

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

## 1 NAME

HISTORIC

Astor Fur Warehouse/American Fur Company Warehouse

AND/OR COMMON

Astor Fur Warehouse

## 2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

Bolvin and Water Streets

\_\_NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Prairie du Chien

\_\_ VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Third

STATE

Wisconsin

CODE

55

COUNTY

Crawford

CODE

023

## 3 CLASSIFICATION

### CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

### OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

### STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

### PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- COMMERCIAL
- PARK
- EDUCATIONAL
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ENTERTAINMENT
- RELIGIOUS
- GOVERNMENT
- SCIENTIFIC
- INDUSTRIAL
- TRANSPORTATION
- MILITARY
- OTHER:

## 4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

(local contact: Michael Douglass, Curator, Villa Louis, (608) 326-2721)  
The State Historical Society of Wisconsin  
P.O. Box 65

STREET & NUMBER

816 State Street

Prairie du Chien,  
Wisc. 53321

CITY, TOWN

Madison

\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

Wisconsin 53706

## 5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Crawford County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Prairie du Chien

STATE

Wisconsin

## 6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

none known

DATE

\_\_ FEDERAL \_\_ STATE \_\_ COUNTY \_\_ LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

## 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Located at the southeast corner of Bolvin and Water Streets on St. Feriote Island, the old fur warehouse is a two-story, rectangular, gable-roofed building, built c. 1828 by Joseph Rolette on the site of an earlier log structure. It is a sturdy structure, little altered since its days as a warehouse, and now restored and converted to museum use.

Many of the earliest structures in Prairie du Chien, especially commercial buildings were located on St. Feriote Island, close to and oriented toward, the Mississippi River whose east channel passes the island on the west. Early 19th century illustrations of the town show a whole cluster of structures on the island lining the banks of the river. The site of an early British tavern, later used as Indian agency is just north of the warehouse, across Bolvin Street, on the edge of Villa Louis property. Immediately south is the Brisbois House, then the site of the very large 1805 North West Fur Company warehouse, the offices of the American Fur Company, the Rolette House, the Dousman Hotel etc.

Apparently there were previous structures on this site. One reference states that a wooden building of the American Factory System on that site was remodeled in the second decade of the 19th century. An October 1829 drawing of Fort Crawford and neighboring buildings shows a structure on this site, but it appears to have a somewhat different shape and orientation than the present building, unless it was remodeled.<sup>9</sup> The State survey of historic structures and the WPA guide to Wisconsin both date the building as 1835. However, Mr. Don Munson, Curator of the Astor Warehouse, reported that c. 1781-1827 a large log structure was located at this site until it burned, and that c. 1828 a fur warehouse for the American Fur Company was built by chief agent Joseph Rolette there.<sup>10</sup>

The building is constructed of native stone with corner quoins. The longer stones of the quoins protrude beyond the corner at the rear of the building. A thin watercourse runs along the base of the first story. The front (west) first story facade is composed of three slightly recessed bays of tall windows. These are framed by a wide wooden beam between and above the windows, "possibly once a wooden approximation of a pilastered Greek Revival storefront treatment."<sup>11</sup>

Three flat arched windows light the second-story front, with three similar windows on the second-story rear. A wooden ramp leads to a tall, wide door in the center of the first-story rear, and there is an entrance to the basement near the foundation line at the north end of the rear wall. On the north side of the warehouse there is a second-story entrance with a small open platform, flanked by two windows. There are no windows on the first story level of the north side, and none at all on the south side of the building.

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<sup>9</sup>Budahl, p. 56.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Don Munson May 23, 1975, during boundary survey visit and confirmed September 23, 1976.

<sup>11</sup>Budahl, p. 88.

(Continued)

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES

c. 1828-1850

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Built c. 1828 and used until mid-century, this stone building in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, is the only known original fur trade warehouse surviving in the Upper Mississippi Valley. As first agent of the American Fur Company in Prairie du Chien, Joseph Rolette built this structure for use by that company c. 1828, on St. Feriöle Island, on the banks of the Mississippi River. In 1842 he rented it to the new American Fur Company and they used it for fur storage for about a decade. The offices of the American Fur Company were located just down the street, to the south.<sup>1</sup>

## History

Situated only a short distance north of the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers, Prairie du Chien was a natural trading and settlement site. Indian occupation of Prairie du Chien area long precedes fur trading activity between Indians and white fur trade companies there. What is perhaps the largest Indian mound in Wisconsin, believed to be a Hopewell mound from the first millenium A.D., on St. Feriöle Island, has also been the site of several forts and houses, as well as a succession of Indian camps. The Fox Indians are known to have had a village in that area in the 18th century, described in documents as early as 1732.

The first well-documented trading post was established in Prairie du Chien in 1871, but French traders and families may well have settled permanently there by 1761. Before 1800 Prairie du Chien was the only other real settlement in Wisconsin besides Green Bay. Prairie du Chien, and especially St. Feriöle Island, had long been a major fur trading rendezvous each spring through late fall, for tribes from all sections of the Mississippi and Wisconsin, with Spanish, French, British and American traders.<sup>2</sup> Local tradition has it that in 1737 the French abandoned Fort Beauharnois to the north and established a trading post and fort at Prairie du Chien. Another yet undocumented story is that Nicholas Perrot, one of the first fur traders in the Upper Mississippi, erected Fort St. Nicholas in this vicinity in 1685 (possible site south of town).

Michael Brisbois, prominent early fur trader came to Prairie du Chien from Canada in 1781, and is recognized as one of the first white fur traders to settle there permanently. He is believed to have long been a secret operative of the Hudson's Bay

<sup>1</sup>Interview, telephone conversation, with Don Munson, Curator of Villa Louis, Astor Fur Warehouse and Brisbois House, September 24, 1976.

<sup>2</sup>Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State, American Guide Series (New York: Duell, Sloane and Pearce, 1941) p. 442.

(Continued)

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(See continuation sheet).

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than one acre.

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,5	6,4,9,8,4,0	4,7,6,8,3,5,0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION The fur warehouse is located on the southeast corner lot of the intersection of Bolvin and Water Streets. The national historic landmark boundary is coterminous with the lines of that city lot. Includes lots 4, 5 and 6, Block 14, of the Main Village Plat of Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin. No other features on these lots contribute to the national significance of the landmark.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Blanche Higgins Schroer, Landmark Review Project

ORGANIZATION

DATE

Historic Sites Survey, National Park Service

STREET & NUMBER

TELEPHONE

1100 "L" Street., N. W.

(202) 5235464

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

Washington, D. C.

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

12/17/84

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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The interior is basically one room, and probably the two stories and basement level were all used for fur storage. The basement still displays old stringers with their fitted support pillars. The hoist system used to move materials between the three levels is near the east end of the building--a pulley attached to the roof beams which hoisted materials through holes in the floors on both levels.

In 1972 the two phase restoration project of the fur warehouse was completed (partially funded with a National Park Service grant). The project included restoration of the exterior of the building and conversion of the interior for use as a museum of the fur trade and history of the Upper Mississippi Valley. The second phase included installation of electrical service and interior circuits, heating and ventilating, interior stairs, interior wall finish to prepare the building for public use as a museum and to meet safety code requirements.

The museum was first opened for the spring and summer season of 1976.

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Company, well into the second quarter of the 19th century. The North West Fur Company, founded in Montreal in 1783, established posts, or "factories" on the headwaters of the Mississippi in 1806. A small one-story stone building on N. Beaumont Street, near the corner of Blackhawk Avenue, dated c. 1808, was the North West Fur Company's offices and auxiliary warehouse in Prairie du Chien.<sup>3</sup> The North West Company's very large warehouse, built in 1805 on the riverfront on the west side of St. Feriote Island, was razed c. 1910.

An 1816 law to regulate activity with the Indians excluded foreign traders from the large fur trade market of the Louisiana Territory, which the British and French Canadians had long dominated. The American Fur Company, founded by John Jacob Astor in 1808 to compete with the large Canadian firms--the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Fur Company--had been nearly destroyed by the War of 1812. However, in 1817, after the passage of this law, Astor's company seized their opportunity. They tightened control over the northeastern trapping areas of the Upper Mississippi, where they already had a foothold, establishing an important permanent post in Prairie du Chien in 1817.

The American Fur Company and its subsidiaries also quickly "threw agents into the remotest corners of the Louisiana Purchase."<sup>4</sup> Astor's firm soon exercised a virtual monopoly on the fur trade in the U.S. territories, and in fact is recognized as the first American business monopoly. The Pacific Fur Company, and the Pacific North West Company were two major subsidiaries in the west, and early operations around the Great Lakes were under another subsidiary, the South West Company, in which Canadian merchants also participated.

In 1821 an alliance with the company of Pierre Chouteau of St. Louis established the Western Department of the American Fur Company and began their entrance into the Missouri River trade and eventually into the Rocky Mountains. The company guaranteed its monopoly by ruthlessly crushing and buying out all competitors, and triumphed over competition in the central Rockies in the 1830's.<sup>5</sup>

John Jacob Astor himself retired in 1834 and the company split into divisions under the direction of Ramsey Crooks, Pierre Chouteau, Jr. and Kenneth McKenzie. The American Fur Company continued Astor's policies, and remained powerful and a very

<sup>3</sup>Information from States survey of historic structures in Prairie du Chien, conducted summer of 1976.

<sup>4</sup>Frederic L. Parson, History of the American Frontier 1763-1893 (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924) p. 214.

<sup>5</sup>LeRoy R. Hafen, and Carl Coke Rister, Western America (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1950) p. 226.

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significant influence on the frontier for several more decades.<sup>6</sup> Prairie du Chien operations were part of the division under Ramsey Crooks, and officially retained the name American Fur Company, which was commonly used for several successive companies also. In 1842 a new American Fur Company was organized under the partnership of Hercules Dousman I, Joseph Rolette and H. H. Sibley.<sup>7</sup>

Fur trading continued profitable in Prairie du Chien until the 1860's, although the great days of the town as a fur mart were over by 1840. The years before 1840 were profitable for the American Fur Company in Prairie du Chien. After British traders were forbidden to operate in the Northwest Territory in 1816, the American Fur Company's remaining competitor, the American Factory system, was removed in 1822. By 1834, at Astor's retirement, the American Fur Company controlled most of the fur trade in the Northwest Territory. But in the 1840's the fur trade began to decline and by mid-century was an almost negligible factor in Prairie du Chien's economy.<sup>8</sup>

During the second half of the 19th century the old American Fur Warehouse was used periodically as both a store and a warehouse. C. 1900 it was converted to a machine shop. The second story was sometimes a residence. The Astor Fur Warehouse, restored and open as a museum of fur trade history as of Spring 1976, was associated with fur trade activities of the major American companies in Prairie du Chien for about twenty-five years.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Interview with Don Munson, September 24, 1976.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas M. Pitkin, "Special Report on Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin" for the National Park Service, Region II Office, Omaha, May 28, 1937.

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Hafen, LeRoy R., and Rister, Carl Coke, Western America Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1950.

Paxson, Frederic L, History of the American Frontier. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924.

Pitkin, Thomas M., N. P. S. historian, "Special Report on Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin," prepared for Region II Office, Omaha, May 28, 1937.

Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State, American Guide Series. New York: Duell, Sloane and Pearce, 1941.

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Information from Preservation Projects Office, OAHP, N. P. S., concerning grants in aid to Astor Fur Warehouse, completion report, 1975.

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Original Historic Sites Survey report, prepared by Charles E. Shedd, Jr., February 16, 1959.