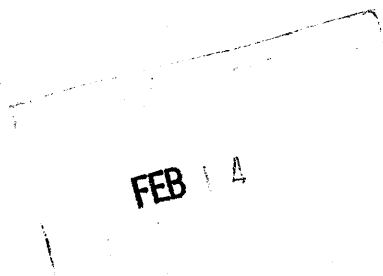


**United States Department of Interior
National Park Service**

National Register of Historic Places

Registration Form



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900A). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Wisconsin Leather Company Building
other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number	320 East Clybourn Street	N/A	not for publication
city or town	Milwaukee	N/A	vicinity
state Wisconsin	code WI	county Milwaukee	code 079 zip code 53202

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] SHPO
Signature of certifying official/Title Date 2/7/05

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 official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

Wisconsin Leather Company Building
Name of Property

Milwaukee County
County and State

Wisconsin

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the 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.
 ___ See continuation sheet.
 removed from the National
Register.
 other, (explain:)

Edson H. Beall

3/31/05

for
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as
as apply)

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

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

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

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources
in the count)

contributing	noncontributing
1	buildings
___	sites
___	structures
___	objects
1	0 total

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

**Number of contributing resources
is previously listed in the National Register**
0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)
COMMERCE/TRADE/business

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)
COMMERCE/TRADE/specialty store

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)
LATE VICTORIAN/Italianate

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation STONE

walls BRICK

roof ASPHALT

other CAST IRON

Narrative Description

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

8. Statement of Significance

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

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce

Period of Significance

1874-1887

Significant Dates

1874

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or 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.

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Mix, Edward Townsend

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

Wisconsin Leather Company Building
Name of Property

Milwaukee County
County and State

Wisconsin

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 SHPO or FPO.)

name/title	Lorette Russenberger	date	October 2004
organization		telephone	414-350-6167
street&number	3150 East Hampshire	zip code	53211
city or town	Milwaukee	state	WI

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects, (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 1

Wisconsin Leather Company Building
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Narrative Description

The Wisconsin Leather Company building is a three-story, cream city brick, Italianate style building constructed in 1874 by the prominent Milwaukee architect, Edward Townsend Mix. The building occupies a 34- by 124-foot lot facing Huron Street (now Clybourn Street) in the original Third Ward of Milwaukee. The building has a south-facing primary facade that is 34 feet wide and a secondary facade that runs 114 feet along the alley on the west.

Like most of the buildings to which it was once adjacent, the Wisconsin Leather Company building is set flush with the sidewalk on a cut-stone foundation that is partially above grade and encloses a full basement. The exterior walls are constructed of cream-colored brick, and rise three stories to the top of a shallow parapet wall, which obscures the northerly sloping asphalt roof. The 114 foot east wall straddles the lot line. It was built intentionally as a party wall, and hence has no decoration or openings of any kind. The north wall is set 10 feet away from the northern property line.

South (front) facade

The Clybourn Street facade is divided into three even sections, flanked at either side by pilaster strips that extend from stone bases at the street level to decorative brick corbels on the third floor which support a brick cornice. The center third of the facade is treated differently, with two cast iron columns resting on a stone base at the street level, which in turn support pilaster strips and corbels and then project above the cornice line to terminate in a triangular brick pediment. At each story the pilaster strips are broken by horizontal cornices, accented by ornamental brickwork or, in the case of the two central pilaster strips, by brownstone set flush with the brick and ornamented with recessed carvings.

On the first floor, the cast iron center columns bear a cast iron acanthus leaf capital, and above this is a sheet metal architrave composed of spandrels with a horizontal row of dog-tooth dentils between them. This metal detail echoes the diagonal bond brickwork in the depressed Gothic arches above the second- and third-story windows, at the top of the first story cornice and underneath the central pediment. Additional courses of decorative brickwork extend horizontally across the facade at the level of the window lintels, terminating in shallow corbels on the pilaster strips. On both the second and third stories, the top level of the cornice is completed with cut stone, which forms the sill for the windows above it.

The windows illustrate considerable attention to detail. Brownstone is used at the base of each window opening, and above this the brick is laid with an inverted corner to create a vertical shadow. A brownstone bracket supports a brownstone lintel over each window, flush with the brick, and with an inverted corner to echo the brickwork. Simple Italianate motifs are carved at the corners of the lintels. Above the lintels are the diagonal bond depressed arches that were previously mentioned. Two-over-two double-hung windows flank the center windows on both the second and third stories.

In the center section of the second and third stories, the upper sashes of two, very narrow, one-over-one windows have depressed Gothic arches and are placed in pairs under a segmented arch created with an additional thickness of brick and a decorative keystone of carved brownstone. This gives the illusion that the

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Wisconsin Leather Company Building
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

center portion of the building projects slightly forward and the diagonal bond arch over the third story windows is more elaborate than those on either side. These details, culminating in the pediment, establish the center section as the focal point of the facade.

While the second and third stories of the Wisconsin Leather Company building remain as built, changes have occurred to the ground floor storefront. A circa 1885 photograph shows the ground level facade consisted of two, nine-light display windows over two, three-light lower windows in the center and left sections of the building, and a three light transom over a two part front door with a side light in the right section.¹ Four steps on the sidewalk brought visitors up to the ground floor level. Other than the recessed panels of the doors, and small decorative details in the lintel above the doors, the windows and doors of the storefront were very simple.

The storefront was probably altered around 1890, when then popular prism glass panels were placed in the top third of the 9 light windows, the three light transom over the door, and the lower three light windows that were also pulled down toward the sidewalk level. The exterior steps were removed from the right section; a prism glass panel was placed in one third of the lower opening, and a double door, shortened and with a transom above it, was placed in the rest of the new, lowered entrance. By the 1950s the prism glass panels had been covered with plywood, and the entire exterior of the building had been painted.

West elevation

Although flush with a very narrow alley, the west wall of the Wisconsin Leather Company building did provide light for the interior of the building. Above the basement stone foundation wall, the otherwise unadorned brick surface is punctuated by 17 four-over-four double-hung windows, one pair of four-over-four double-hung windows, and one two-panel wooden loading dock door with a three pane light above it. Five small arched openings in the stone foundation wall contained windows to light the basement.

North elevation

This wall has no decoration or openings other than one exit door of modern date. Two blocked up openings on the first floor indicate that a window and a door may have existed at some period.

East elevation

Because it was built as a party wall, there are no openings or decorations of any kind on this wall.

Interior

Original floor plans of the Wisconsin Leather Company building have not been found, and there is little evidence of interior walls. The interior contains one row of round wooden columns with modest turned detail that support a wooden center beam, which in turn supports the floor joists. This configuration is the same on all floors; however, on the third floor, an additional square column close to the front wall appears to have been added later. Numerous changes to joists and flooring make it difficult to determine the original stairway location.

¹ Clybourn Street Photo Archive Folder, Milwaukee County Historical Society.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Building
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

All floors are of tongue and groove hardwood, with the exception of the basement floor which had been dirt and is now concrete. The ceiling on the ground floor is of tongue and groove softwood. A portion of the east wall on the ground floor is scarified and was apparently plastered at one time. No evidence of plaster exists on any other walls, nor are there traces of interior window trim. A brick walk in safe is located on the west side of the ground floor. A water hydraulic elevator still functions near the loading area on the west wall, but is certainly of a later date.

At the entrance, removal of the outside steps necessitated the creation of a street level platform and interior steps to reach the first floor level. A boxed in knee wall across the front of the building allowed light into the basement. It appears likely that these renovations occurred at the same time that the facade was altered, increasing the size of the basement windows to create better natural light in the lower level.

Renovation work done on the interior in 1999-2000 consisted of washing and tuck pointing all interior walls, removal of damaged plaster on the first floor, updating of all electrical and plumbing, repair and repainting of tongue and groove ceilings, refinishing of floors, and sandblasting of joists, beams and some walls. A new stair core, bathrooms and handicapped access ramp have been located in the rear third of the east side of the building. Prism glass panels above and below the storefront windows, which had been painted over, were stripped and repaired. The knee wall at the entrance was removed and replaced with an open stair to access the basement. A concrete floor was poured in the basement. The building currently is used as a retail establishment.

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Section 8 Page 1

Wisconsin Leather Company Buildings
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Narrative Statement of Significance

The Wisconsin Leather Company Building, located at 320 Clybourn (historically 114-116 East Huron Street) in Milwaukee's Third Ward, is significant at the state level under *Criterion A: Commerce* for its association with the Wisconsin Leather Company, a leading Milwaukee and Wisconsin leather manufacturer in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. It is the only extant building associated with the company, which operated between 1846 and 1889. The company was one of the largest leather manufacturers in Milwaukee and the country during the 1870s and 1880s. During this period, this building served as the company headquarters, with office space, a store/ showroom, and storage. The Wisconsin Leather Company occupied the building from construction completion in 1874 through 1887.²

Milwaukee industry and commerce

Milwaukee was an established trading center when it was incorporated in 1846. During the 1850s a channel was dredged to make the river accessible to Lake Michigan freight boats, and several rail lines were completed.³ The Third Ward, originally bounded by the Milwaukee River on the west, North Avenue on the north, Greenfield Avenue on the south, and Lake Michigan on the east, was home to many of the city's early industries. Early commercial businesses were located on the east bank of the river, fronting East Water Street, allowing small boats to unload cargo ferried in from ships on Lake Michigan to the back doors of businesses. Gradually businesses moved eastward toward the Lake Michigan shore and the topography of the downtown area changed as marshy areas were filled to accommodate the expanding city. In the second half of the nineteenth century explosive growth occurred in the area south of Wisconsin Street and east of East Water Street, and cream brick structures replaced older wooden structures. The former Huron Street, once the line between solid ground to its north and marshland to its south, was now squarely in the center of the commercially thriving Third Ward.⁴

The leather industry in Milwaukee and Wisconsin

In the mid-to-late 1800s, only three materials were essential for the operation of a productive tannery: animal hides or skins, water, and a tanning agent. Water was necessary for disposing of waste byproducts, providing power, and allowing for easy transportation of raw materials and finished products. Various tree barks, including hemlock, oak, and chestnut were common tanning agents and collectively referred to as tanbark. Wisconsin had ample supplies of all three materials. Hides were readily available from inland areas and nearby cities, including Chicago. Lake Michigan and inland rivers provided the necessary water and the state contained vast stands of hemlock timber.

² Milwaukee City Directories, 1875-1887.

³ Bayard Still, *Milwaukee, The History of a City*. (Madison, Wisc.: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1941), 92.

⁴ John G. Gregory, *History of Milwaukee Wisconsin*. (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1931), 416, 422.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Buildings
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Within Wisconsin, Milwaukee was an ideal location for a tannery due to the ample supply of wild animal and livestock hides, availability of tanbark in the outlying areas, and proximity to water and rail transportation. Established shipping networks and rail transportation allowed bark from nearby forests and hides from inland points and Chicago to be easily shipped to Milwaukee. Milwaukee also had a skilled labor force, which included a large German population with leather-working experience. This labor force helped lay the foundation for the expansion of the industry.

Daniel Phelps established the first Milwaukee tannery in 1842 on Huron Street, between Thirteenth and Fourteenth streets. By the end of the decade, Milwaukee produced \$120,000 of leather.⁵ The Wisconsin leather industry experienced a surge in the 1860s due to the Civil War and the high demand for leather products, including shoes, harness work, and equipment such as pouches, packs, and bags. The number of firms operating in the state rose from 45 in 1860 to 85 by the end of the decade, and production rose from \$439,985 to \$2 million during the same period.⁶

By 1872, Milwaukee was recognized as the largest tanning center in the west. Thirty tanneries were located in the city, with many concentrated in the Third Ward area near the "Rock River Canal." As tanning became a major industry, other firms entered the area that made use of their products. For example, several shoe companies were established in the area.⁷

At this time Milwaukee leather manufacturers were producing 158,523 hides, 125,000 sheep pelts, and large amounts of calf and kip skins, with a total value of \$2.56 million.⁸ Two Milwaukee tanneries ranked among the largest in the entire country in 1872 – the Wisconsin Leather Company and Pfister & Vogel. By 1874, the tanning industry ranked third in Milwaukee industries, following iron and clothing manufacture. According to the 1880 industrial census, \$1.62 million was invested in Milwaukee leather tanning, 840 workers were employed, the annual wages totaled \$339,740, and the value of annual production was \$2.6 million. It was the sixth most valuable industry in the city at that time, after slaughtering and packing, machine shops and

⁵ Raymond H. Meritt and Carol L. Snook, *Milwaukee's Menomonee Valley: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites* (Milwaukee, Wis.: University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, 1980), 47-48; Charles Ernest Schefft, *The Tanning Industry in Wisconsin, A History of its Frontier Origins and Development* (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1938), 24; Frank A. Flower, *History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin* (Chicago, Ill.: The Western Historical Company, 1881), 1117.

⁶ Barbara Wyatt, ed. *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*. Vol. 2 (Madison, Wis.: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986), 12:3.

⁷ Roger David Simon, *The Expansion of an Industrial City: Milwaukee, 1880-1910* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1971), 32; Resource Design Group Incorporated, *North Third Street Area Intensive Historic Structure Survey* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Department of City Development, 1983), n.p.

⁸ Frederick Merk, *Economic History of Wisconsin During the Civil War Decade* (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1916), 149-150.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Buildings
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

foundries, tobacco and cigars, clothing, and flouring mills.⁹

During this period, Milwaukee tanneries had an esteemed reputation and many firms found it difficult to fulfill the orders they received. This high demand made it difficult for many small companies to compete. Improved transportation systems caused smaller firms to lose their foothold in regional markets to larger concerns who could consistently deliver quality goods. In addition, many small firms were unable to purchase the modern equipment necessary to keep up with consumer demand and competition. During the 1880s, smaller tanning companies merged with larger establishments. Some of these companies continued to operate as subsidiaries while others closed down operations. Statewide, three-quarters of independent establishments were eliminated during this period. However, there was not a reduction in the number of workers or value of output. By 1890, tanning had become Milwaukee's second-largest industry, with over \$11.1 million in production value. Although the number of tanneries had decreased to 12, the amount of production had increased.¹⁰

Milwaukee leather production continued to increase into the twentieth century. Between 1897 and 1909, output rose from \$2.1 million to \$27.48 million, making it the largest tanning center in the nation.¹¹ The growth of the national market was responsible for this increase in production and Milwaukee's well-developed rail network and supply of raw materials positioned the city during this period. Leather production remained an important growth industry in the state until after 1920.

The Wisconsin tanning and leather industry was not limited to Milwaukee. It also flourished in other port cities, including Kenosha, Racine, Fond du Lac, and Green Bay. Water and rail transportation, coupled with the proximity of hides and tanbark, made the locations ideal for the industry. The first tanning industry in Kenosha was established in 1856. The N.R. Allen & Sons tannery, of no relation to the Allen family associated with the Wisconsin Leather Company, survived until after World War I. Other smaller concerns were attracted to the city's strategic Lake Michigan location. Two tanneries were established in Racine by 1855, making it one of the city's top industries. By 1870, it was second to Milwaukee in the value of leather production in Wisconsin. Manitowoc County had vast amounts of tanbark and major Milwaukee leather producers, including the Wisconsin Leather Company and Pfister & Vogel, erected tanneries there. Smaller independent firms were located in Two Rivers and Manitowoc. Overall, Manitowoc County ranked third in the state in leather production.¹²

⁹ Frank L. Holmes, "State in Front Rank as Tanning Industry Center," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 17 April 1921; Schefft, 40; Flower, 1121. Milwaukee was a leading meat packing center with pork as a leading product. These hides were not commonly used in the tanning industry.

¹⁰ Simon, 64.

¹¹ Simon, 64; Wyatt, 12:4.

¹² Wyatt, 12:2-3.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Buildings
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

History of the Wisconsin Leather Company

The Wisconsin Leather Company was headed by members of the Allen family, who had operated a successful tannery in Cazenovia, New York, which was established in 1805. The exhaustion of the tanbark supply in New York made it necessary for the family to relocate their tannery further west. Rufus Allen Sr., along with his sons William, George, and Rufus Jr., arrived in Milwaukee in 1846. At the time, Milwaukee was a fledging industrial city with an ample supply of hides and hemlock.¹³

Rufus Allen Sr. provided financial support to son William and Edward P. Allis, a friend and Cazenovia native who also relocated to Milwaukee. Allen and Allis opened a Milwaukee leather goods store in 1846, naming it "Empire Leather Store." The partnership was also advertised as Allis and Allen Leather Merchants, but by 1850, they had adopted the name "Wisconsin Leather Company."¹⁴ An advertisement from the 1848-1849 Milwaukee City Directory describes the company as wholesale and retail dealers in sole and upper leather of every description, including harness leather, bridle skirting, linings, and findings.¹⁵

In 1853 the company moved from its location at 149 East Water Street to a newly erected building at 80 East Water Street. The four-story brick building erected by Inbusch Brothers included a waterproof cellar for salting hides, a first floor designed for the transaction of business, a second floor designed for leather storage, a third floor designed for dry hide storage, and a fourth floor designed for hanging green hides.¹⁶

Due to the abundance of tanbark in Manitowoc County, the Wisconsin Leather Company purchased 1,200 acres of hemlock forest from the government and erected an upper-leather tannery near Two Rivers in 1850.¹⁷

The tannery served as an outpost and supplies were shipped from Milwaukee to the tannery and finished products were returned to Milwaukee for sale and distribution. In 1850-1851 the Two Rivers tannery was considered the largest establishment of its kind in the Midwest. The 270-foot by 50-foot building contained 134 tanning vats on the ground floor and extensive drying and storage rooms on the second floor. During this period, 7,000 tons of tanbark were consumed and 60,000 hides were tanned annually. The majority of hides were shipped from Chicago and Texas.¹⁸

¹³ Schefft, 24; Flower, 1439.

¹⁴ Walter F. Peterson, *An Industrial Heritage* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1976) 1-4.

¹⁵ Milwaukee City Directory, 1848-1849.

¹⁶ Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, 5 January 1853.

¹⁷ Arthur H. Lohman, *Early Days in Two Rivers, Wisconsin* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Meyer-Rotier Printing Co., 1909), 24.

¹⁸ Dr. Louis Falge, *History of Manitowoc County Wisconsin*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, Ill.: Goodspeed Historical Association Publishers, n.d.), 404; Wyatt, 12:2.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Buildings
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

In 1854 Edward Allis sold his interest in the Wisconsin Leather Company. By this time, Rufus Allen Sr., George Allen, and Cyrus Whitcomb were involved in the management of the company. Cyrus Whitcomb was also a native of Cazenovia, New York, who relocated to Milwaukee in 1850 along with the Allen family to establish a leather company. He resided in Two Rivers for a time and oversaw production of the tannery there. A second Two Rivers tannery designed for the production of sole leather was constructed in 1861. The tanneries operated simultaneously until the earlier tannery was razed c.1864.¹⁹

A Milwaukee tannery designed for upper and harness leather was constructed in the Kinnickinnick Basin in 1870. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* referred to it as the largest tannery of its kind in the country. The complex included a "beam house" with tanning vats, a "yard" with double tanning vats, an engine house, a grinding and leeching house, a finishing building, a receiving house, and two smaller buildings. The features incorporated into the design were new, and according to the Allen brothers, it was the best modeled factory of its kind in the country. The company also erected 600 feet of dock on the Kinnickinnick, which was used for receiving tanbark, fuel, and other freight.²⁰

The Wisconsin Leather Company, along with its Milwaukee-based rival Pfister & Vogel, was one of the largest tanneries in the entire country in 1872. Milwaukee was a dominant force in the leather industry, producing over \$2.5 million in goods that year alone.

In 1874 the Wisconsin Leather Company made the decision to relocate to a new building on East Huron Street, also in Milwaukee's Third Ward area. It is unclear as to who was responsible for construction of the building and if the company was the owner or the tenant. In November 1874 the *Milwaukee Sentinel* announced that the Wisconsin Leather Company was negotiating the purchase of two lots on the southwest corner of Michigan and Milwaukee streets for the purpose of constructing a brick block to accommodate its extensive business. In December of that year the *Milwaukee Sentinel* added that the company commenced construction of a large brick block on Huron Street.²¹ However, property deed records available at the Milwaukee County Courthouse reference Edward Townsend Mix as the owner of the property during this period, with the Wisconsin Leather Company as his tenant²² However, regardless of ownership the Wisconsin Leather Company occupied the

¹⁹ "Cyrus Whitcomb," *New York to Wisconsin Migrations* <<http://darcisplace.com/darci/migrations/nytowis.htm>> (viewed 4 October 2004); Falge, 432-433.

²⁰ "A Mammoth Tannery," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 27 August 1870; Schefft, 12; Falge, 433.

²¹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 7 December 1874.

²² *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 21 November 1874; Milwaukee County Register of Deeds Office. The southwest corner of Michigan and Milwaukee Streets is the northwest corner of the subject block. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* may have had an inaccurate location, or the original sale may have fallen through and the company chose to rent property in the immediate area. According to deed records, Mix sold the building to Charles L. Kiewert in 1885. After the Wisconsin Leather Company vacated the building, Kiewert operated a brewing and bottling supply business there until 1920.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Buildings
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

building and used it as the location of its central offices and store from 1874 through 1887.

In 1874 Mix and his neighbor to the east agreed to build one wall on the line between their two properties and share it in perpetuity. This wall straddled the lot line, with half of its depth resting on either lot. The east side of this wall was not utilized until 1883, when Mix sold the half-thickness of the already erected wall to J.S. Richter for use as the west wall of a three-story structure.²³

At the height of its success in the 1870s and 1880s, the Wisconsin Leather Company did extensive business with firms in New York, Philadelphia, and other eastern cities and was known for its high-quality harness leather. It is estimated that as much as 90 percent of the company's sales were to firms in the eastern and southern United States. Oftentimes the company was two months behind in orders.²⁴

The company incorporated in December 1881, 31 years after it began operating under the name Wisconsin Leather Company. George W. Allen, William Allen, Rufus Allen Jr., and Cyrus Whitcomb entered into the association. According to the articles of association, the company was organized for the purposes of buying, selling, and dealing in hides, leather, and other personal property; manufacturing leather; loaning money on security; selling, exchanging, and dealing in real estate; and building, selling, and renting buildings.²⁵ It is clear that the company focused on the manufacture and trade of leather products. In 1881 the aggregate business of the company exceeded \$1 million annually. No evidence was found to suggest that it was a successful money lender or real estate dealer.²⁶

The Wisconsin Leather Company reached a turning point in 1887. Operations at the Two Rivers tannery were discontinued, due in part to the depletion of the local tanbark supply. It proved more cost-effective to deliver tanbark to the Milwaukee tannery, which had receiving docks on the water, than to haul it overland to the Two Rivers plant.²⁷ In September of that year the company went into financial failure as several creditors filed judgments against the company. It is unclear why the company, which appeared to be conducting a successful business, failed, but the *Milwaukee Sentinel* stated: "It is difficult to learn what caused the crash as to find out anything definite as to figures. Among business men the opinion is expressed that old-fashioned business methods practiced by the firm did not enable it to cope with rivals that reached out for business in the modern way and placed it at a disadvantage. However, members of the firm say that business was good, and in fact all

²³ This structure was razed in 1969, again revealing the wall with its corbelled brick courses intended to support floor joists. Numerous references to this wall may be found in various deeds on record at the Milwaukee County Register of Deeds Office.

²⁴ *A Mammoth Tannery*.

²⁵ Wisconsin Leather Company Articles of Association, Volume A, page 352. Filed with Milwaukee County.

²⁶ Flower, 1439.

²⁷ Falge, 432-433.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Buildings
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that could have been desired."²⁸

By 1888, the company had relocated to the New Insurance Building, located at Broadway and Michigan. The company's production output had shrunk to \$250,000 and it employed only 100 workers. In comparison, Pfister & Vogel operated three tanneries in Milwaukee, employed 600 workers, and produced over \$2 million worth of leather. Three other tanneries were also producing more than Wisconsin Leather Company at this time.²⁹

As was the case with many tanneries that operated into the 1880s, the Wisconsin Leather Company was acquired by a larger corporation. Long-time rivals Pfister & Vogel acquired the Wisconsin Leather Company for \$100,000 in March 1889. Pfister & Vogel possessed large mortgages on the company prior to the acquisition.³⁰

Pfister & Vogel went on to enjoy many successful years in the Milwaukee leather industry. Along the way it acquired other struggling companies. By 1918, it was one of largest tanneries in world with five plants.³¹

Edward Townsend Mix

The Wisconsin Leather Company Building was designed by Milwaukee architect Edward Townsend Mix. Mix arrived in Milwaukee in 1856. At the time he was one of only a handful of formally trained architects in the city. He began his training in the office of Sidney Mason Stone in New Haven, Connecticut, and later joined William W. Boyington in Chicago. As a representative of that firm he moved to Milwaukee to oversee two building projects. Once these projects were completed, Mix set up his own practice in Milwaukee.³²

Mix's Milwaukee work includes an eclectic collection of building types and architectural styles. He constructed many residences, commercial buildings, churches, and institutional buildings. His East Coast education grounded him in all of the recognized architectural styles of the time, including Greek Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, and Gothic Revival. Some of his best known works include the National Soldier's Home, Mitchell Building, and Free Press Building. He also designed dozens of small-scale commercial buildings in Milwaukee's Third Ward between the 1850s and 1880s. The Wisconsin Leather Company Building is one of few surviving examples that remain of Mix's small-scale commercial designs.

²⁸ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 6 September 1887.

²⁹ Schefft, 51.

³⁰ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 14 March 1889.

³¹ Merritt and Snook, 47.

³² John Richard Burrows, *The Work of Edward Townsend Mix from 1856-1890* (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Virginia School of Architecture, 1980), 5-9.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Buildings
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Commercial buildings

Italianate commercial buildings were popular in Wisconsin between 1850 and 1880. Several Third-Ward commercial buildings represent this style. These properties are typically two and three stories and are characterized by the ornate treatment of windows and cornices. The Wisconsin Leather Company Building displays several elements of the style, including an ornate cornice and window hoods.

Significance of the Wisconsin Leather Company Building

The Wisconsin Leather Company Building is significant on the state level under *Criterion A: Commerce*. During the height of the Wisconsin Leather Company's success, the building located at 114-116 East Huron Street served as its central offices and store. The building played a critical role in the sale and distribution of leather products produced by the company at its Milwaukee and Two Rivers tanneries. The period of significance spans from construction completion in 1874 through 1887, when the Wisconsin Leather Company went into failure and vacated the building.

The Wisconsin Leather Company is significant because it represents the early leather industry in Milwaukee and the importance of the industry in the state's economy. Between 1860 and 1910, Milwaukee was a leader in leather production, and Milwaukee-based tanneries were among the largest and most respected in the nation. The Wisconsin Leather Company was one of the first leather companies established in Milwaukee. By the mid-1870s, it was one of the two largest leather manufacturers in the city and ranked among the largest tanneries in the country. The company produced several different types of leather, but had a reputation for high-quality harness leather and did extensive business with Southern and Eastern markets. It continued to operate successfully until 1887, when it experienced financial trouble and was no longer able to compete with other Milwaukee tanneries.

The Wisconsin Leather Company Building located at 320 East Clybourn Street is the only remaining building associated with the Wisconsin Leather Company. Both Two Rivers tanneries are nonextant, as the second tannery constructed there was destroyed by fire in 1891. The properties located on East Water Street, occupied by the company prior to the construction of 114-116 East Huron Street, are no longer standing. The property located at 320 East Clybourn Street reflects the success of the Wisconsin Leather Company and the state's leather industry of the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Building
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Verbal Boundary Description

The West 34 feet of Lots 5 and 6 in Block 14, in Plat of Milwaukee, in Lot 3, in Southwest Fractional of $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 28, Township 7 North, Range 22 East, in the City of Milwaukee, County of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries of the Wisconsin Leather Company Building coincide with the legal parcel and incorporate the land historically associated with the building.

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Wisconsin Leather Company Building
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Wisconsin Leather Company Building
320 E Clybourn St, Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin
Photos by Lorette Russenberger
September 2004
Negatives at the Wisconsin Historical Society

1. Front façade, from the southeast
2. Detail of storefront windows, from the south
3. East party wall, from the southeast
4. Back wall, from the northwest
5. West wall, from the southwest
6. First floor interior and storefront windows, facing south
7. Second floor interior, facing south
8. Third floor interior, details of windows, facing south