

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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received **AUG 18 1987**  
date entered

# 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 Louis Johnson Building

and or common Johnson Building

## 2. Location

street & number 161 First Street, S.W. not for publication

city, town Largo N/A vicinity of

state Florida code 012 county Pinellas code 103

## 3. Classification

|                                                 |                                             |                                              |                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Category</b>                                 | <b>Ownership</b>                            | <b>Status</b>                                | <b>Present Use</b>                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> district               | <input type="checkbox"/> public             | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied | <input type="checkbox"/> agriculture                  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied          | <input type="checkbox"/> commercial                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> structure              | <input type="checkbox"/> both               | <input type="checkbox"/> work in progress    | <input type="checkbox"/> educational                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> site                   | <b>Public Acquisition</b>                   | <b>Accessible</b>                            | <input type="checkbox"/> entertainment                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> object                 | <u>N/A</u> in process                       | <input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted     | <input type="checkbox"/> government                   |
|                                                 | <u>N/A</u> being considered                 | <input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted   | <input type="checkbox"/> industrial                   |
|                                                 |                                             | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> no       | <input type="checkbox"/> military                     |
|                                                 |                                             |                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> museum                       |
|                                                 |                                             |                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> park                         |
|                                                 |                                             |                                              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private residence |
|                                                 |                                             |                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> religious                    |
|                                                 |                                             |                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> scientific                   |
|                                                 |                                             |                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> transportation               |
|                                                 |                                             |                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> other:                       |

## 4. Owner of Property

name Frances M. Johnson

street & number 161 First Street, S.W.

city, town Largo N/A vicinity of Florida state

## 5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Pinellas County Courthouse

street & number 315 Court Street

city, town Clearwater Florida state

## 6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Historic Sites Survey of Largo has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1986  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Florida Bureau of Historic Preservation

city, town Tallahassee Florida state

# 7. Description

|                                          |                                       |                                             |                                                   |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Condition</b>                         |                                       | <b>Check one</b>                            | <b>Check one</b>                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> excellent       | <input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated | <input type="checkbox"/> unaltered          | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good | <input type="checkbox"/> ruins        | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered | <input type="checkbox"/> moved      date _____    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fair            | <input type="checkbox"/> unexposed    |                                             |                                                   |

## Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Louis Johnson Building is a two-story, concrete block structure with a trapezoidal plan and a flat, built-up roof that has a parapet on three sides. A two-story veranda with a hip roof extends the width of the facade. The Johnson Building is located on First Street, S.W., in downtown Largo, Florida. The street runs at a diagonal to the regular grid of the town plan and parallels the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad (now the CSX Corporation) right-of-way.

The foundation of the Johnson Building is a poured concrete wall with spread footings that supports the load bearing concrete block walls. The interior partitions that separate the three shop units on the first floor are also load bearing masonry walls. The ground floor of the building is about 6 inches above grade and is paved with hexagonal concrete pavers (14" diameter X 2" thick). Such hexblock pavers were designed for use in sidewalks but were also used for the flooring of commercial buildings in the Tampa Bay area of Florida during the 1910s and 20s.

The main (east) facade of the building is dominated by the two-story, seven-bay veranda. The veranda is supported by square wood posts and has a hip roof covered with composition roll roofing. A three foot wide "apron" of 1" X 6" vertical wood siding extends the width of the veranda just below the floor sill level of the upper gallery. This was once evidently used as a surface on which to attach or paint advertising. The upper veranda features a plain wooden balustrade consisting of thin, widely spaced palings framed by hand and foot railings.

The ground floor of the Johnson Building is occupied by three shops and by an enclosed stairway leading to the Pinellas Hotel on the second floor. The largest shop space is found on the south end of the building. This shop has a front with two large fixed pane windows flanking a pair of double doors. The doors are, in turn, flanked by cast iron pilasters with moldings and recessed panels. To the north (right) of the large shop is the smallest shop, which has one large fixed pane window to the left of the double doors. To the north of this shop is a recess that contains the single wooden door and transom opening onto the stairwell. The northernmost shop has two plate glass windows on either side of double wooden doors. The narrow piers between each of the shop units are made of rusticated concrete blocks.

The hotel on the second floor originally contained ten guest rooms and a common bathroom. The area was partitioned into apartments in the late 1920s and became the private residence of Charles E. Johnson (the son of Louis S. Johnson) and his wife Frances after Louis Johnson's death in 1946. Charles Johnson died in 1982 and as of this writing Mrs. Johnson is still the resident of the former hotel. She would not allow access to the area so that a written description could be made.

The second story of the main facade has three 1/1 light double hung sash windows and two wooden doors with a single fixed glass pane above two wood panels. One door lies near the center of the facade, with two windows to the north and one to the south. The other door is found on the south end of the facade. The concrete block wall on the second floor facade has a smooth face and deeply beveled edges.

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The southeast corner of the building is chamfered and faced with rusticated concrete block. Immediately above the porch roof is a heavy dentil cornice, also of concrete. The cornice extends across the main facade and occupies about eight feet of the north facade. Above the cornice is a rusticated concrete block parapet.

Rusticated concrete block occupies about the eastern eight feet of the north elevation of the Johnson Building at which point it is abutted by a one-story masonry structure that once served as a gasoline filling station. The remainder of the elevation, on the second story, features a plain concrete block wall. The first story contains an enclosed display window, while the second has four 1/1 light double hung sash windows. There is also a plain stepped parapet on this elevation.

The south elevation is also quite plain. On the first story are six small rectangular transom windows placed high in the wall. The second story contains six 1/1 light windows identical to those on the north elevation. Both elevations feature a simple stringcourse separating the parapet from the load bearing wall.

The rear elevation is also of plain concrete and has no parapet at the roof line. There are four main windows on the second story. All were originally 1/1 light windows similar to those in the other elevation, but two of these have lost their original sashes and have been enclosed. There is also a small aluminum awning window which serves a bathroom. The first story contains two pedestrian doors and one for motor vehicles. The garage door is a later addition.

RESOURCES

Contributing: Louis Johnson Building

Non-Contributing: None

# 8. Significance

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

**Specific dates** 1910-1911 **Builder/Architect** unknown

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The Louis Johnson Building in downtown Largo, Florida, fulfills criteria B and C for nomination to the National Register. It is associated with its builder, Louis Steele Johnson, one of the pioneer settlers and developers of the city of Largo, and the building is representative of a type of pre-1930s commercial building that is rapidly disappearing in Florida.

Louis Steele Johnson was born in Cedar Key, Florida, in 1870, the second youngest child of six children born to Captain Charles Wharton Johnson (1829-1907) and Catherine (Kurtz) Johnson (1831-1911). Charles Johnson was the owner and captain of the eight ton sailing ship Evening Star, which plied the Gulf of Mexico carrying the mail between Cedar Key and Ft. Myers. A native of Pennsylvania, he lived for a time in Key West, Florida, until he moved his shipping business to Cedar Key in the late 1860s. In 1870, his ship was wrecked during a storm while on its way to Ft. Myers, and he was rescued by fishermen from Clearwater, a city near present-day Largo.

Johnson was impressed by the high bluffs that run along Clearwater Harbor and the surrounding countryside, leading him to purchase a homestead overlooking the harbor in 1872. The site is now occupied by the Belleview Biltmore Hotel (National Register 1979). His attempt to establish citrus groves on the property failed because of unfavorable soil, and in 1877 he moved his family to a new homestead on the west shore of Lake Largo. In 1882 and 1883, Johnson purchased additional land to the south of his new homestead.

The first settlers arrived in the Largo area in the 1840s, but the population remained small. There were only about 50 families living in all of the Pinellas peninsula at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. The post war period saw a steady increase in population. The 1880 federal census lists 1,111 people (240 families) living on the peninsula. In this decade small communities began to take shape. In 1887, construction began on the Orange Belt Railway which was intended to link the Pinellas peninsula with major Florida rail lines for the shipment of citrus and other agricultural products to northern markets.

Knowing that the railroad promised future growth for their community the citizens of Largo sought and were granted the establishment of a post office in their village. The first postmaster of Largo was Joel McMullen, who was appointed on September 4, 1888. Charles W. Johnson became the second postmaster. The Orange Belt Railroad was built in Pinellas County in 1888 and crossed the southwest section of Johnson citrus grove. A depot was constructed about 100 yards from the Johnson House, and the town of Largo grew up around it.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property Less than one

Quadrangle name Clearwater

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

### UTM References

A 

|      |   |         |   |   |   |          |    |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
|------|---|---------|---|---|---|----------|----|---|----|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1    | 7 | 3       | 2 | 3 | 9 | 8        | 10 | 3 | 10 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 10 |
| Zone |   | Easting |   |   |   | Northing |    |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |

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| Zone |  | Easting |  |  |  | Northing |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

C 

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| Zone |  | Easting |  |  |  | Northing |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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| Zone |  | Easting |  |  |  | Northing |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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| Zone |  | Easting |  |  |  | Northing |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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| Zone |  | Easting |  |  |  | Northing |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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| Zone |  | Easting |  |  |  | Northing |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

### Verbal boundary description and justification

Whitehurst's & Others Subdivision, Block 5, N 30 ft. of Lot 6 and S 55 ft of Lots 14 and 15

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title W. Carl Shiver, Ph.D., Historic Sites Specialist

organization Florida Bureau of Historic Pres. date August 12, 1987

street & number R.A. Gray Building telephone (904) 487-2333

city or town Tallahassee state Florida

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  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 National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature 

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date August 12, 1987

### For NPS use only

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

Keeper of the National Register 

date 12/3/87

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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Louis S. Johnson appears to have been educated in Largo's first school, which was built by his father. He entered the citrus business with his father and was later instrumental in subdividing and developing the family property as it changed from grove land to residential and commercial usage within the city limits of Largo. He also tried his hand at truck farming, specializing in cabbages. In 1896, he married Elizabeth McMullen, the daughter of another Largo pioneer. Their first child, Louis C. Johnson, was born in 1897 but died in infancy. Another child, a daughter named Noreen, was born in 1900.<sup>5</sup>

The town of Largo was incorporated in 1905, and in 1907 Louis Johnson became the community's second mayor. He was to be elected to a second term in 1925. Johnson's wife died in 1908 and two years later he married Janie Kilgore, another Largo native. Their first child, Charles E. Johnson, was born in 1911. In that same year Johnson's mother died. His father<sup>6</sup> had died in 1907, and Louis had taken over many of the family business interests.

Two important projects undertaken by Johnson during the 1910-1911 period were the construction of the Louis Johnson Building and providing Largo with its first municipal water system. The Johnson building was erected on Railroad Avenue in the heart of the city's commercial district. The land had been part of the Johnson Homestead. To the rear of the building, Johnson drilled a well 178 feet deep to raise potable water to a 60,000 gallon tank atop a 75 foot high tower. This system replaced the many unreliable open household wells on which Largo's citizens had depended since the beginning of the settlement. The Johnson building was ready for occupancy in late 1911. The ground floor was occupied by the Largo Hardware Company, owned by Walter Geiselman, and by Louis Johnson's Drug Store and Ice Cream Parlor. The upper floor contained the Pinellas Hotel, managed by Johnson's wife.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the "growth" brought about by construction of the railroad, Largo remained a small community. Its population in 1910 was only 291. By 1925 it has risen to over 1,300 people, but the Great Depression saw a decline in population, so that in 1940 it stood just over 1,000. The 1980 federal census listed the population of incorporated Largo as being more than 59,000. Population growth in the post-war period has been dramatic, with an increase of 143 percent between 1970 and 1980.<sup>8</sup>

Louis S. Johnson died in 1946, and ownership of the Johnson Building passed to his son, Charles E. Johnson. He used the entire ground floor for his welding and marine supply business and lived with his wife, Frances, upstairs in the former hotel. Since Charles Johnson's death in 1982, the ground floor has been vacant. The second floor was still occupied by Mrs. Johnson in 1986.<sup>9</sup>

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Architecture

Although unremarkable in design for its time, the Louis Johnson Building represents a type of commercial architecture that is fast disappearing from Florida because of the rapid growth in the state's population, especially in the coastal areas of the peninsula. Particularly in Pinellas County, the cities of Largo, Clearwater, Belleair, Dunedin, Tarpon Springs, and St. Petersburg have been transformed from small independent communities into a single contiguous urban area. Most of this change has come within the last twenty years, resulting in the destruction of a large proportion of the original building stock because of the pressures of redevelopment. These communities, therefore, have lost much of their former identity.

The Johnson Building is among the oldest extant commercial buildings in downtown Largo, most of which date post-1930. The type of rusticated block construction represented by the Johnson Building was once popular in Florida and examples of this kind of building are still found in a number of communities, but most such structures have been demolished. The use of concrete block with a rusticated or a beveled ashlar face (called cast stone) came into favor in the last quarter of the 19th century and went out of fashion by about the 1920s. The block was formed in a mold on the building site. The molding machines were available by mail order, and judging from the number of cast stone houses and small commercial buildings which still exist in Florida, its popularity was widespread. Sears, Roebuck and Company marketed one such machine, called the "Wizard," in 1908. It came with a variety of accessories, including several face plates for producing different types of blocks.<sup>10</sup>

The Louis Johnson Building, therefore, is significant for its association with the Johnson family, who were early pioneers of Largo and who owned the property on which the building was erected. It is directly associated with Louis Steele Johnson, who had the building constructed and who personally used it for commercial purposes. Johnson was further an important local developer and was twice mayor of Largo. The property has remained in possession of the Johnson family till the present time. The building also represents a type of construction that is becoming increasingly rare in Florida and is one of the few commercial buildings in downtown Largo that dates prior to 1930.

END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sadie Johnson et al., eds, Largo, Florida, Then 'Til... (Largo, 1979), p. 15. ; U.S. Census, 1850-1910.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.; Hillsborough County, Tax and Deed Records

<sup>3</sup>Historic Sites Survey of Largo, Florida, 1986.

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END NOTES (Cont.)

<sup>4</sup>Largo, Then 'Til....

<sup>5</sup>Harvey Wells, "Genealogical Records of Pinellas Pioneers," unpublished manuscripts, Pinellas County Historical Society Library.

<sup>6</sup>Largo, Then 'Til..., p. 79.

<sup>7</sup>Polk's City Directory of Largo, Florida, Jacksonville: R.L. Polk Publishing Co., 1912-1925.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.; U.S. Census, 1910-1980.

<sup>9</sup>Johnson Family Grave Monuments, Largo Cemetery; Polk's City Directory of Largo, 1946-1986.

<sup>10</sup>Walton D. Stowell, "The 'Miracle' and the 'Wizard', Preliminary Notes on Concrete Block Making," Bulletin of the Association for Preservation Technology Vol 5, No. 2 (1973): 67-70.



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Continuation sheet Bibliography

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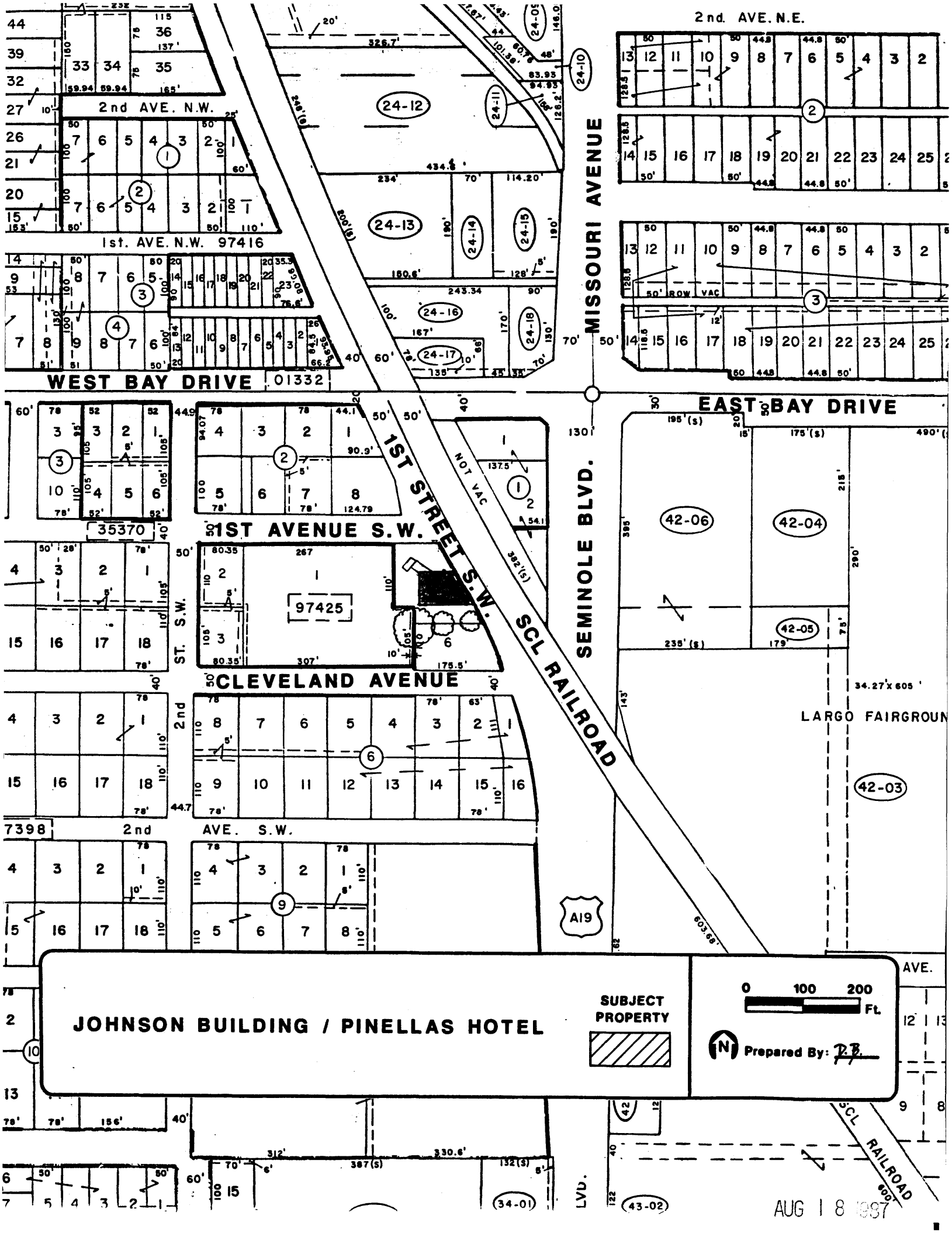
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**JOHNSON BUILDING / PINELLAS HOTEL**

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