

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

MAR 26 2001

454

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 Universal Car Company

other names/site number Universal Chevrolet Company Building / JFSW436

2. Location

street & number 2500 West Broadway NA not for publication

city or town Louisville NA vicinity

state Kentucky code KY county Jefferson code 111 zip code 40211

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.)

David L. Morgan, Executive
Director and SHPO 3-13-2001

Signature of certifying official/Title Kentucky Heritage Council/State Historic Preservation Office

State of 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 _____

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.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:)

Edson H. Beall
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action 5-2-01

Name of Property

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

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

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

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

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Specialty Store = Auto Showroom

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Specialty Store =
Electric Motor Repair Shop

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th and early 20th century

American movements

Other: Commercial Style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Brick

roof Asphalt

other Decorative cornices = wood

Chimney = Brick

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 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.

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.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Transportation

Period of Significance

1923 - 1950

Significant Dates

1923

1948

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- 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

Name of repository:

University of Louisville

Attached Continuation sheet, P.9-1

Universal Car Company
Name of Property

Jefferson, Co., KY
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property .81

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Frederick C. Widman

organization Clark Electric Co. date 11-27-00

street & number 2112 Edgeland Ave. #2 telephone 502-451-0166

city or town Louisville state KY zip code 40204

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. * See attached

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property. * See attached

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 Fred A. Widman, Jr.

street & number 573 Sunset Road telephone 502-899-7086

city or town Louisville, state KY zip code 40206

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 Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Narrative Description of Building.

The Universal Car Company building (JFSW-436) is located at 2500 West Broadway, one of Louisville's commercial corridors between the Russell and California neighborhoods. The structure, erected circa 1923, is one of the city's first structures built specifically as a new car sales showroom. With a two-story red brick front, the building features a high ceiling showroom with a full inlaid ceramic tile floor, balcony offices, and a large four-section 56-light window/door for driving cars in and out. The solid brick wall construction continues in the rear for the single story garage area.

Facing north onto Broadway, the original building front had showroom plate glass windows (now reduced in size) in the center at street level and comparable casement style windows above for natural lighting and ventilation. Above those upper windows is a decorative wooden cornice supported by scrolled wooden brackets. At either end of the show window segment were double entrance doors, and over these is a soldier bond of brickwork with a spandrel panel above that in a checkerboard stretcher bond pattern laid horizontally and vertically. The panel is topped with a fan-shaped multi-light wooden window placed on a bull header bond brick sill. Completing the detail of both entrance doors is a brick relief arch laid in bull stretcher bond from ground level up each side and over the window tops. Above that arch is found a circular plain limestone medallion surrounded with header bond brick edging. The front facade features multiple brick relief details accenting windows, doors, and wall panel segments. The top of the brick front has a plain limestone cap, which continues around both sides. Each end of the two-story portion is of plain stretcher-bond-

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pattern brick. One decorative fan-style window is carried around on each side and placed above a single casement-style window at street level. To the left, at balcony height is a second casement-style window. These three openings were placed on bull-header bond brick sills. The plain brick wall construction continues to the rear and back on the garage portion, with casement-style windows. Garage walls are topped with overlapped, glazed tile caps. The roof is of flat built-up construction, supported by a wooden deck over the showroom, and a structural-steel-supported masonry deck over the garage.

A side-by-side addition to the original building was added in 1948, built of the same style and materials. This increased space for the service and parts departments, and provided a garage entrance in the center of the structure. After the last auto dealer left, in 1987, the garage entrance was closed and a wrought iron fence was erected along the Broadway sidewalk. The addition in the two-story front portion is so faithful to the original, as to be almost indistinguishable except for the type of mortar used between the bricks on the front and end walls. Rear and side walls of the garage addition were of concrete block. The roof of the entire addition was the same built up type as the original but on a concrete stave deck with structural steel support. This extensive use of masonry and steel made the structure virtually fireproof, except for the wooden roof deck over the showroom.

The inside showroom was suitable for fashionable product displays typical of the times. The new car was presented against a backdrop of floor to ceiling drapes and bunting, with plants and greenery at either side, all accented by the patterned tile floor. An old 1927 photo shows chandelier style lighting hanging on chains from the

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ceiling, and the showroom floor furnished with upholstered wicker furniture and decorative masonry plant stands and benches.

The showroom's plaster ceiling is twenty-four feet above the tile floor and features wide cornice molding all around. The main ceiling cross beams are clad with mahogany stained wooden trim and molding. The balcony offices on the back wall, overlooking the showroom floor, have matching sets of French doors at each end facing front which are flanked by mid-wall arched alcoves suitable for floral displays. The alcove bases are mahogany stained wood and project out from the wall proper in a semi circular shape with a decorative cast plaster support underneath.

Inside the garage area, the original portion had a plain painted plaster ceiling between the steel supports. The much larger addition featured 22 large casement-style sky lights which could be opened in summer for ventilation and closed in winter, while providing natural lighting year around. The ceiling in the interior is the painted underside of the concrete stave roof deck. All structural steel trusses and supports the were fabricated using hand rivet techniques and are exposed and painted. The entire garage floor is concrete with the exception of in-laid tile in the wash bay areas.

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Universal Car Co.
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Narrative Statement of Significance

The historic Universal Car Company (JFSW-436) building at 2500 West Broadway in Louisville, Kentucky meets National Register criterion "A" and is being evaluated in the context of "The Early Years of Automobile Promotion and Marketing in Louisville." The property is significant because it is one of the few remaining original buildings in Louisville designed and built specifically as an automotive showroom. The most significant feature in the architectural design is the dramatic "theater style" showroom which provides important local documentation of the early days of automobile promotion and marketing. The large heated showroom, with attached service garage, allowed Universal to show and promote new cars year around. As early pictures demonstrate, great care was taken to ensure that the cars were presented in the most glamorous manner possible. The car was at center stage, flanked by curtains, banners, and potted plants.

"The Early Years of Automobile Promotion and Marketing in Louisville"

Americas passion for the automobile has made it one of the most important inventions in modern history. What began as a simple mode of transportation has developed into an integral part of the United States lifestyle and economy. The automotive industry touches multiple aspects of the economy: manufacturing and service facilities provide employment opportunities, vehicles enhance individual and business speed and efficiency, and financing provides lucrative investment

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returns. Since the car's inception, the automobile has been embraced by the city of Louisville.

The first automobile agency was formed in Louisville in 1890. In that year, Prince Wells, with a showroom at Third and Walnut streets, began to act as an agent for Rambler cars. The Wells agency was the only automotive dealer in Louisville until 1903 (Louisville Times, February 23, 1921). The first ten years of the century saw slow growth for automobile dealers. According to a Courier Journal article on February 19, 1922, there were only 2,868 automobiles registered in Kentucky in 1911. However, during this same year, two factors were introduced that increased both demand and production dramatically. The first of these was the debut of the self-starter. This feature, which allowed the vehicle to be started without cranking, enjoyed immediate popularity. Second, the unveiling of the assembly line revolutionized the manufacturing process. Through this invention, automobiles were produced more quickly and economically. Ford for example, could produce 1000 vehicles per day in their plants. As a result, registration nearly doubled in Kentucky, rising to 5,147 by the end of 1912 (Courier-Journal, February 19, 1922).

Steady growth continued in the car production industry until 1917, when the United States declaration of war on Germany caused manufacturers to offer their factories to the government to assist in the war effort. In 1918 there were 65,870 cars registered in Kentucky (Courier Journal February 19th, 1922). That same year, manufacturers were notified the day after Armistice Day that they would be permitted to have only 75% of the materials that they had used the previous year. Nevertheless, by 1921 there were 127,511 cars registered in Kentucky, as consumer demand drove the production process.

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The early twenties brought about the introduction of many makes of cars previously not sold in Louisville. By 1920 nearly 100 different makes of passenger and commercial cars were handled by 75 dealers and distributors. At this time, the major brand automobile dealers in Louisville were located downtown on Fourth Street south of Broadway. This area was known as "automobile row." "Automobile row" arose as consumers looking for cars wanted to compare different brands and dealers. The placement of dealers in close proximity did heighten the competitive nature of automobile marketing in Louisville by the early 1920s. For the consumer, this proximity provided convenience, which paralleled conveniences designed into cars as a marketing strategy. Even by the early 1920s automobile design had begun to standardize, so that individual companies edged their competitors according to conveniences their cars offered.

Car purchases steadily rose throughout the 1920s, as cars were refined and roads improved. This trend would soon slow dramatically as the crash of the stock market in 1929 spelled disaster for the United States economy. With this economic downturn automobile prices were drastically lowered, as consumers could barely afford to purchase fuel. With the decline in consumer purchasing power, dealers were forced to develop innovative strategies in order to increase their profits. According to an interview with Ed Rapp, a long time employee of Universal Car Company, some dealers turned to automobile financing while others sold car accessories such as tires in order to sustain their business.

Despite the downturn in the economy, there was still a demand for cars. Many stalled in becoming first-time owners, longing for, and saving for years to make their car purchase. Others, already confirmed

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owners, delayed their purchase of a replacement car for a longer time than in more prosperous days. Buyers such as these eventually made purchases, though at a slower rate than in the 1920s. According to an article in the Courier Journal, "The automobile has become a fundamental necessity in this country. It ranks with food, shelter, and clothing. When it is expended it must be replaced, just as we replace a outworn suit of clothes with a new one. This replacement market is of constantly increasing importance to the automobile business; in fact, it is the major factor in automobile merchandising. In a survey of the almost 23,000,000 cars that were operating on the highway, 8,000,000 of these cars were outworn" (January 18, 1931). Because of the new-found reliance on the automobile by individuals and businesses, Louisville dealers still had a product to sell and service.

By 1934, the economy began to improve and car registrations saw an upturn. The 1934 automotive registrations showed a 9.3% increase over registrations from 1933, indicating a positive shift in the public's willingness to consume (Courier Journal March 3rd, 1934). Slow but steady growth continued through the 1930's until WW II erupted. The war turmoil of the early 1940s would prove an even greater challenge than the Depression.

On January 2nd 1942, due to the World War II-related raw materials shortage, the government severely limited all manufacturing of new automobiles and tires in the country. The severe limitations were seen as a "death sentence" for the retail automobile industry. An article in the Courier Journal speculated that "few of the fifty-odd dealers in the Louisville metropolitan area would be able to continue in business on the basis of used car sales and repair services" (January 2nd, 1942). With no new cars to sell, dealers once again had to find

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alternative ways for survival. In January of 1942, the Courier Journal stated that many would have to turn to the repair side of the business, using re-capped tires and fixing worn parts that until recently had been discarded (January 2nd, 1942).

Not only was the war effort taking away the raw material, the demand for manpower was making itself felt in both the production and service aspects of the automobile industry. In March of 1941 the Courier Journal estimated that three million cars would normally go to the junk pile every year. But if new cars were not being produced to replace them, and no mechanics were available to maintain the growing population of aging cars, American drivers would soon find themselves in a transportation crisis.

The following two years were filled with a shortage of raw materials, as the nation put everything it had into the war effort. There were rations on tires and gas. Quotas were set for the number of cars which could be sold. This would continue until the end of the war was in sight.

A December 1944 Courier Journal article quoting the president of the Kentucky Automobile Dealers Association, estimated auto sales would be at record levels in the first post war year of full production. Citing "figures announced in Detroit," and predicated on "the defeat Germany and Japan to be not too long in coming," it was expected that the nation would embark "upon an era of auto touring unprecedented in history." It was further forecast that "Kentucky automobile retailers are expected to smash all records." (12/13/44)

Although the war years were difficult for the transportation industry, it would soon benefit from the many advances in machining and manufacturing that were introduced to help this country in the

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armed conflict. Automotive manufacturers would soon take advantage of this newfound knowledge. As post-war production began and parts became more available, higher quality cars began to emerge from more efficient assembly lines. Louisville dealers would soon be prospering, and larger showrooms and garage facilities would be required. With consumer demand on the rise, the stage was now set for production and marketing into the modern era.

“History of the Universal Car Company”

W.C. Martin founded Universal Car Company in 1922 as an authorized Ford dealership at 2228 West Oak Street. The following year in 1923, Universal moved to a more prominent location at 2500 West Broadway. This location was more prominent because Broadway, six lanes wide, was the main thoroughfare in the west end whereas Oak Street is a shorter, narrower secondary street. The Universal building was the first major brand showroom built in the west end, away from automobile row. The brand new West Broadway building was 10,000 square feet with a brick two-story showroom and office area in the front and a one-story garage at the rear. The architectural design and detail, specifically the two-story high ceiling showroom, make the building of major significance when compared to the few remaining buildings on the old automobile row.

The decision made by Universal to locate west, away from the downtown area, leveraged on the city's population growth pattern and residential proximity. Louisville's west end is a flat geographic plane laid out in a grid system of city blocks. Adjacent to downtown, the area extends from about 9th Street to just beyond 46th Street at the Ohio

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River. Consisting of primarily residential neighborhoods with some commercial and industrial use interspersed, the main commercial thoroughfares ran east-west, with Broadway being the most prominent. The west end area was more densely populated than comparable areas to the east and south. This, along with a mix of affluent and working class residents in the area, indicated a promising market for auto sales and service. Management and employees of Universal lived nearby, making the location convenient for customers and company personnel alike.

The automotive sales industry and business continued to grow in Louisville, and in 1924 W.C. Martin sold the Universal Car operation to C.L. Balthis. Mr. Balthis ran the business as an authorized Ford dealership until 1933, when a Chevrolet dealership became available. Mr. Balthis seized the opportunity to sell Chevrolets, as one out of every six cars produced in the country was a Chevrolet (Courier Journal January 18th, 1931). Universal Car Co. became an authorized Chevrolet dealership and ceased representing Ford Motor Company in 1933.

Mr. Balthis was committed to selling cars even during the tough financial times of the 1930s. In 1936, to increase revenue and sales, he created Victory Finance to help people finance new cars. Victory Finance was a perfect complement to Universal Car, fostering the sale of new Chevrolet cars while enabling Universal to participate in the financing. The cost of insurance, along with other financing costs, was added to the price of an automobile, which then was sold on installment payments. The finance feature of the business allowed dealers like Universal, with the help of Chevrolet, to offer such

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programs which helped them succeed in the economically depressed 1930s.

When the war broke out and the government set severe restrictions on the automotive industry, dealers had to find new ways to survive. Universal's solution to the shortage of new cars was to devote significant effort to the sale of re-capped tires. The company survived the war years by filling the showroom with recycled tires instead of new cars. Ed Rapp, formed a tire re-capping company on East Main Street to supply Universal and other dealers with recycled tires (Interview with Rapp, October 26th, 2000). This business plan showed promise, so on January 8th, 1942, despite the adverse business climate, Universal who did not want to move, bought the building for \$30,000 from the estate of George M Clark.

Toward the end of 1944, newspaper reports were forecasting an auto boom following the anticipated end of WW II. In the Courier Journal on January 21, 1945, Ben F. Long, general service manager, announced "The Universal Car Company will build a \$25,000 addition to its service department at 25th and Broadway. The addition will adjoin the west side of the present building fronting 85 feet along Broadway and extending 265 feet back. The building will be brick with two stories in front and single story in rear. Construction is expected to be completed by May 1st 1945." An expansion of this magnitude indicates the company managed to survive the war years and aggressively prepared for the predicted post-war boom. Universal anticipated that service and repair would see immediate growth, while the company waited for new car production and sales to ramp up. The

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size of the service space was increased to just over 30,000 square feet, and it became among the largest dealer garages in Louisville.

The addition was basically a mirror image of the existing building. Careful attention to detail was taken to copy the architecture, brick, and moldings both inside and out. C. L. Balthis saw the completion of the addition and remained president until 1953 when he sold the building, Universal Car Company, and Victory Finance, to Ben F. Long. Mr. Long, the long-time Universal secretary, continued to grow the business through remainder of the 1950s and 1960s, as Universal focused on serving the West End of Louisville.

In 1973, Ben F. Long sold the business and building to Bob Smith, making Universal one of the first major automobile dealerships in the city to be owned and operated by an African American. Smith changed the name to "Bob Smith Chevrolet" and remained in the building until 1987 when he moved his dealership to its present location on Westport Road in eastern Jefferson County.

Although other auto stores were subsequently built in the west end, the recent demolition of the old C.F. Smith Plymouth store on Broadway near 22nd Street left the Universal Car Company building as the only early automobile showroom remaining in Louisville's west end. The building's distinctive showroom design and long standing history as an automobile dealership qualifies it as a local landmark in the west end of Louisville.

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Universal Car Co.
Jefferson, Co., KY

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Major Bibliographic References:

Caron's Annual Directory for the City of Louisville, 1900 – 1950

Courier Journal February 19, 1922 "Stage All Set For Opening of
Auto Show"

Courier Journal January 1, 1931

Courier Journal March 3, 1934 "Motor Registration in Kentucky
Up 15,119."

Courier Journal January 2, 1942 "Automobile Dealers Here
Accept 'Death Sentence' Cheerfully"

Courier Journal December 13, 1944 "Sale of 68,000 New Cars
Forecast in State 1st Year of Full Production"

Courier Journal January 18, 1931 "Replacement Need in Sight"
Strong, E.T.

Courier Journal January 21, 1945 "Universal Car Firm Plans
\$25,000 Addition"

Courier Journal March 21, 1941 "Lean Days Forecast for U.S. Car
Dealers"

Courier Journal January 8, 1942 "Universal Car Buys Building"

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Historic Photographs, UofL Archives

Louisville Times February 23, 1921 "First Auto Agency in City was
Established in 1890; 29 Dealers Now"

Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Louisville, KY, 1928

Personal Interviews with Former Employees of Universal Car Co.

Beeler, Fred	November 28, 2000
Brown, Denver	November 28, 2000
Erik, Charles	November 28, 2000
Kruer, Jimmy	November 28, 2000
Rapp, Ed	October 26, 2000

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Continuation Sheet**

Universal Car Co.
Jefferson, Co., KY

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Verbal Boundary Description

Property I.D. # 07-036A-0125-0000

Parcel I.D. #036A01250000 Dist = 07 Block = 036A Lot = 0125

Boundary Justification

This is the area which has been historically associated with the Universal Car Co. This lot, proposed for listing, consists almost exclusively, of the significant resource, the building.

Louisville, Kentucky, United States

