United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

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 Wilkens-Robins Building

and/or common Robins Paper Building

2. Location

street & number 308-312 W. Pratt Street ___ not for publication

city, town Baltimore ___ vicinity of congressional district Third

state Maryland code 24 county Baltimore City code 510

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
___ district	_X_ public	___ occupied	___ agriculture	___ museum
_X_ building(s)	___ private	_X_ unoccupied	___ commercial	___ park
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	___ educational	___ private residence
___ site	**Public Acquisition**	**Accessible**	___ entertainment	___ religious
___ object	___ in process	___ yes: restricted	___ government	___ scientific
	___ being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial	___ transportation
		___ no	___ military	___ other:

4. Owner of Property

name Mayor and City Council

street & number City Hall, 100 Holliday Street

city, town Baltimore ___ vicinity of state Maryland 21202

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Records Office, Room 601

street & number Baltimore City Courthouse

city, town Baltimore state Maryland 21202

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title ___ has this property been determined elegible? ___ yes ___ no

date ___ federal ___ state ___ county ___ local

depository for survey records

city, town ___ state

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
___ excellent	___ deteriorated	_X_ unaltered	_X_ original site
X good	___ ruins	___ altered	___ moved date _____
___ fair	___ unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Wilkens-Robins Building at 308-314 W. Pratt Street is a five-story six-bay structure of common bond construction with a cast-iron front. It is approximately eighty feet tall, fifty feet wide and one hundred and ten feet deep and has a gently sloping roof. Stylistically its facade contains design elements of the North Italian Renaissance Revival including arched openings framed between columns and full entablatures for each story. Derived from the Roman Coliseum and from the architecture of Sansovino, it presents these elements in ornate form following the tradition of R.G. Hatfield's famous iron building for the Baltimore Sun. A sculptured surface of rich relief, a dignified symmetry of parts and an expanse of over-sized windows are the highlights of one of the few surviving cast-iron facades in Baltimore.

The first story, still intact with a temporary infill of concrete block, has its original six entry bays. These are surmounted by transoms under flat arches and fronted by an arcade consisting of fluted iron columns and pilasters at center and at each side. Tuscan bases, bell capitals and composite abacuses with egg and dart molding embellish the slender columns. The entablature is dentilated and features a broad band of cabling on the projecting cornice. The extant molded iron jambs encased the original two-paneled, glazed doubledoors that have been modified in recent years. Rectangular projections finalize each side of the first story cornice as well as those of the upper stories.

The second through the fifth stories of the facade are also arcaded, providing space for twenty-four large arched, recessed windows--one of the design advantages of cast-iron construction. Early views of the building reveal that the original two-over-two lights were replaced by four-over-four. All are presently boarded, but the sash remain in place.

The arches of the upper floors are semi-circular and the openings shorter than those of the first story. Originally the column capitals held ornate leaf decorations, but in the early 1950s the building was repainted and stripped of these details. The soffits of these arches are coffered and their spandrels are recessed. Molded jambs also enrich the glazed arcaded surface. Small, cabled cornices protrude and divide the upper stories.

Seven leaf-decorated brackets support the boxed dentilated roof cornice. The frieze is defined by a thick rope molding over the arcade of the fifth story and running the width of the building. A thumb-nail sketch used by Wilkens for promotional purposes indicates that additional molding was attached to the facade in its early history. Unusual quoins, representing alternating pieces of dressed and rough-hewn stone, define the sides of the facade. The degree of ornamentation found in this facade is relatively rare in cast-iron structures, and the leaf-decorated cornice brackets with rope molding are found on only two buildings in New York, a city with a rich cast-iron legacy.

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET #1.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below				
___ prehistoric	___ archeology-prehistoric	___ community planning	___ landscape architecture	___ religion	
___ 1400–1499	___ archeology-historic	___ conservation	___ law	___ science	
___ 1500–1599	___ agriculture	___ economics	___ literature	___ sculpture	
___ 1600–1699	_X_ architecture	___ education	___ military	___ social/ humanitarian	
___ 1700–1799	___ art	___ engineering	___ music	___ theater	
_X_ 1800–1899	_X_ commerce	___ exploration/settlement	___ philosophy	___ transportation	
___ 1900–	___ communications	_X_ industry	___ politics/government	___ other (specify)	
		___ invention			

Specific dates 1871 **Builder/Architect**

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

SIGNIFICANCE

The Wilkens-Robins Building is one of the few remaining cast-iron fronted buildings in the city of Baltimore and an excellent example of a technology of building in transition. By the 1870s the city had become an important center of cast-iron construction and several important foundries exported such architectureal fronts across the country and around the world. Many were used int he expansion of the central business district here after the Civil War. The majority were destroyed by the Fire of 1904 which devastated the area east of Howard Street and the remaining ones have gradually been torn down. This building is also a fine illustration of the way in which formal aesthetic principles were translated into what was the world's first industrialized, factory-produced building material.

HISTORY

The Wilkens-Robins Building was built in 1871 as the office and warehouse of the Wilkens Brush Company, a pioneer of large-scale industrial production in Baltimore. In the 1840s, William Wilkens, a German immigrant who had probably learned the trade of brushmaking in his native land, founded the company. The plant expanded and was forced to move from earlier locations, first on the Jones Falls at Lexington and then on Frederick Avenue. The company used hair from the hides of the slaughterhouse for its brushes and was probably a very smelly operation. Like the slaughterhouses themselves Wilkens was forced to relocate in a less populated area as the scale of his operation increased. In 1847 he bought land in west Baltimore and began to build a large integrated manufacturing facility. By 1870 the factory contained specialized machinery for making haircloth and wigs as well as brushes. Ten years later it included a blacksmith shop, brickyard and machine and Wilkens had over 800 employees, a large number for that day.

Wilkens diversified his production to take advantage of scraps that were by-products of brushmaking. Skilled weavers wove the longer horsehair into haircloth, an incredible durable material used to cover upholstered furniture. Shorter horsehair was combined with cattle hair and used to make "curled hair", a stuffing for furniture, mattresses and cushions. Some was also twisted into rope and set with steam to form ladies hairpieces and wigs. Sort, stiff hog bristles were used to make brushes of all sorts. Wilkens had agents who scoured the country and went abroad to find suitable hair and to market his products. Location in a port city like Baltimore with its transportation connections both to the agricultural west and abroad was a definite advantage for an operation of this scale.

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET #3.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet #5

ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED

10. Geographical Data

UTM NOT VERIFIED

Acreage of nominated property less than 1 acre

Quadrangle name Baltimore East Quadrangle Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	360280	4349610
B			
C			
D			
E			
F			
G			
H			

Verbal boundary description and justification

BEGINNING at a point on the north side of West Pratt Street approximately 150' west of Howard Street running 50' east along West Pratt Street; thence, 110' north; thence, 50' west, thence 110' south to the point of beginning.

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 Dennis M. Zembala, Historian

organization Baltimore Industrial Museum date March 15, 1980

street & number 217 E. Fayette Street telephone (301) 396-1931

city or town Baltimore state Maryland 21201

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

___ national ___ state _X_ 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 Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature J. Richard Griffith 10-21-80

title STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER date

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Keeper of the National Register date 12-3-80

Attest: date

Chief

GPO 938 835

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND RECREATION SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

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(DESCRIPTION, continued)

The west side of the building is a continuous brick expanse with fourteen windows and two entrances. Small windows, sealed with cement block, are placed in the first two bays of the first story. Two transomed doorways are to the left. A central entrance features an iron lintel whil the one closest to the rear has brick jambs and lintels and a sliding freight door. The windows of the upper stories are irregularly placed and constructed. The bay above the center door has four stories of single windows with stone sills and flat-arched brick lintels while smaller windows with splayed brick lintels are scattered randomly. Many have metal-covered fire shutters. A shadow line of new brick marks the fifth story addition.

The rear of the building is eighteen bays wide and appears to stand six stories high because of a mezzanine level between the first and second floors. The two rear entrances at the center and the western corne are sealed. Three of the small windows are sealed and three are shuttered The upper story windows have stone sills and iron lintels and most are fire shuttered. The east side of the building is similar to the other two sides.

Between the brick side-bearing walls, the interior is divided into two nearly equal spaces. The east side contains a partitioned office at the front and was apparently used mostly for office space and showroom display. The west side was used for stock storage and contains an intermediate support system of eight timber posts and a timber sill on each level but the fifth. A large opening with a sliding freight door connects the two halves at the center of each level. A staircase at the front of each section provides access to the upper floors. Stairs at the rear of the western half lead to the basement and the mezzanine level and retain some of their original details.

The rear of the second level is elevated to provide space for the mezzanine below. In the western portion holes in the floor reveal alternating heavy and light joists designed to carry heavier loads than in the eastern half of the building.

The third floor houses the machinery for the elevator on the east side of the building. The floor system on this level consists of 3/4 inch joists on 12 inch centers. As on the other levels these are covered by heavy tongue and groove wooden flooring. The fourth floor construction matches the design elements of the lower levels.

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET #2.

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(DESCRIPTION, continued)

The fifth floor is similar to the lower levels but the sloping roof creates a smaller space at the rear. Skylights, presently sealed, pierce the roof in the western half which also houses the machinery for the other elevator. The irregular buttressing system of the west wall is also particularly visible on this level where piers of uneven wide protrude slightly into the room. This floor is in most nearly original condition.

The interior of this building is not accessible at the present.

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(SIGNIFICANCE, continued)

Construction of the Pratt Street facility marked a new stage in the company's development. Industrial production could only be sustained by comparable marketing and financial methods. In other words, Wilkens probably needed a base of operations near the banks, shipping agents and insurance companies in the central business district.

The building itself reflected the type of organization that characterized his factory. It was fronted with a cast-iron facade, the world's first industrialized building material. By the 1850s cast-iron fronts and entire cast-iron buildings were being pre-fabricated in Baltimore factories and shipped to worldwide markets just like Wilkens' brushes. The city had a number of foundries whose designers and mold-makers imitated the most elaborate classical and Victorian architecture. Bartlett-Hayward, which probably produced the Wilkens front in its Scott Street shop, was one of the leading foundries in the country in 1870. Their shop employed crews of trained artists, wood carvers, pattern-makers and molders capable of producing almost any design--in multiples! Each group performed a specialized task and all were orchestrated to produce high-quality castings at a price within the reach of a relatively large market.

The building's structure also summarizes the impact of industrialization on the rise of the city's central business district following the Civil War. The majority of the building is of brick masonry and timber construction, linking it to an older tradition of warehouse construction. The use of cast-iron, however, was intended to convey the notion of progress. The two notions of tradition and change symbolize the tensions and the vitality of the late 19th century and reflect the emergence of the modern city.

The building's construction history also marks the beginning of Baltimore's high-rise skyline, a phenomenon due largely to the advent of the elevator. Elijah Otis demonstrated his safety device at the 1853 World Exposition in New York and set architecture on its upward course. Vertical possibilities were slowly realized, but by the 1880s the skyscraper had make its appearance and many small buildings were added to. The Wilkens-Robins Building was only four stories high originally, but sometime in the 1880s, a fifth story was added. The foundry was asked to provide an identical section of facade and the masonry walls were raised. A comparision of the buildings present appearance with an old vie of the original structure shows a striking contrast between the two. The old feeling of solidity derived from the use of a classical design

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET #4.

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(SIGNIFICANCE, continued)

has given away to a sense of vertical linearity. This desire for a taller building is not only functional but captures both the organization and the elan of late 19th century industrialists and city builders.

By 1910 the importance of a downtown location was diminished for companies like Wilkens and the Pratt Street office was replaced by a new headquarters at the plant. By this time most of their sales were probably wholesale and the telephone and the motor truck allowed them to conduct business effectively from a distance. While the company retained ownership of the building until 1929, it was occupied by a variety of tenants, most of whom were paper companies. During the 20s it was the home of the Bradley-Reese Paper Company and was finally purchased by the Robins Paper Company in 1940. Its long and useful history have made it s landmark to Baltimoreans and to visitors arriving at nearby Camden Station.

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MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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Scharf, J. Thomas. History of Baltimore City and Baltimore County. Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1971 (reprint).

Wright, David G. "Priceless Architecture," The (Baltimore) Sun (16 February 1980).