

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USD/I/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Blue Plate Building, New Orleans, Orleans Parish, LA

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

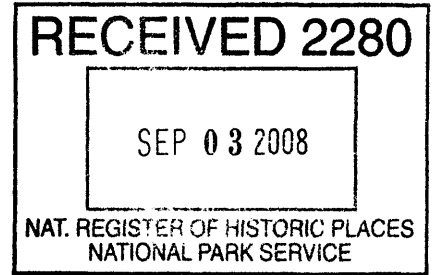
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Blue Plate Building

Other Name/Site Number:

989



2. LOCATION

Street & Number 1315 South Jefferson Davis Parkway

Not for publication: NA

City/Town New Orleans

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana

Code: LA

County: Orleans

Code: 071

Zip Code: 70115

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: Statewide: X Locally:

Signature of Certifying Official/Title

Phil Boggan, Deputy SHPO, Dept. of Culture, Recreation & Tourism

8-28-08

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this 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): \_\_\_\_\_

*For Colson H. Beall*  
Signature of Keeper

10-16-08  
Date of Action

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property  
 Private:  X   
 Public-Local:       
 Public-State:       
 Public-Federal:    

Category of Property  
 Building(s):  X   
 District:       
 Site:       
 Structure:       
 Object:    

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	<u> 1 </u>
	<u>    </u>
	<u>    </u>
	<u>    </u>
	<u> 1 </u>

Non contributing

<u> 0 </u> buildings
<u>    </u> sites
<u>    </u> structures
<u>    </u> objects
<u> 0 </u> Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register:  0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

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## **6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Industry                      Sub: Manufacturing Facility  
Current: Vacant                        Sub: Not in use

## **7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification: Moderne (Streamline Moderne)

Materials:

Foundation: Concrete  
Walls: Concrete  
Roof: Other: Built-up (tar and gravel)  
Other:

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

Summary:

The Blue Plate Building is a three story, concrete food processing facility (mayonnaise and other condiments) occupying a city block in New Orleans. It has a prominent location where various major traffic arteries converge. The building faces South Jefferson Davis Parkway with a forty-five foot setback. The immediate area has a fairly modern commercial/industrial look. Behind the building is an early to mid-twentieth century neighborhood.

A classic example of the Streamline Moderne, Blue Plate was built in 1942-43 to the designs of local architect August Perez, Jr. In 1947 Perez designed an expansion at the rear that roughly doubled the footprint, yielding a total of 93,696 square feet. The building has been vacant since 2000 and has experienced some deterioration. The exterior has received minimal alterations since the 1947-48 expansion.

The Blue Plate Building embodies all the textbook characteristics of the Streamline Moderne style. It has a dramatic, streamlined, horizontal form; ribbon windows; curving glass block windows; a flat roof; and a smooth gleaming white surface devoid of ornamentation.

Construction Details:

Blue Plate is built of concrete poured continuously to create a single monolithic exterior wall. (Per the New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission nomination form, this made the building as "solid as a three story block of stone.") Most unusual for New Orleans, the building has a basement.

Newly developed technology was employed for interior finishes. Because product ingredients such as sugar, milk, oil and vinegar will gradually deteriorate concrete, the floors were of acid-proof brick and the

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grout was acid-proof. Walls were partially tiled and then new epoxy paints were applied on the ceilings.

### Façade:

Blue Plate has a commanding presence along South Jefferson Davis Parkway, with a sweeping 153 foot façade. Single pane ribbon windows, emphasizing the building's horizontal lines, define the second and third floors. The window panes are of pebbly textured glass with a slight gray tint. Curving glass block ribbon windows define the corners on all three stories. The bulk of the first floor façade is punctuated, at regular intervals, with single steel windows. These windows are "connected" by five incised bands, continuing the strong horizontal lines of the overall composition.

Perez gave the centrally located entrance a particularly sophisticated, dynamic treatment. It is defined by curving glass block walls capped by a curving flat roof canopy with a blue, aluminum-banded edge. Incised lines in the concrete further emphasize the horizontal lines. The steps are skewed to the side of the door. The small landing is defined along the front by a low concrete wall with a rounded edge (parallel to the building). The wall has a metal Streamline Moderne railing formed of thin steel members punctuated with round members. Defining the steps on the other side, running perpendicular to the building, is a planter with a rounded edge. Geometric forms in the terrazzo of the landing lead the visitor into the building, ending in a pronounced large curve at the door. On the wall above the steps and under the flat roof porch canopy is perhaps the building's sole nod to decoration. Here a large plaque bears an image of a Chinese blue willow pattern plate (the company's namesake).

Counterbalancing the horizontal entrance is the facade's sole vertical element. Immediately above the flat roof canopy, and extending over two stories to end slightly above the main parapet, is a two-part composition designed for signage. A large smooth area formed of blue tiles bears the words "BLUE PLATE" in large white neon letters. Protruding at a right angle, along one side, is a white fin-like element. Ending with a dramatic curve that extends above the companion sign, it is edged in blue and bears a neon "BLUE PLATE" sign (blue). (The blue edging of the fin-like element connects at a right angle with the previously mentioned edge of the flat roof porch canopy.) Unlike commercial signage today, the Blue Plate squared-off lettering is an integral part of the overall building design.

The exact date of the huge rooftop neon sign is not known at present. It is not there in a circa 1950 photo. It is reasonable to assume that it was added in the 1950s, or possibly the early 1960s.

### Erato Street (Side) Elevation:

As noted previously, the Blue Plate Building received a huge expansion across the rear in 1947-48. As can be seen from a pre-expansion photo, it is clear that the old rear part (recessed from the main side elevation) was either demolished or completely incorporated. The very long (almost 198 feet) side elevations now read as continuous masses.

The previously mentioned curving glass block windows define the front edge of this elevation. As on the façade, ribbon windows define the second and third stories. Those on the front original portion are of large single panes of glass (as on the façade). Those on the 1947 addition are multi-pane (with some panes of blue glass). Made of steel, the windows feature both fixed and movable sections. (The latter rotate out to provide ventilation.) The break in the ribbon windows marks the edge of the original main block. Here single vertical windows indicate the location of a staircase. Above each window is a panel with vertical

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bands.

As on the façade, single windows pierce the ground floor of the original portion. The ground floor of the 1947 addition contains a truck loading dock with a deep fixed canopy supported by tension members from above. Interestingly, Perez and/or Blue Plate made a conscious design decision to hide the loading dock from the principal view of the building. A long stepped white concrete wall with glass block accents extends almost to the sidewalk. Clearly the building was meant to be a work of architecture rather than simply a factory.

### Thalia Street (Side) Elevation:

The Thalia Street side elevation is similar in some ways, but not entirely identical, to the Erato Street elevation. It has curving glass block windows at the front edge, ribbon windows at the second and third stories, and single windows at the first floor. The ribbon windows are interrupted on this elevation with three small windows at the second story and on the third, what was originally a recessed open area (use unknown). At an unknown date, the company enclosed this area with concrete blocks painted blue (to provide for additional signage, which has since been removed).

At the end of this elevation is a recessed loading dock. (Railroad tracks ran along this side of the building.) Round concrete columns on the loading dock carry the weight of the floors above.

### Rear Elevation:

The 1947-48 rear elevation features a continuous multi-pane ribbon window at the second and third floors and a recessed loading dock spanning the first floor (with the same round concrete columns found on the Thalia Street elevation). A fixed canopy extends considerably beyond the loading dock. Glass block windows accent the rear wall of the loading dock.

### Interior:

During the historic period, the manufacturing and packaging processes occurred on the second and third floors. The first floor was given over to storage, loading docks and some office space.

The manufacturing/packaging equipment has been removed. The floor plan (different on each floor) consists of various large rooms. Structural columns with large splayed tops punctuate the rooms (in the manner of a hypostyle hall). In the largest spaces, they read almost as a "forest" of columns. In some of the rooms the walls and columns are partially clad in non-corrosive enameled tile. In other areas the walls and columns are of plain concrete. Toward the front of the Erato St. elevation is a small section subdivided for offices.

The small entrance lobby contains the building's only decorative elements. An elegant curving staircase (with a curving wall) contributes considerably to the building's Streamline Moderne character. Although by definition a vertical element, it has a strong horizontal feeling. The balustrade is the same design as found on the entrance porch. Here the thin steel ribbons seem to flow up to the second floor in a continuous stream, albeit interrupted by two vertical structural members. The entrance lobby also features a recessed decorative ceiling ornamented with multiple curving bands.

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### Assessment of Integrity:

The building's statewide architectural significance rests largely upon the exterior, which survives almost unchanged since the 1947-48 expansion. The rooftop sign is presumably a historic addition. The concrete block infill on the Thalia St. elevation is not in keeping with the building's architectural character and will be removed as part of a planned rehabilitation project. Panes here and there have been broken in the ribbon windows. One of the corner curving glass block windows is missing (presumably blown out by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005). The window is presently filled with plywood. The latter is the only change that impacts the building's Streamline Moderne character and it is relatively minor considering the size and emphatic articulation of Blue Plate. (The missing window will be replicated as part of the rehabilitation project.) While the machinery has been removed on the interior, this obviously does not impact the building as an architectural statement. The only styled space, the lobby, survives intact and contributes to the building's architectural significance.

### 8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National  
Register Criteria:

A\_\_ B\_\_ C X D

Criteria Considerations  
(Exceptions): NA

A\_\_ B\_\_ C\_\_ D\_\_ E\_\_ F\_\_ G

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1942; 1947

Significant Dates: Same

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: August Perez, Jr., Architect

**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

### Summary:

The Blue Plate Building is of statewide significance under Criterion C: Architecture, as Louisiana's finest expression of the Streamline Moderne taste.

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## Architectural Background:

The following analysis of Streamline Moderne relies heavily on an essay written by David Gebhard, "Art Deco and Streamline Moderne Architecture in the United States, 1920 to 1949," as an introduction to *The National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America* (1996). Gebhard was co-producer of the first Art Deco/Streamline Moderne exhibition mounted in the United States, in 1969 at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Although the guidebook he introduces uses only Art Deco in the title, Gebhard makes a clear distinction between the two in his essay.

In the world of architecture, style, and popular taste there were essentially three ways to be "modern" during that period known to us today as "between the wars." Arriving first on the scene, and particularly popular, was what is known today as Art Deco. Art Deco's hallmarks are verticality, repeating geometrical forms, and applied stylized ornament attached to what was typically a symmetrical mass. Its emphasis on bas relief and applied ornament provided the traditional architect of the day (the old Classicist or the old Gothicist) a familiar approach to design. In short, it was the most conservative "modern" genre. To cite a Louisiana example, when the Port Allen High School was constructed in 1937, it was termed "conservative-modern style" -- meaning Art Deco.

At the other end of the spectrum was the most revolutionary International Style, brought to the United States from Europe by advanced publications and the emigration of such noteworthy architects as Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, etc. To its illustrious practitioners, the International Style was more than a style of architecture. It was a mode of design appropriate to the machine age. And it had strong associations with political and economic reform.

Similar in some elements to the International Style, but usually very different from Art Deco, was a sleek look called variously Streamline Moderne, Art Moderne, or simply Moderne. In its day the style almost immediately acquired the name Streamline. It came into its own in the late 1930s and continued in popularity through the 1940s. The label Streamline Moderne appeared on the scene with the 1969 exhibition mentioned above.

Streamline Moderne was a style of fashion without what one author has called "the moral imperative" of the International Style. Like Art Deco, and unlike the International Style, it was quite popular across middle class America. As Gebhard notes, the two styles "permeated every facet of the design world" -- not just architecture. For example, there were streamlined vacuum cleaners, bicycles, airplanes and trains.

Within architecture, Streamline Moderne buildings tended to be smaller scale street or highway oriented commercial buildings (service stations, bus stations, motels, restaurants, supermarkets), in contrast to the skyscrapers and large public buildings seen in the Art Deco. Remodeling existing commercial buildings in the new sleek style was fairly common. National retail chains and service stations embraced the style. In the 1920s Sears, Roebuck and Co. used the Art Deco style to show that they were modern and up-to-date. By the late 1930s they had turned to the Streamline Moderne. Service stations ranged from Frederick Frost's Streamline Moderne oil-drum design for Mobil to Walter Dorwin Teague's enamel-clad stations for Texaco.

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The Streamline Moderne was not nearly as popular a choice for residences. Although they embraced the modern and up-to-date styles of the period for almost all other manner of buildings, Americans on the whole continued to prefer historic revival styles for their homes. For the distinct minority who were the exception, magazines and retail stores sponsored the construction of Streamline Moderne houses across the country. There were even a few developments restricted to the Streamline Moderne (for example, Swan Acres near Pittsburgh, 1934-38, and Park Moderne in Los Angeles, 1929-34).

Quoting from Gebhard, "In its form the ideal Streamline Moderne building was a horizontal rectangular container, usually with dramatic rounded corners and occasional semicircular bays, surmounted by parapeted or projecting thin-slab roofs. The image projected was that of a scientifically advanced, effortlessly hygienic world. A sense of rapid movement was imparted by narrow horizontal bands of windows that often wrapped around corners and by horizontal layering in the building's façade (via changes in colors or material). Glass blocks and small round windows reminiscent of port holes were prominent characteristics. Gleaming white stucco was almost the universal choice in exterior finish."

Gebhard traces the distant origins of the Steamline genre to popular science fiction -- works like H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1896) and Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*, with its streamlined futuristic submarine (1870). Pulp science fiction novels and comics of the 1920s portrayed a futuristic world, both dreamy and dynamic, with streamlined cities. The popular series "Buck Rogers of the 25<sup>th</sup> Century" commenced publication in 1929. Five years later it was joined by the even more popular "Flash Gordon." Feature-length films such as *The Shape of Things to Come* (1938) both reflected and fed the fascination with futuristic worlds.

The tangible architectural image of fast moving form first appeared in drawings of certain European modernists of the 1910s such as Eric Mendelsohn. His work was published in America in 1921 under the title *Dynamic Architecture: New Forms for the Future*. Also, a rising generation of artists and sculptors increasingly emphasized streamlined horizontality and curves. Engineers played a role with streamlined cars, radio sets and other consumer products, while some established architects turned their hand to stylish industrial design. Most notable was probably the Beaux Arts trained Franco-American architect Paul Philippe Cret, who produced numerous classic designs for streamline passenger train cars.

Practitioners who took up Streamline Moderne borrowed significantly from the International Style with features such as broad expanses of smooth stucco, ribbon windows and flat roofs. A notable difference was the International Style's decided preference for the use of cantilevered masses to break up the composition and squared off corners (in contrast to the signature rounded corners of Streamline Moderne). And International Style architects totally eschewed (actually abhorred) any form of ornamentation. They would never have broken up a building's smooth expanse of "skin" with horizontal incised bands, as seen at Blue Plate.

## Statewide Architectural Significance of Blue Plate Building:

While Louisiana retains about 40 major Art Deco buildings, the author of this document has identified only 6 or 7 major Streamline Moderne buildings in the state (see below). And some of these are notable only in a relative sense. (This assessment is based on 28 years of historic preservation fieldwork in Louisiana.)

As noted previously, Streamline Moderne was never popular for residences. The vast majority of



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examples were commercial buildings, and hence subject to that ever-changing world -- replacement to achieve an even more up-to-date look or remodeling beyond recognition. Gebhard notes that Streamline Moderne buildings "have on the whole fared far worse" than Art Deco buildings. For instance, "the Streamline Moderne bus depot was once a landmark common to most American cities; now only a few remain." Like International Style buildings, Streamliners tend not to age well and are hence subject to substantial remodeling as a maintenance necessity. By Gebhard's reckoning, "probably upwards of three-fourths of the Streamline Moderne buildings erected in the 1930s [in the United States] are now gone."

Gebhard's estimate of loss seems valid for Louisiana. Today there are probably less than 50 examples of the Streamline Moderne taste in the state. Many have been lost within the last twenty years. The vast majority of survivors can be summarized as follows: small low-key gas stations and bus stations; a streamlined shopfront here and there; or small buildings that display an element of the style (perhaps rounded corners).

The major examples of the Streamline Moderne taste in Louisiana are:

(1) Blue Plate Building

(2) Standard Oil Company Building, Baton Rouge, 1950. Of five stories and with a long rectilinear footprint, this is also a quite large building. Some would place it more squarely within the International Style. It has squared off corners and long ribbon windows. But the building has very strong horizontal lines and two curving rooftop elements (to enclose mechanical equipment), which, taken together, make it evocative of an ocean liner.

(3) Walgreen's, Canal Street, New Orleans. This three story corner building features a boldly formed curved tower-like mass to define the corner with a curving fixed canopy below.

(4) Hotel Ponder. Located in the small town of Amite, the three story Hotel Ponder has the long, low lines of the Streamline Moderne and the signature curving corners. The decidedly horizontal lines along with the rooftop balustrade make the building evocative of an ocean liner. Windows, however, are single (rather than ribbon), and the hotel is of exposed brick (rather than the preferred white stucco).

(5) Airline Motors Inn, Airline Hwy., LaPlace. Airline Motors is a one story restaurant with a front porte-cochere that originally sheltered gas pumps. Its Streamline Moderne façade features curved edges, curved glass block windows, and a port-hole like (albeit elongated) window.

(6) Feibleman House, Metairie, 1938, Weiss, Dreyfous & Seiferth. This two story house combines International Style signature features (mainly squared-off corners) with two curving sections in the Streamline Moderne taste.

(7) Masonic Temple, Shreveport, 1936, Theodore Flaxman. This building may or may not belong within this list of notable Streamline Moderne buildings, depending upon one's interpretation. It is a highly individualistic design that shares common forms with the Streamline Moderne. Dr. Karen Kingsley, the foremost authority on modernism in Louisiana (see below), describes it as a "blend of modernism with expressionistic forms." Flaxman's acknowledged inspiration was the sweeping curved forms of Eric Mendelsohn. The two story beige brick building's façade is dominated by two sweeping curved forms with thin ribbon windows.

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Of these (and of all the Streamline Moderne works of architecture in Louisiana), the Blue Plate Building is conspicuous for its enormous scale -- a three story building with a footprint occupying almost an entire city block. The only other example approaching Blue Plate in sheer size is the above mentioned Standard Oil Company Building. Because of its size, Blue Plate makes a much more emphatic statement than the occasional Streamline Moderne shopfront or small free-standing, low-key filling station or bus depot seen typically in Louisiana.

Of the above notable examples of the Streamline Moderne taste in Louisiana, the Blue Plate Building is the most intensively articulated. The design incorporates virtually every signature feature of the style. With its gleaming smooth white walls defining space, horizontal massing, ribbon windows, pronounced curving corner windows, glass blocks, and an interplay of curving elements and horizontal lines setting off the entrance, Blue Plate exemplifies the futuristic modern look quite splendidly.

In its day Blue Plate was one of relatively few buildings in the state with a design looking squarely to the future --for Louisianians remained on the whole wedded to conservative historic revival styles. Its importance was recognized fairly early (1984) in a ground-breaking exhibition, with accompanying catalog, entitled "Modernism in Louisiana: A Decade of Progress, 1930-1940." While it focused on pure International Style works, particularly the revolutionary work of the Wiener brothers in Shreveport, the exhibition included a few Streamline Moderne designs such as Blue Plate. A total of 21 properties were highlighted (a few no longer extant at the time). The compiler was the state's foremost authority on Modernism, Dr. Karen Kingsley, then professor of architecture at Tulane University.

### Historical Background:

Mayonnaise, the product synonymous with Blue Plate, was first commercially produced in the United States in New York in 1905 or 1912 (the year depending upon interpretation). According to the website of today's Blue Plate parent company, Blue Plate mayonnaise originated in 1927. An article in a local newspaper from October 27, 1950, which provides a brief company history, gives the date as 1930. The brand was a subsidiary of Wesson Oil and Snowdrift when it began, as recounted in the newspaper's historical sketch.

Charles A. Nehlig is considered the founder of Blue Plate mayonnaise. He was the operations manager of Gulf and Valley Cotton Oil Company, which had been acquired by Wesson/Snowdrift's parent company (no date given, but presumably in the 1920s). Nehlig convinced management to begin the production of mayonnaise. And it was Nehlig who decided to call it Blue Plate, after Chinese blue willow pattern china.

By 1950, the small company had grown from 5 salesmen to 340, and from 1 product to 34. At that time it was a 20 million dollar business and the largest food processor in New Orleans. Its signature mayonnaise was (and is) distributed mainly in the South.

In 1974 Reiley Foods purchased Blue Plate. In 2000 the company moved production from the candidate to a plant in Knoxville, Tennessee.

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## 9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Blue Plate Building. Historic Photos (circa 1945 and circa 1950). Copies in National Register file. Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Fricker, Donna. Personal knowledge of state's historic architecture based on 28 years professional field experience.

Gebhard, David. "Art Deco and Streamline Moderne Architecture in the United States, 1920-1949." Introductory essay to *The National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996.

*New Orleans Item*. "\$20-Million Plant from \$5000 Idea." October 27, 1950.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company. Map, New Orleans, 1951.

Tulane University. "Modernism in Louisiana: A Decade of Progress, 1930-1940." Compiled by Dr. Karen Kingsley, this booklet was a companion to the 1984 exhibition of the same name.

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)
- 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:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

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## **10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: 1.6 acres

UTM References:     **Zone Easting Northing**  
                          15   779350  3317620

Verbal Boundary Description: The nominated acreage is bounded on the front (southeast) by South Jefferson Davis Pkwy., on the northeast by Erato Street, on the northwest by a line running parallel to the rear elevation at a distance of 30 feet, and on the southwest by Thalia Street.

Boundary Justification: Boundary lines were chosen to coincide with the boundary lines of the property at the time the building seen today was completed (1948). The rear boundary coincides with the location of a street (Clark) which defined the property in 1948 (removed after 1951, per Sanborn map).

## **11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Donna Fricker, Historic Preservation Consultant

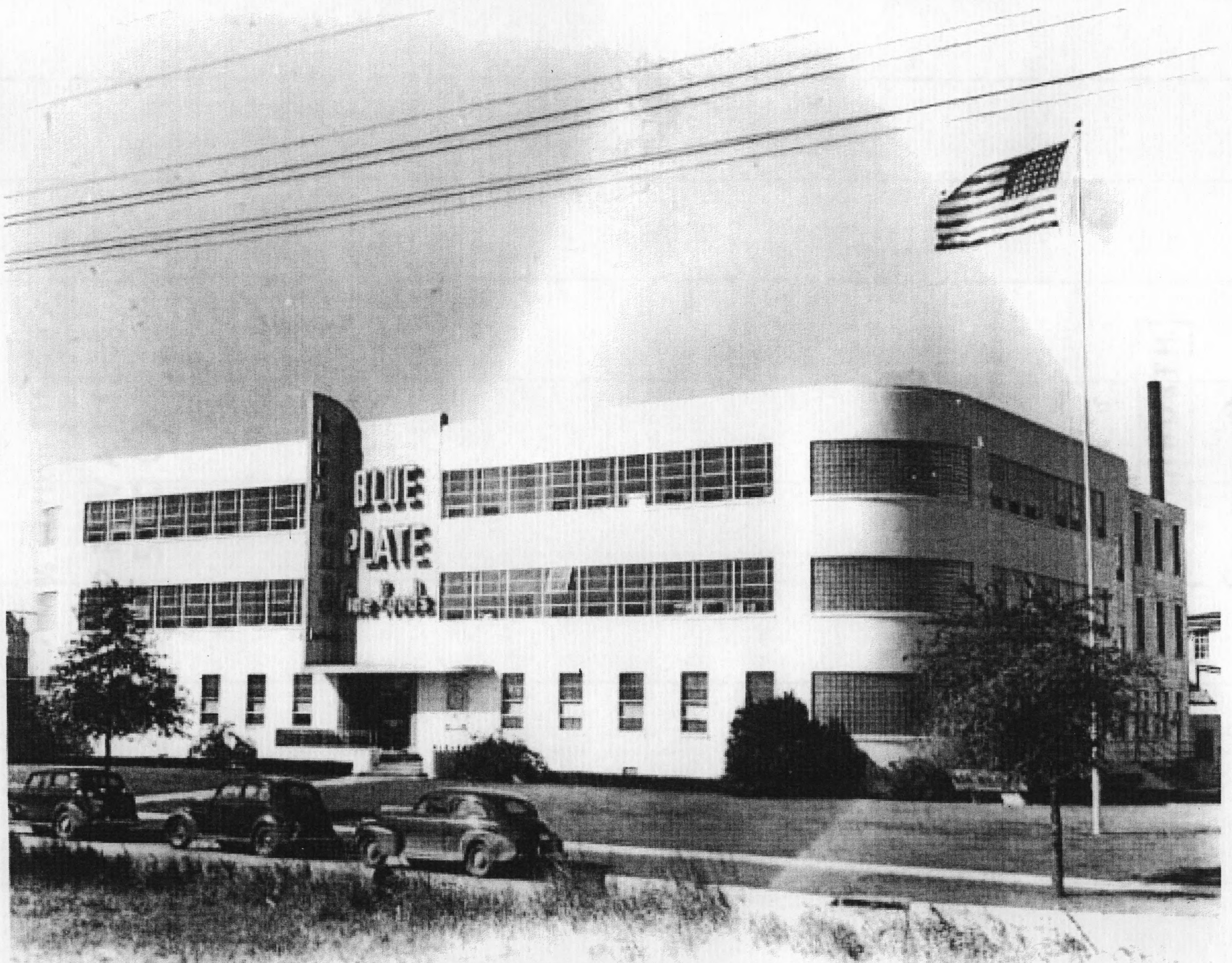
Address: 6810 Jefferson Hwy., Apt 1206, Baton Rouge, LA 70806

Telephone: 225-246-7901

Date: July 2008

## **PROPERTY OWNERS**

Earhart Expressway Commerce Center, LLC  
Kevin M. Kelly, Manager  
5200 Coffee Drive  
New Orleans, Louisiana 70115



BLUE  
PLATE  
NEW YORK