

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Kurth, Joseph H., Jr. House, Vernon Parish, LA

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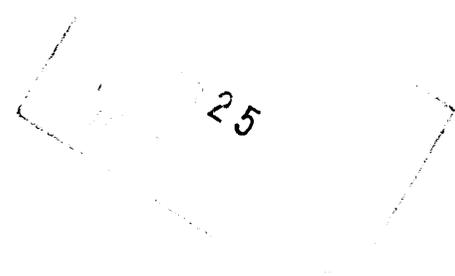
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Kurth, Joseph H., Jr. House

Other Name/Site Number:



2. LOCATION

Street & Number 351 Hwy 465

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Leesville

Vicinity: X

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: Vernon Code: 115 Zip Code: 71446

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: Locally: X

Signature of Certifying Official/Title Jonathan Fricker

Date August 24, 2004

Deputy SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

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):

Daniel J. Nivia

9/17/04

Signature of Keeper

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

2

Non contributing

buildings

sites

structures

objects

0 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: Domestic                      Sub: Single dwelling  
Current: Domestic                      Sub: Single dwelling

## 7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: Bungalow/Craftsman

Materials:

Foundation: Brick  
Walls: Weatherboard  
Roof: Metal  
Other:

### **Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The large, one-and-one-half story, frame Joseph H. Kurth, Jr. House is a vernacular example of the bungalow style. When constructed in 1920, it stood on the main street of a lumber company town known as Kurthwood. Today virtually nothing remains of the town, and the setting in northern Vernon Parish is essentially rural. The road has been relocated along the side of the property, so the house now faces a wooded area.

Large brackets, exposed rafter tails, and a door featuring triple wooden panels below with triple lights above are features of the bungalow style found on the home's exterior. Although the dwelling's wraparound gallery is larger than the porches usually seen on bungalows, it does exhibit the bungalow motif of tapered wooden columns atop brick piers. The columns support a simple entablature which outlines the gallery. Weatherboards fill the space on the facade between the entablature and the roof. The gallery's center portion projects in a fashion suggestive of a gabled porte cochere; a set of steps is found beneath this shelter. The home's numerous sets of paired, triple and even quadruple windows also derive from the bungalow style. The four windows piercing a utility/storage room on one side of the building are especially interesting because they slide sideways rather than upward.

The large floorplan consists of a deep central living room flanked by a dining room and kitchen on one side and two bedrooms on the other. The previously mentioned utility/storage room is located behind the kitchen; a third bedroom is found behind the previously mentioned two. The space behind the central living room contains a bathroom and a narrow hallway which connects the third bedroom to a sitting room located between the bath and storage rooms. A fourth bedroom projects outward from the sitting room at the rear of the home. The attic story contains a landing space, a small room whose historic function is unknown, and a long room (whose walls and ceiling are covered by beaded board) which stretches from one side of the house to the other. This space, apparently used for parties during the historic period, contains four built-in benches.

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The home's interior reflects more of the bungalow's influence. The walls in the living and dining rooms are composed of bagasse board panels separated by narrow strips of darkly stained wood -- a treatment used to simulate paneled walls by bungalow enthusiasts. A similar treatment distinguishes the ceiling, where the narrow wooden strips are laid in a crossing pattern to suggest a boxed ceiling. The living room contains a brick fireplace with a thick board serving as its mantel. A built-in bench is located to one side of the fireplace. On its other side are two built in, glazed, waist-high display or bookcases surmounted by tapered wooden columns. These cases separate the living room and dining room. Both rooms feature a darkly stained beaded board wainscot. A steep two-flight staircase with plain and narrow square balusters rises in one corner of the living room.

The Kurth House has experienced the following alterations:

1. the placement of a vinyl lattice around the foundation, the replacement of the original back door, and the installation of a modern glazed screen door at the rear entrance.
2. The installation of linoleum over the original floors in the kitchen and utility/storage rooms and of carpet in some spaces.
3. The modernization of the kitchen and bathroom, the lowering of the kitchen's ceiling, and the construction of a closet in the third bedroom.
4. The installation of modern wall paneling in many secondary rooms and of ceiltex tile ceilings in all rooms except the living room, dining room and hall.

The above changes are relatively insignificant because they impact neither the façade nor the important interior features. Anyone from the historic period who happened to visit the Kurth House today would easily recognize it as the home of Joseph H. Kurth, Jr., founder of the Vernon Parish Lumber Company and its company town of Kurthwood. As a rare survivor representing the lumber industry within Vernon Parish, the dwelling is a legitimate National Register candidate.

### Contributing Element

A two-story wooden structure stands in one corner of the property and appears to date to the same period as the house. Its first story was probably used as a garage, as it is known that Kurth had garages built to accompany a number of the workers' houses in Kurthwood. The second story contains a two room apartment, which was probably the home of the Kurth family's cook.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Applicable National Register Criteria:      A X B\_\_ C\_\_ D\_\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):      A\_\_ B\_\_ C\_\_ D\_\_ E\_\_ F\_\_ G\_\_ NA

Areas of Significance:      Industry

Period(s) of Significance:      1920 - 1929

Significant Dates:      1920 - 1929

Significant Person(s):      NA

Cultural Affiliation:      NA

Architect/Builder:      Builder: Vernon Parish Lumber Company

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

The Joseph H. Kurth, Jr. House is of local historical significance in the area of industry as a very rare survivor representing the immensely important early twentieth century lumber industry of Vernon Parish. The period of significance for the nomination ranges from 1920, the year Kurth built his Louisiana home, to 1929, the year he closed the mill and dismantled the company town of Kurthwood.

Vernon Parish, created in 1871, is Louisiana's third largest parish. Its history is that of yeoman farmers, the coming of the Kansas City Southern Railroad in the 1890s, and a major lumber boom (long leaf pine) that lasted into the 1920s. A second economic boom, caused by the establishment of Camp Polk, came in 1941. Lumber continues to contribute to the parish's economy, but that industry no longer plays the leading role it once occupied.

Although the heyday of Vernon's lumber industry occurred between 1900 and 1930, some timber was harvested in the western portion of the parish during the antebellum period. The 1880s found the industry increasing, with loggers floating rafts of logs down the Sabine River (which forms the parish's western boundary) to mills near Orange, Texas. At about the same time, others began cutting trees along Whiskey Chitto and Bundick creeks, two of the Calcasieu River's tributaries which reach into Vernon Parish's southwestern corner. These logs were floated downstream to Calcasieu Parish sawmills near Lake Charles. Small mills serving local customers also appeared during this period. Although a lack of documentation makes determining the exact number difficult, author Steven D. Smith cites seven sawmills which may have been operating during this period in his history of Vernon Parish. Yet the parish's vast timber resources, estimated at ". . . 3,741,000,000 board feet of merchantable [sic.] pine. . ." in 1880, remained largely untouched.

Two events brought industrial lumbering to Vernon Parish on a mammoth scale. The first was depletion of the Northern and Midwestern forests. By the 1890s lumber companies had cut most of the trees in these regions and needed new sources of timber. Industry leaders then turned to the largely untouched forest lands of the South, including those of Vernon Parish. The second factor was the arrival of the Kansas City Southern Railroad which, as mentioned above, built through the area in the 1890s. This line would provide the mechanism for shipping the products of the parish's pine forests to markets throughout the country. Anticipating the coming boom, northern lumbermen and speculators began purchasing tracts within the parish even before the railway was complete.

The impact of industrial lumbering upon Vernon Parish cannot be overemphasized. As Steven D. Smith explains:

Even as the railroad tracks were laid, lumber mills, big and small, sprouted overnight along the main line. From this trunk line, branch lines quickly ran far into the forest interior to reach the trees and still other mills. From the turn of the century until the late 1920s, Vernon Parish forests echoed with the sounds of chopping axes, shouting men, crashing trees, braying mules, and snorting steam engines. Out-of-state strangers -- Blacks, Mexicans, and Italians included -- joined local farmers and their sons to work in the deep woods and at the new sawmills. Across the transforming Vernon Parish landscape, the people and culture of this isolated community were awakened to a wider world economy and, for some, unprecedented prosperity.

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Once again, lack of reliable documentation makes an accurate count of the sawmills which operated within Vernon Parish between 1900 and 1930 impossible. The problem is compounded by the facts that some companies operated mills simultaneously in multiple locations, some changed ownership and name, some moved their operations from place to place when sites were no longer profitable, and others (usually smaller concerns) sometimes took over sites after larger companies abandoned them. However, Smith has found references to twenty mill towns of various size which can be associated with specific lumber companies. These are listed in an appendix accompanying this document. In addition, Smith lists at least five other locations which had one or more sawmills without mentioning the name of the parent company.

Although some of the sawmills were small, others were large concerns which employed a multitude of workers during the peak lumber years. For example, the W. R. Pickering mill at Barham and Nona Mills in Leesville each had 300 employees, while the W. R. Pickering mill at Pickering had 500 workers. The Central Coal and Coke Company's lumber mill at Neame employed 900 persons. During World War I the Fullerton mills worked 2,000 people. Smith estimates that the larger mills ". . . employed an average of four hundred men and supported lumber towns and camps with populations often in the thousands."

The amounts of lumber processed by the mills were astounding. A few examples tell the story. The W. T. Strange mill at Hawthorne and Nona Mills in Leesville each processed 100,000 board feet per day. At one time the W. R. Pickering Lumber Company's mills at Cravens and Pickering averaged close to 200,000 each. The Gulf Lumber Company's mills at Fullerton (one of the parish's largest) produced (at their high point) 120 million board feet per year and processed a grand total of approximately 2.25 billion board feet of lumber before they closed.

It is an understatement to say that the economic impact of the industry on Vernon Parish was significant. Local men, many former farmers, who went to work for the lumber companies made far more money than they ever had earned from the land. In addition, mill payrolls (that at Fullerton was almost \$1 million annually) did more than directly support company employees. They spread prosperity across the board because people could now afford the products and services of local merchants and professionals. In addition, the parish government profited from the taxes the companies paid. The effects of this prosperity can still be seen in the commercial buildings of the parish seat Leesville's historic downtown, as well as in a few residences surviving from this era.

Unfortunately, the Vernon Parish lumber boom and the prosperity it brought did not last forever. The voracious industry devoured the area's timber resources in less than thirty years. The destruction was so great that the parish, with an area of over 800,000 acres, was listed as 70 percent cutover land in 1938. Lumbering had long been characterized by a "cut and run" policy, and Vernon experienced this practice. Beginning in the 1920s, company after company closed its facilities, often dismantling and selling the mills and mill towns or moving them to new locations. Although smaller lumber companies sometimes attempted to operate at these abandoned locations, most could not survive for long.

The Vernon Parish Lumber Company and the company town of Kurthwood are an important part of Vernon's lumber saga. They came into being near the end of the parish's lumber boom. Son of a Texas lumberman and entrepreneur, Joseph H. Kurth, Jr. began the Louisiana portion of his career in Rapides Parish, where he established the Pawnee Land and Lumber Company. When harvesting exhausted Pawnee's timber supply in 1919, Kurth turned his attention westward. He found what he was looking for -- three thousand acres of uncut longleaf pine trees -- in northern Vernon Parish.

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After purchasing this land, Kurth's next step was to construct a mill and a small group of shotgun houses for black workers. Only a historic photograph exists to depict the industrial area, but a written source indicates that it eventually contained at least a mill pond, sawmill, planing mill, a dry kiln with three cells, and a series of rough sheds and yards. In addition to utilizing a small railroad (approximately eight miles long with spurs on each side of the main track) to carry men and timber to and from the forest, the company also owned various other pieces of equipment needed for cutting, hauling, and processing timber. Although no production figures are available for the sawmill, the planing mill averaged one hundred and fifty thousand board feet a day. Figures for the drying kiln are a bit unclear, but it seems to have handled at least one hundred thousand board feet per day. The yards and sheds stored an average of nine million board feet at one time. Products produced by the company, which emphasized quality and service, included different types of flooring, wood for ceilings, material for railroad cars and bridges, and "all items of yard and shed stock for retail." There is no doubt that the company was a major employer. In addition to the foremen and workers who cut the trees and operated the mill's various machines (no information on the number of these workers is available), the Vernon Parish Lumber Company eventually also employed a timekeeper, invoice clerk, bookkeeper, shipping clerk, blacksmith, painter, commissary manager and several commissary clerks, butcher, electricians, telephone operators, and local boys hired to cut grass in the plant and around the town.

Once the mill was fully operational and producing, Kurth finished his company town. The completed Kurthwood offered a number of conveniences to its residents and was considered quite modern for its time and place. Railroad service was provided by the Red River and Gulf Railroad, which connected with the Missouri Pacific line. The town's other amenities, many if not all built by Kurth, included a post office (Kurth served as the first postmaster), a large ice plant, a power plant, three hotels (one for blacks), a feed store, a four room school, a well-stocked commissary, a community church which Baptist and Methodist ministers took turns using, a ball park where teams from different sawmills played each other, a movie house, a doctor's office and clinic (surprisingly, the upper floor of this building was used as a dance hall and skating rink), a barber shop, a swimming pool and domino hall, a soft drink bottling plant, a Ford car dealership and garage, a telephone office, and a series of comfortable workers' houses. Each home had electricity, telephone service, running water, and a large yard with space for a garden. A number of the homes were accompanied by garages.

Kurth built a bungalow style residence (the candidate) for himself and his family. This home apparently became something of a social focus for the community. Kurth's children held parties in a large second story room which Kurthwood residents called a ballroom. Kurth was an early radio owner, and it was his practice to place this machine in a window or on his home's large gallery so that the town's residents could hear important news and entertainment events. According to employees interviewed many years later, Kurth was held in high esteem because he was a good and fair employer who really cared about his employees.

In 1929 Kurth's workers cut the last of the longleaf pine on the company's three thousand acres. Although he had options on other timbered lands, the businessman decided to close the mill due to poor economic conditions. The town's demise was noted in the newspaper at nearby Leesville. "Goodbye Kurthwood," the *Leader* lamented, "the people of the town of Kurthwood are moving away fast since all the timber was used up and the mill has ceased operating." Kurth followed the practice of disassembling the town, selling some of its machinery and buildings, and moving the rest to his family's other lumber concerns. By the time he was finished, nothing remained of Kurthwood except Kurth's own home and about eight workers' houses, which he sold for \$100 each. (The workers' homes now are gone.) At some point in

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the dismantling process, Kurth moved back to Texas.

Two factors insured that little would survive to illustrate the important role industrial lumbering and mill towns, including the Vernon Parish Lumber Company and Kurthwood, once played in Vernon Parish. The first was the industry's previously mentioned policy of selling or moving facilities when mills closed down. The second was Louisiana's unforgiving vegetation, which quickly overwhelmed and destroyed anything that was left. As a result of these forces, Vernon Parish has less than half a dozen resources left to directly represent lumber's story. One of these is the once large and thriving town-site of Fullerton, which now survives only as an archaeological site. Another is the railroad depot in the parish seat of Leesville, which symbolizes the force which made industrial lumbering in Vernon Parish possible. The third and fourth are houses built by one of the major lumber companies for management-level employees. All four of these properties are listed on the National Register. Kurthwood, also once a vital place, fared little better than Fullerton but at least has a small kiln, an office building converted into a home, and the Kurth house to indicate its history. As the surviving resource most closely associated with the Vernon Parish Lumber Company and the town of Kurthwood, and as a rare resource illustrating the overwhelmingly important lumber industry in Vernon Parish, the Joseph H. Kurth, Jr. House is a strong candidate for National Register listing.

### APPENDIX

#### Vernon Parish Lumber Company Towns

<u>Town Name</u>	<u>Company Name</u>
Alco	Alexandria Lumber Company
Anacoco	Powell Brothers and Sanders
	J. H. Anderson Lumber Company
Barham	W. R. Pickering Company
	Weber-King
Cooper	Lockwood and Bass Lumber Company
	Arbuthnot and McCain Lumber Company
	Lockwood and Ross Company
Cravens	Pickering Lumber Company
Lansco	Pate and Everette Mill
Fal	Kirby Lumber Company
Fullerton (with 2 mills)	Gulf Lumber Company
Hawthorne	W. T. Strange
Hymes	Hymes Lumber Company
Kurthwood	Vernon Parish Lumber Company
La Camp	Louisiana Sawmill Company
Leesville	Nona Mills
McRae	Stone Lumber Company
Neame	Central Coal and Coke Company
	(a lumber company despite its name)
Pickering	W. R. Pickering Lumber Company
Pinewood	Roberts Lumber Company
Rosepine	Rosepine Lumber Company
Slagle	White Gandlin Lumber Company
Stables (with 2 mills)	Gulf Lumber Company

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## 9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Deed of Sale, Vernon Parish Lumber Company to William A. Grant, Jr., September 5, 1930; copy in National Register file.

Historic photo of Kurthwood; copy in National Register file.

McDaniel, Roy, Jr. *Kurthwood, Louisiana: The Sawmill Town that Refused to Die*. Woodville, TX.: Dogwood Press, n.d. McDaniel was a grandson of Frank Mathews, who worked at the Vernon Parish Lumber Company as a mill foreman beginning in 1920. Mr. McDaniel interviewed a number of former Kurthwood residents, including Joseph H. Kurth, Jr., for this narrative.

Smith, Steven D. *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. National Park Service, 1999.

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: Approximately 5.8 acres

UTM References:     **Zone Easting Northing**  
                          15   484220   3466720

Verbal Boundary Description:     See attached sketch map.

Boundary Justification:

Boundaries follow the fence line defining the home's yard on the east, south, and west. On the north the boundary follows the adjacent highway. These boundaries recognize the immediate setting while excluding additional forested acreage.

## **11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: National Register Staff

Address: Division of Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Telephone: (225) 342-8160

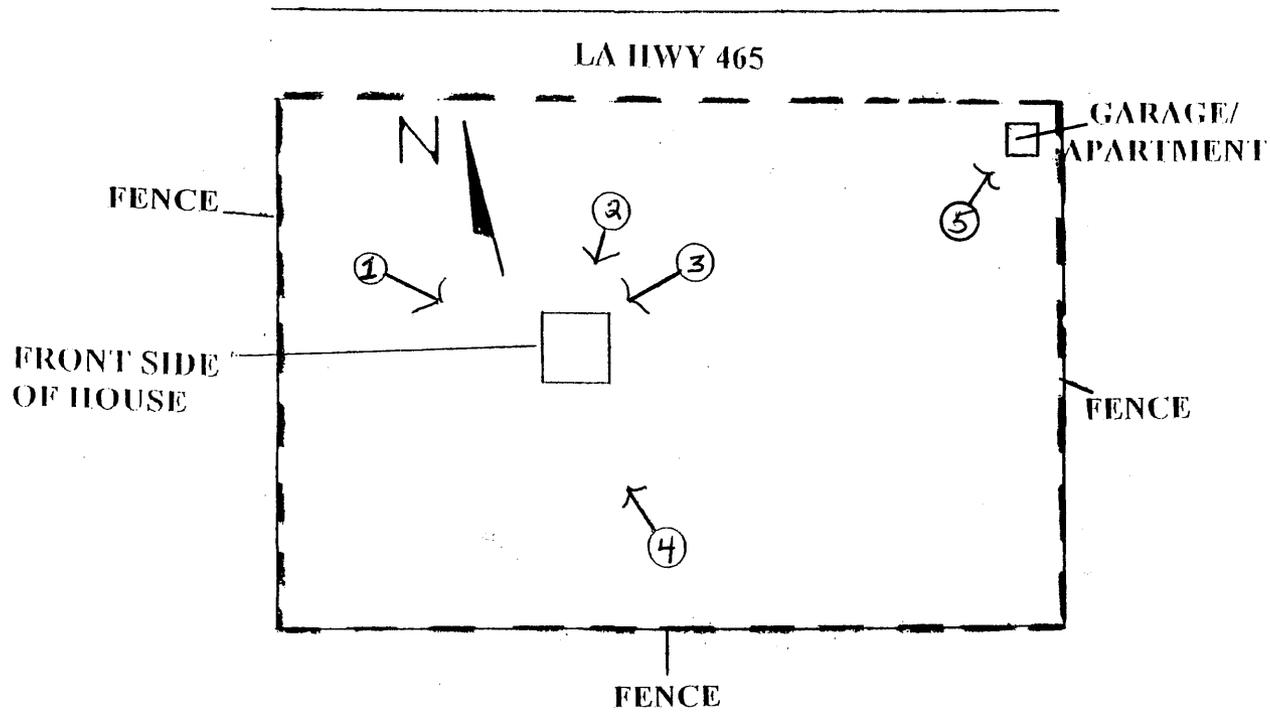
Date: Spring 2004

## **PROPERTY OWNERS**

Ronald Holsomback  
352 Hwy 465  
Leesville, LA 71446  
(337) 239-7742

# Joseph H. Kurth, Jr. House

Leesville vicinity, Vernon Parish, LA



SCALE: 1" = 150'

BOUNDARY: - - - -