was built on that side of the block across from the main building. Finally, the corner of the block on that (south) side is occupied by the old Birmingham *World* building, a c. 1910 two-storey building now abandoned. The newspaper was not a Gaston business, but its importance to the black community and its influence in promoting and publicizing issues and events cannot be overstated.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 5

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Statement of Significance:

The A.G. Gaston Building is being nominated to the National Register on the basis of Criterion B, by its association with Birmingham's seminal black entrepreneur and civic leader, and of Criterion C, Architecture, by its remarkably intact Modernist design and construction dating from 1959-60.

Justification of the Period of Significance:

The years 1959-60 mark the over-winter construction period of the A.G. Gaston Building. In 1963 Mr. Gaston moved his personal office out of the building along with the Citizens Federal Savings and Loan Association, which went to the former Parisian department store building on the corner of 18th Street and Third Avenue North. This location was, significantly, within the district of the downtown once considered the province of white businesses only. So, whereas the building's association with Gaston enterprises endured until the 1990s, its status as the sole home of the Gaston professional businesses had ended.

Justification of Exceptional Importance:

The A.G. Gaston Building is being nominated to the National Register at 40 years old because of its status as an unusually intact example, and a locally carry one, of Modern or International Style architecture as it was adapted for commercial use in the United States. The building is the more remarkable because it was realized by an African American entrepreneur in the face of a dominant white business culture that politely ignored it. It can be seen today as a statement, both cultural and architectural, not belligerent but determined, that things were not going to be done as they had always been done in the past.

CRITERION B: Association with A.G. Gaston

This building is not only named for A.G. Gaston, it was conceived by him, built by him, and represents much of everything he did in terms of business development and economic assistance for his people. Mr. Gaston was a type of African-American leader and public figure from a period prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the middle 1960s forward: he was called, at the time the Gaston Building was finished and dedicated, a "community builder" and "freedom workman" by the editor of the Birmingham *World*, and the scope of what he had accomplished by this time was truly remarkable in so segregated a city as Birmingham was. By the time the Civil Rights disturbances were acute in the city, his status was such that he could quietly assist both groups, Negro and white, in their purposes and negotiations. Criticized by some at the time as an Uncle Tom because he did not vocally join the demonstrations, he has since been understood and appreciated as a pivotal figure of behind-the-scenes collaboration between the races.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 6

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Arthur George Gaston was born in Demopolis, Alabama, in 1892; two facts often repeated in biographical sketches of him were that he was the grandson of slaves, and that he was born on the Fourth of July. When he was eight years old he and his mother came to Birmingham, and he subsequently graduated from the Tuggle Institute here. He worked for Tennessee Coal & Iron in Fairfield and in various ways showed his entrepreneurial cleverness through such ventures as providing lunches— with his mother's help— to his fellow workers and making small loans with interest. He also noted that his people didn't mind spending what money they needed on funerals, and often the services were paid for by church collections. The end result of his early perceptions was the founding in 1923, with his father-in-law, of the Smith & Gaston Funeral Home and of the Booker T. Washington Insurance Company. Building on his success in these ventures but recognizing that black people had no opportunities to be trained for life in business, in 1939 he founded the Booker T. Washington Business College; here were taught skills in typing, bookkeeping, accounting, and general office work.

Answering another need, Mr. Gaston built and opened the A.G. Gaston Motel in 1954; this facility figured largely in Civil Rights era activities, was bombed in 1962 and subsequently reopened, and in 1983 was converted to a residential building for the elderly. At the time of its conversion, a letter to the editors of the Birmingham *News* summarized the importance of the motel to the black community:

One looks back over the years and remembers the many affairs, especially those of a religious and social nature, which I have had the honor to organize at the motel— when we, as a Negro race, had no place else to go. It was with pride after the opening that we could journey into other cities and boast of our first-class motel owned and operated by one of our people. It gave us a sense of belonging, as we invited persons to come into the city. . . . Here was the first motel in Birmingham in which Negroes could live.⁶

In 1957 the Citizens Federal Savings Bank was founded, subsequently becoming the south's largest black-owned financial institution and the eighth largest in the nation. The growing success of Citizens Federal, along with that of Booker T. Washington Insurance Company and the BTW Business College, made obvious a need to provide better quarters for these Gaston enterprises. The A.G. Gaston Building was the result of this expanding enterprise in a culture so dominated by white-owned business that in May of 1959— the year the building was begun— the Birmingham *World's* editor lamented that, on the occasion of the Chamber of Commerce's Business-Industry Education (BIE) Day,

(u)or a single Negro-owned, Negro-managed or Negro-operated company was among the firms listed for the Negro teachers to visit. . . . The Negro group in the Birmingham trade area spends approximately five million dollars weekly. Only a small amount of this liquid purchasing power flows through the economic lines of Negro-owned business. Many of those concerns which live by this Negro-directed purchasing power, provide few, if any, of those substantial extra benefits and corresponding support to which customers are entitled.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 7

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

... It seems that BIE Day should be broadened to include the recognition of the economic citizenship of the Negro group as represented in Negro-owned business. If Negro teachers are assigned to visit a downtown department store, certainly they could visit Citizens Federal Savings and Loan Association, or Protective Industrial Insurance Company, to name just two Negro-operated business enterprises.⁷

In February of the following year the A.G. Gaston Building was ready for dedication; the *World* said at that time:

A job-maker is a community builder. The new, modern and well-located A.G. Gaston Building, which is scheduled to be formally dedicated on Sunday, February 28 is a symbol of jobs already created and families being fed as the result of them.

It also stands as a fascinating example of what our purchasing power can do for us when we use it wisely. This is one of the few downtown buildings where Negroes can obtain employment in line with their training, aptitude and preparedness. This should be kept in mind by the members of our group who bear economic witness to this amazing business achievement⁸

Two generations later, it is difficult for some (not all) of us to realize the great jubilation and satisfaction felt by the "group" to see this modern building built by and for them and representing an enterprise they could attain.

In 1966 Mr. Gaston became the co-founder and largest contributor the A.G. Gaston Boys Club (later Boys and Girls Club), and in his later years he spent much of his time at the Club watching over the activities of the young people. Also that year he published *Green Power*, an autobiography and explication of his financial success that he wished to communicate to others coming along behind him; proceeds from the book went to the Boys' Club. In 1975 he acquired WENN-FM and WAGG-AM radio stations, which were housed in the Gaston Building; in November of that year *Ebony* did a large piece on the Gaston enterprises titled "How to make a million," showcasing the Gaston Building and again offering instruction on financial success. In 1984 Mr. Gaston created the A.G. Gaston Construction Company, which became the largest black-owned construction company in Alabama. By 1987 his financial enterprises were worth \$54 million dollars, and then he sold them to his employees through a stock option plan for one tenth of their value. In 1992 *Black Enterprise* magazine named A.G. Gaston its "Entrepreneur of the Century." Two years later, at the age of 103, he died, much mourned and honored by the entire Birmingham community.

A.G. Gaston spent his life doing well by doing good, and his theme and lesson to the African-American community—both local and national—were that anybody could make money if he followed certain rules, and that Negroes could make it as well as anybody. By being a great financial success himself, he both funneled economic resources into the black community and gained a respect in the

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 8

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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prevailing white business community that was put to the test in the 1960s when he could serve as a liaison in desegregation negotiations. Upon his death the Birmingham *News* noted that

(h)is businesses made him a millionaire, and the color of his money gave him an influence and authority in the business world that no other black man had been able to achieve. . . . Mr. Gaston fought civil rights battles with his influence and cash, not his feet. He kept Martin Luther King Jr. and his companions in his motel during the marches of the 1960s and bailed them out of jail when King marched without permits. . . .

(H)e was one of the founders of Operation New Birmingham's Community Affairs Committee, which was credited with helping change the racial climate in Birmingham. And he met with President Kennedy and asked him not to send troops to Birmingham. He was invited to the White House several times by several presidents and remembered Lyndon B. Johnson showing him around the White House and saying, "Gaston, have a drink."⁹

Rather than having to establish the significance of the A.G. Gaston Building in relation to Mr. Gaston, it would in fact be impossible to separate the two. Remarks at the building's dedication on Sunday, February 28, 1960 state the case as it was understood at the time and must be acknowledged now. The month of February was the time of Negro History Week and Brotherhood Week, and Dr. G.W. McMurray told the crowd attending that

(t)his building stands as a living monument to both, an achievement in Negro History and to the brotherhood of man. The building itself represents far more than a million dollars it cost. It represents vision, planning, public trust, organization, thrift, knowledge of modern business procedures on a large scale, and above and beyond all, a trust in God for divine guidance to make it all into one beautiful, stupendous, amazing, breathtaking success. . . .

It is altogether fitting and proper that the building bear the name of A.G. Gaston, the 'brain,' the 'mastermind,' the 'center-of-action' figure in this network of interrelated diversified businesses which make the tenants of this building.¹⁰

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 9

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

=====

CRITERION C: Architecture

The A.G. Gaston Building is a remarkably intact example of the Modern period in architecture, as it was adapted for American business use; this particular building has undergone very little change and retains most of its original finishings, and it appears to us today much as it did on the occasion of its dedication in February of 1960.

The building reflects general traits of the International Style: a concrete frame construction, the ground-floor front recessed behind the structural ribs or stilts; glass or acrylic panels forming a clear or translucent skin between the ribs on the face elevations of the building, some of the panels tinted blue-green to create a Mondrian-like grid; service and off-street areas in brick-faced pavilions; ground-floor street fronts a continuous glass panel, its interior spaces delineated by the metal structural members of windows and doors, and the entrance not emphasized in the design.

The architect's rendering shows the building as a glittering, transparent box with the auditorium facade a sort of accent jabbing into its 16th-Street side; in actuality the faces are somewhat more impenetrable visually, but the sense of fine proportion and simple form is secure. This effect, of light both entering and emanating from the interior, depending on the source of light and time of day, is one of the delights of the modernists in theory, but the more stolid actuality is easier on the tenants. This is a fact closely associated with Mies van der Rohe's 860 Lakeshore apartments (1948-51), where refuge had to be taken against the sun with curtains-- as was done in the corner executive offices here. Other aspects of the Lakeshore Apartments could be argued to have more positively influenced the design of the Gaston Building: the visual anchoring of the windows on each floor by horizontal elements toward the bottom of the window panels, and also the definite "stilting" of the ground floor.¹¹ The use of the opaque panels themselves, however, could be more related to aspects of designs by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, whose Lever House (1951-52) likewise had banded floors, enhancing "a . . . deliberate pattern of rectangles created by the opposition of horizontals and verticals— a pattern that is at least nominally Miesian."¹²

The importation of the Miesian ideal and its interpretation by such influential firms as SOM might be said to have been the primary derivation of the commercial style that began to dominate American office buildings from about 1950, a style that Alan Gowans snortishly calls "American Imperial Modern."¹³ The meticulous craftsmanship of Mies could not, however, in most circumstances be afforded or appreciated, and the resulting formula of undecorated functionalism often became dreary in real life. Showing an example from Seattle from the mid-1960s, Gowans cites its Modern orthodoxy: "metal-cage construction revealed by hung panels and exposed stilts on ground floor, mandatory flat roof, and drab industrial color."¹⁴ Other than the drab industrial color, this is a description of the Gaston building. Drabness in this case is avoided, fortunately, by the addition of the colored panels and the building's good proportions and stainless steel details, as well as the relatively light brick masonry.

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Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

Examples of the Modern style began to appear in Birmingham in the late 1940s, most notably the Bromberg's building of 1946, but these were more sculptural in structure, with sleek masonry walls and banded windows. A 10-storey glass-hung stilted building was announced for Highland Avenue in 1957: the publicity stated that it would be the largest building built in Birmingham since the Watts Building of 1928.¹⁵ It was to be stilted on the ground and its facade was a solid screen of glass panels. It was never built. IBM, however, finished a headquarters building on Highland in late December, 1957, a two-storey rectangular box featuring a slightly recessed glassed ground floor fronted by concrete pylons that supported a shallow flat canopy and an upper storey faced on the front (the rest was brick) with steel-framed panels surrounding banded windows. This building has now been redone (1997) in a postmodern rendition of the traditional, clad in warm red brick.

On April 3, 1960— a little more than a month after the dedication of the Gaston Building— the *News* announced that First Federal Savings and Loan Association would build a “swank” new home office building on the northwest corner of First Avenue North and 21st Street. It is a three-storey glass box anchored by masonry service pavilions, with a dark granite base rather than stilts, but with the same tinted panels defining the floor and ceilings levels. The newspaper quoted the architect, Charles H. McCauley:

(T)he design philosophy for the new structure “was to present a clean and dignified exterior that will honestly set forth the structure as the architectural feature— to create space rather than enclose it.

The dark base is intended to give the feeling of foundation and stability. Emphasizing the structure which rises from the base are supports for the glass skin finished in natural aluminum. The glass skin is a polished plate glass slightly grayed to separate the exterior and interior but not to form a formidable barrier.”

It was also opined, by both the association's president and the contractor, that this building was “strikingly different from anything yet seen in Alabama . . . and will be a conversation piece for downtown Birmingham.” Not only that, the building “is believed to be the first office building put up in the 100 per cent retail and financial district of downtown Birmingham in more than 30 years.”¹⁶ With such thoughtless slights did the African-American community daily contend.

Based on such evidence, it may be possible to state that the A.G. Gaston Building was actually the earliest major example— certainly the earliest intact example— of this Modernist style in Birmingham, and that it has survived more nearly intact than its successors. It just wasn't particularly noticed by the dominant white business community.

Birmingham's edition of the Seagram Building was to be the First National/Southern Natural Building of 1963-69. Weiton Becker, architects and engineers. Well proportioned, its high ground floor recessed behind granite stilts, its walls a glittering skin of dark glass, set on a plaza with lower skirt pavilions, it is a fine example of Miesian design and construction. Its owners and builders were no more proud of it, however, than were the owners and builders of the A.G. Gaston Building, which in its way also represented the triumph of economic endeavor and pride in the accomplishments of “our group.”

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Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Notes

¹ Personal communication, Lillie Fincher, Odessa Woolfolk, Geraldine McClain. All of these are professional women who knew the Gastons; Mrs. McClain worked at the Business College for many years. Mrs. Fincher, when asked about the origins of the building, quickly said, "Oh, he built that for Minnie."

² "A.G. Gaston building to be erected at cost of million plus," *Birmingham World*, March 7, 1959.

³ Hattie Bryant Greene, "Aging motel a historic site for city's blacks" (Letter to the Editor), *Birmingham News*, November 17, 1982.

⁴ Personal communication from Bo Grisham, SouthPace Properties, who was accompanying visitors to the building.

⁵ Related by Mayor David Vann in the Birmingham segment of *Eyes on the Prize* [video recording]: *America at the Racial Crossroads*. WGBH Boston; series writer Steve Sayre, a production of Blackside. Alexandria, Va: PBS Video, 1987.

⁶ Hattie Bryant Greene, *op.cit.*

⁷ "Visiting business and industry," editorial, *Birmingham World*, May 6, 1959.

⁸ "Community builder," editorial, *Birmingham World*, February 27, 1960.

⁹ "A.G. Gaston dies," *Birmingham News*, January 19, 1996.

¹⁰ "A.G. Gaston Building dedication attracts illustrious figures," *Birmingham World*, March 2, 1960. Dr. McMurray was pastor of the nearby Metropolitan AME Zion Church. The ribbon-cutting was actually done by Birmingham's mayor, Jimmy Morgan.

¹¹ William H. Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects. Vol. 5: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, page 240.

¹² *Ibid.* . p. 237.

¹³ Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression*. New York: HarperCollins, 1902, p. 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*. p. 273.

¹⁵ "2 million-plus office building will rise soon on Southside," *Birmingham News*, April 23, 1957.

¹⁶ "Swank office building going up downtown," *Birmingham News*, April 2, 1960.

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Jefferson County, Alabama

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Major Bibliographical References

Clipping files of the Tutwiler Collection, Birmingham Public Library: A.G. Gaston; Buildings.

Microfilm newspaper files of the Birmingham Public Library: Birmingham *World*.

Tax file of the Jefferson County Board of Equalization, Birmingham Public Library's Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

"How to make a million," *Ebony*, November, 1975, pp. 53-58.

Conversation with Helen Shores Lee concerning her memories of the building, its uses and changes.

On the architecture:

Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

William H. Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects. Vol. 5: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Verbal Boundary Description

The A.G. Gaston Building property is comprised of lots 1 through 5, Block 64, in the City of Birmingham. See attached Jefferson County Tax map number 22-35-1-12-1.

Boundary Justification

The defined boundary is that historically associated with this property

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Photographs

Gaston, A.G., Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

Description of Photographs

1. Northeast corner of building at Fifth Avenue and 16th Street North, from NE. This picture does not show the auditorium on the extreme left. The building's main entrance is in the middle of the long facade on Fifth Avenue.
2. Main facade, detail showing entrance, from N.
3. Auditorium front, along 16th Street North, from E.
4. 16th Street side, from ESE.
5. West side of building, from NW.
6. Southeast corner and alley side of auditorium, from SE.
7. View along alley to south of building, south side of auditorium, from SE.
8. Auditorium entrance, detail, from NE.
9. Northeast corner of building, storefront detail, from SE.
10. Entry and vestibule, from N.
11. Vestibule, elevator and stairs, from NW.
12. Stair railing, detail.
13. Second-floor elevator landing and corridor, from E.
14. Second floor, northeast corner room, looking toward Kelly Ingram Park..
15. Third-floor elevator landing and corridor, from E.
16. Northeast corner office (Mr. Gaston's), detail, from SW.
17. Mr. Gaston's office, west wall, from E.
18. Outer office suite, third floor, from NW.
19. Standard office outlook: this photograph was taken to show the window configurations from the interior.
20. Bathroom, showing translucent glazing.
21. Auditorium, looking toward stage, from E.

Additional photographs, December, 1999:

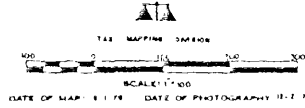
22. NE corner and 16th Street elevation, from ENE: auditorium to extreme left.
23. Office building portion, northeast corner, from NE (corner of Kelly Ingram Park).
24. Northwest corner, facade and part of west side, from NW.
25. West side showing WENN sign (originally Citizens Federal's), from WNW.
26. Auditorium facade, from E.

Numbers 1-21, May 1999; 22-26 December, 1999; Linda Nelson.

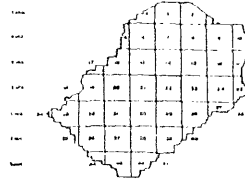
Location of negatives: Alabama Historical Commission

OWNERSHIP MAP
 COUNTY OF
JEFFERSON
 PREPARED UNDER THE DIRECTION
 OF THE
STATE OF ALABAMA
DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE
 AD VALOREM TAX DIVISION

PREPARED BY
COLE LAYER TRUMBLE CO
 ATLANTA, GEORGIA



COUNTY LOCATOR



TOWNSHIP LOCATOR
 (ORDER TO 1"=400 & 1"=200 MAPPING)

| | | | | | |
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| 04 | | 05 | | | 06 |
| 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
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SUB-SHEET INDEX

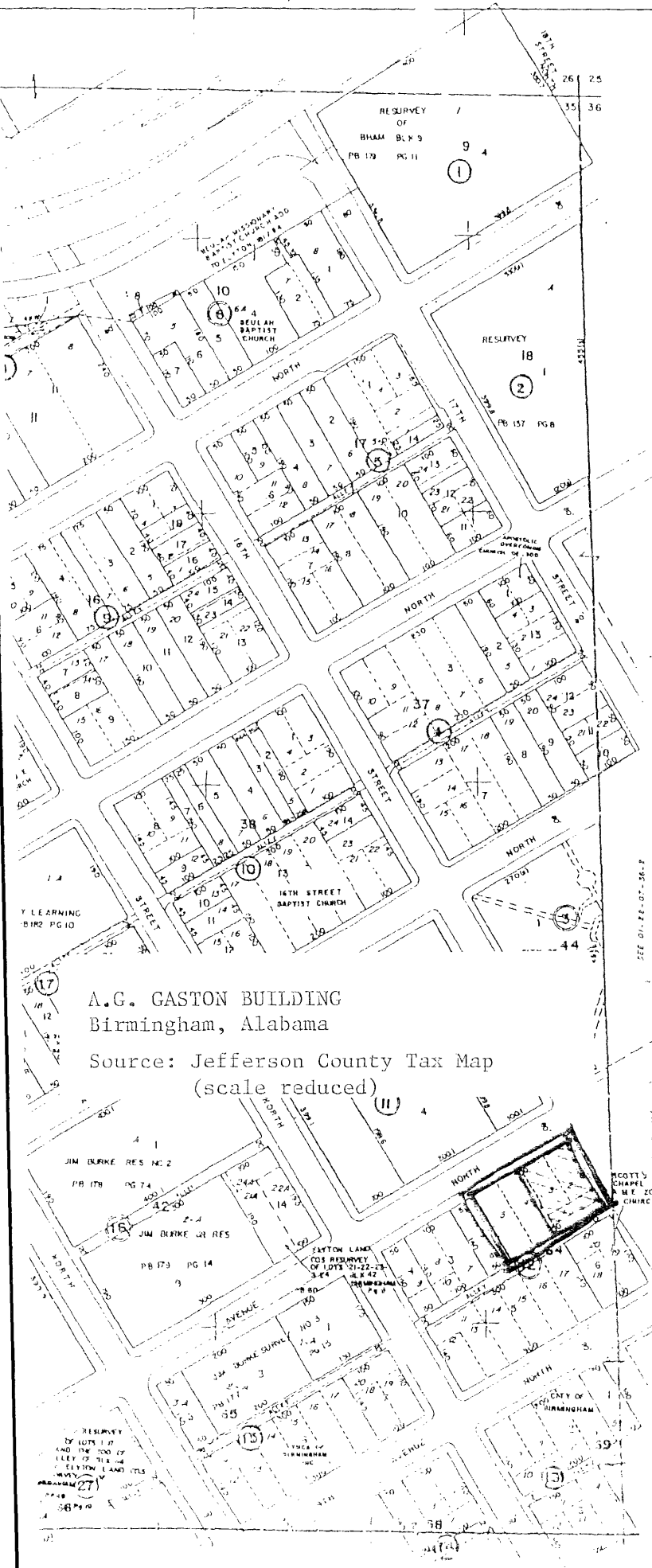
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| 28.4 | 28.5 | 28.6 |
| 28.7 | 28.8 | 28.9 |
| 29.1 | 29.2 | 29.3 |

LEGEND

| | | | |
|--|-----|--------------------------|-------------|
| STATE LINE | --- | AREA (FROM NEED) | 10 B AL |
| COUNTY LINE | --- | AREA (CALCULATED) | 10 B AL (2) |
| CORPORATION LINE | --- | DIMENSION (FROM NEED) | 10 B |
| DISTRICT LINE | --- | DIMENSION (CALCD) | 10 (1) |
| ROAD A/W | --- | WATER | |
| TRAVELED ROAD | --- | INTERSTATE HIGHWAY | 10 (2) |
| RAILROAD A/W | --- | U.S. HIGHWAY | 10 (3) |
| PROPERTY LINE | --- | STATE HIGHWAY | 10 (4) |
| LAND HOOD | --- | COUNTY HIGHWAY | 10 (5) |
| INTERIOR TRACT LINE OR ORIGINAL TRACT LINE | --- | ROADS OR STREETS | BY NAME |
| AMENDMENT LOT NUMBER | --- | MAJOR TRANSMISSION LINES | BY NAME |
| PARCEL NUMBER | --- | SECTION CORNERS | 11 (1) |
| LOCK LINE (WHERE APPLICABLE) | --- | STATE PLANE COORDINATES | 11 (2) |
| OWNERSHIP MAP BLOCK (WHERE APPLICABLE) | --- | | |
| CHARITABLE SCHOOLS, CENTERS, HOSPITALS, GOVERNMENT LANDS, ETC. | --- | | |

SECTIONS 26, 27, 28, 29
 T. 17 SOUTH, R. 2 WEST

DATE: 11/78
 MAP NUMBER: 16.1



A.G. GASTON BUILDING
 Birmingham, Alabama

Source: Jefferson County Tax Map
 (scale reduced)