

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICENATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

General Motors Building

AND/OR COMMON

General Motors Building

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

3044 West Grand Boulevard

NOT FOR PUBLICATION 1
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

CITY, TOWN

Detroit

VICINITY OF

STATE

Michigan

CODE

26

COUNTY

Wayne

CODE

163

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

☐ DISTRICT☒ BUILDING(S)☐ STRUCTURE☐ SITE☐ OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

☐ PUBLIC☒ PRIVATE☐ BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

☐ IN PROCESS☐ BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

☒ OCCUPIED☐ UNOCCUPIED☐ WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

☐ YES: RESTRICTED☒ YES: UNRESTRICTED☐ NO

PRESENT USE

☐ AGRICULTURE☐ MUSEUM☒ COMMERCIAL☐ PARK☐ EDUCATIONAL☐ PRIVATE RESIDENCE☐ ENTERTAINMENT☐ RELIGIOUS☐ GOVERNMENT☐ SCIENTIFIC☐ INDUSTRIAL☐ TRANSPORTATION☐ MILITARY☐ OTHER:**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

(Contact: Mr. Elliott M. Estes, Pres.)

NAME

General Motors Corporation

STREET & NUMBER

3044 West Grand Boulevard

CITY, TOWN

Detroit

VICINITY OF

STATE

Michigan

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTIONCOURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Register of Deeds, City-County Building

STREET & NUMBER

Woodward Avenue at Jefferson

CITY, TOWN

Detroit

STATE

Michigan

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

None

DATE

☐ FEDERAL ☐ STATE ☐ COUNTY ☐ LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input 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

Since its completion in 1923, the 15-story General Motors Headquarters Building, designed by noted architect Albert Kahn and occupying the block bounded by West Grand and Second Boulevards and Milwaukee and Cass Avenues in downtown Detroit, has symbolized General Motors' dominant position in the automobile industry. The 322-by-504-foot structure consists of a series of eight wings projecting from a central spine and a five-story hipped-roof Annex connected to its rear (southeast) facade. Except for the replacement of its wood window sashes and the modernization of some interior areas, the building has undergone little alteration and still retains much of its original architectural vitality. It is the oldest extant General Motors headquarters building in Detroit, and its construction and completion coincides with the beginning of the Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., era which saw the company surpass its competitors in total sales.

When General Motors was founded in 1908 it was officially headquartered in New York, later it opened headquarters in both New York and Detroit. Although the company occupied rented office over the next several years in both cities, its headquarters were in reality wherever William C. Durant happened to be, whether it be a hotel, his private railway car, or the office of one of the subsidiary companies. By 1919, however, many company officials desired to build a central office building in Detroit despite the opposition of Durant, who wanted to use available funds for purchasing or expanding plant facilities. Eventually Durant relented, and Albert Kahn was hired to design the new structure. An entire city block was purchased, and the 48 structures occupying the site were either torn down or moved. The Thompson-Starrett Company received the construction contract, and the first shovel of dirt was turned on June 2, 1919. The Annex was the first section completed, and it was used as a base for the huge cranes that were used in erecting the steel superstructure for the rest of the building. The edifice was constructed in an east-to-west direction, and the Cass Avenue side was completed and opened before all the steel work went up on the Second Avenue side. By November, 1920, the section facing Cass Avenue had received its first tenants, the Harrison Radiator Division. At this time, the edifice was called the Durant Building to honor the founder, but by the end of the year he had been ousted from control. Well before the structure's completion in January, 1923, its name had been changed to its present title.

In designing this structure Kahn combined elements of classical and modern architecture. He followed the Renaissance division of a building into base, body, and top. The base features a centrally-located entrance loggia with triple arches and a groined vault.

(continued)

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 type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES 1920-present

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Thompson-Starrett Company
Albert Kahn

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

As the Nation's largest manufacturer of motor vehicles and, according to institutional scholar Paul F. Douglas, "the largest manufacturing corporation in the world," General Motors has profoundly influenced not only the American automobile industry but corporate organization and personal lifestyles as well.¹ Two men--William C. Durant and Alfred P. Sloan, Jr.--were largely responsible for this development. In creating General Motors in 1908, Durant, says distinguished automotive historian John B. Rae, showed "a clear insight into the future of the automobile industry; its organization has followed the pattern that he initially adopted for General Motors."² Under Durant's direction, the company acquired the familiar makes of Buick, Oldsmobile, Pontiac (originally called the Oakland), Cadillac, and Chevrolet and a host of parts manufacturing concerns.

Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., president of General Motors from 1923 to 1937 and chairman of the board from 1937 to 1956, emerged as the company's most dominant figure in the post-Durant era. Sloan's decentralized management plan, according to distinguished management historian Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., "transformed General Motors from an agglomeration of many business units, largely automotive into a single coordinated enterprise . . . by successfully creating a general office to coordinate, appraise, and set broad goals and policies for the numerous operating divisions."³ In its innovations in management, "General Motors pioneered beyond the automobile industry," says Chandler, "because its decentralized form of administrative organization . . . became a model . . . for much of the rest of American industry."⁴

(continued)

¹Paul F. Douglas, Six Upon the World: Toward an American Culture for an Industrial Age (Boston, 1954), 184.

²John B. Rae, "William Crapo Durant," Dictionary of American Biography, Supplement Four (New York, 1974), 245.

³Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise (Cambridge, 1962), 130.

⁴Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. (ed.), Giant Enterprise: Ford, General Motors and the Automobile Industry (New York, 1964), 15.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(See continuation sheet.)

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY about 3.7 acres

UTM REFERENCES

A 1.7 329000 4692600
ZONE EASTING NORTHING

B 1.7 329160 4692660
ZONE EASTING NORTHING

C 1.7 329200 4692560
ZONE EASTING NORTHING

D 1.7 329040 4692500
ZONE EASTING NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

(See last page of description.)

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

Ralph J. Christian, Historian, Historic Landmarks Project

ORGANIZATION

DATE

American Association for State and Local History March 1977

STREET & NUMBER

TELEPHONE

1400 Eighth Avenue South

615-242-5583

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

Nashville,

Tennessee 37203

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.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

899

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CONTINUATION SHEET General Motors ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE one

This arch motif is continued along the front (northwest) facade and the sides of the building, creating a continuous arcade framing display windows for automobile exhibits and businesses located inside. Where the wings project from the central spine, the base reaches a height of two stories and is separated from the upper floors by a stone entablature with dentiled cornice. Stories 3 to 13 form the body of the building. Vertical piers faced with Bedford limestone rise uninterrupted from the base to the top of the 12th floor, where a stone course and carved corner blocks serve to relieve the modernistic simplicity of this section. Windows are set in rectangular surrounds and are of the one-over-one sash variety. Originally the sashes were wooden, but in recent years they have been replaced with metal ones. The crown consists of floors 14 to 15 and features marble Corinthian columns which support a massive stone entablature capped with a dentiled cornice. At both ends of the structure the roof has large neon letters which spell out General Motors.

The five-story hip-roofed Annex is connected to the main building at its rear (southeast) facade. Constructed of reinforced concrete and sheathed in limestone, this structure, which features fluted Ionic columns at its entrance, originally housed the General Motors Laboratory. Currently, it serves as the central office for the Chevrolet division and is divided from the main building at basement level by a 504-foot-long depressed drive which extends from Cass to Second Avenue.

Inside, the G. M. Building is little altered except for the installation of modern elevators, modernization of some of the offices, and the conversion of an auditorium on the first floor into office space. The lobby area features vaulted ceilings that are brightly decorated in the bright colors and old gold typical of the Italian Renaissance style. This area, which contains a number of small shops, businesses, and automobile exhibits, is faced with tavernelle marble imported from Italy and has floors covered with gray Tennessee marble. Lobbies and corridors on floors 2 through 15 are faced with white Alabama marble and have floors of gray Tennessee marble.

Situated in the business section of downtown Detroit, the General Motors Headquarters Building is still being used for its original purpose, and it is well maintained.

(continued)

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Boundary Justification. The boundary includes the General Motors Headquarters Building, its Annex, a portion of the covered metal passageway that connects the Annex to the neighboring Argonaut Building, and the surrounding sidewalks; but the metal passageway and sidewalks do not contribute to the building's national significance.

Boundary Description. As indicated in red on the accompanying AASLH Sketch Map and in black on the accompanying U.S.G.S., 7.5' Series, Michigan-Ontario, Detroit Quad. (1968, photorevised, 1973), a line beginning at the northeast corner of the intersection of Second and West Grand Boulevards and extending eastward approximately 504 feet along the south curb of West Grand Boulevard to the west curb of Cass Avenue; thence, southward approximately 322 feet along the west curb of Cass Avenue to the north curb of Milwaukee Avenue; thence, westward approximately 504 feet along the north curb of Milwaukee Avenue to the east curb of Second Boulevard; thence, northward approximately 322 feet along the east curb of Second Boulevard to the point of beginning.

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Sloan also played the major role in developing a marketing strategy that offered "a car for every purse and purpose," which in effect made the automobile a symbol of the individual's financial status.⁵ By emphasizing styling improvements and offering a wide variety of color combinations and personal comforts, Sloan and G. M. popularized the annual model, which was based on planned obsolescence. By 1926 this strategy had enabled General Motors to surpass the Ford Motor Company in total car sales with 30 percent of the market, a figure which by the 1950's would reach well beyond 50 percent.

Designed by noted architect Albert Kahn and completed in 1923, the 15-story General Motors Building occupies the block bounded by West Grand and Second Boulevards and Milwaukee and Cass Avenues in downtown Detroit and symbolizes General Motors' dominant position in the automobile industry. The 302-by-504-foot structure consists of an elongated central block with eight wings and a five-story, hip-roofed Annex that is connected to the rear (southeast) facade. Except for the replacement of its wood window sashes and the modernization of some interior areas, the building has undergone little alteration and still retains much of its original architectural vitality. It is the oldest extant General Motors headquarters building in Detroit, and its construction.

History

General Motors, currently the largest manufacturing corporation in the world, was created by William Crapo Durant, "a business genius whose mastery of the techniques of persuasion and promotion says historian George S. May, "have rarely been equaled in the annals of American business."⁶ In 1886 Durant founded what eventually became the Durant-Dort Carriage Company with \$2,000 in capital and quickly expanded it into one of the Nation's largest manufacturers of horse-drawn vehicles by creating a nationwide sales network and acquiring a host of subsidiary companies engaged in producing not only the finished product but the component parts as well. "Through the development of the Durant-Dort organization," according to May, "one can see at work the same restless, innovative, gambling spirit that later characterized Durant's auto ventures."⁷

(continued)

⁵Quoted in *ibid.*, 16.

⁶George S. May, A Most Unique Machine: The Michigan Origins of the Automobile Industry (Grand Rapids, 1975), 176.

⁷*Ibid.*, 191.

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In 1904 Durant turned his attention to the infant automobile industry after assuming control of the financially troubled Buick Motor Car Company. Using the resources of the Durant-Dort Carriage Company, particularly its sales organization and supply plants, he quickly put Buick back on its feet. By 1908 Durant had made Buick the Nation's best selling car, surpassing the earlier leaders Ford and Cadillac. About this same time he began to envision the creation of a large company to manufacture not one but several makes of automobiles.

After an abortive attempt to merge Buick with Ford, Maxwell-Briscoe, and Reo, Durant founded the General Motors Company on September 16, 1908. A holding company, it soon controlled not only Buick but Oldsmobile, Oakland (later renamed Pontiac), Cadillac, and several lesser known automobile manufacturers and parts suppliers. With the exception of Cadillac which required a large cash outlay, most companies were acquired simply by an exchange of stock. Durant's "vision," says company historian Arthur Pound, "was always running far ahead of his treasury," and by 1910 he faced a shortage of cash for operating expenses.⁸ This situation, combined with losses caused by unwise acquisitions like the friction-drive Cartercar and the Heany Lamp Company with its fraudulent patents, had placed General Motors in severe financial straits. As a result, Durant lost control of the company to a consortium of bankers.

James J. Storrow, formerly of the banking firm of Lee, Higginson & Company, directed General Motors after Durant's ouster. "He gave the concern the overhauling it had to have," argues John B. Rae, "not only financially but also in operating structure."⁹ A general administrative office was created, many of the subsidiaries were combined, unprofitable acquisitions were liquidated, a research department was started, and automobile production confined to the most profitable makes. Storrow also promoted talented individuals like Charles W. Nash, company president after 1912, and Walter P. Chrysler, president of Buick.

(continued)

⁸Arthur Pound, The Turning Wheel: The Story of General Motors Through Twenty-five Years- 1908-1933 (Garden City, 1934), 86.

⁹John B. Rae, American Automobile Manufacturers: The First Forty Years (Philadelphia, 1959), 89.

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These men contributed not only to General Motor's development but later formed companies bearing their own names.

While Storrow and Nash had been concentrating on providing General Motors with a sound financial base, William C. Durant plotted to regain control. In 1911 he became Louis Chevrolet's principal backer in the Chevrolet Motor Company. The Chevrolet proved so successful that Durant was able to regain control of General Motors again in 1916 by simply exchanging Chevrolet stock for that of General Motors at a very advantageous rate. According to Durant's biographer Lawrence R. Gustin, many "heralded the news of Chevrolet swallowing giant General Motors as one of the greatest achievements in the history of American finance" and "writers of the time likened the situation to Jonah swallowing the whale."¹⁰

Durant's return to General Motors was followed by another period of rapid expansion. In 1916 to insure a steady flow of automotive components, he organized United Motors, a holding company of parts suppliers that 2 years later became a division of the General Motors Corporation. This acquisition also brought into the company orbit Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., and Charles F. Kettering, both of whom were to play significant roles in General Motors' later development. One year later, in 1919 Durant engineered the purchase of a controlling interest in Fisher Body, the world's largest producer of automobile bodies, set up the General Motors Acceptance Corporation for consumer financing, and purchased for \$56,366.50, the company that eventually became known as Frigidaire.

Despite his accomplishments, Durant's leadership came under increasing criticism. His acquisition of the Samson Tractor Company proved unprofitable and eventually cost General Motors nearly \$33 million. Of even greater concern, especially to colleagues like Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., was Durant's apparent inability to delegate authority and his sloppy administrative methods. Finally, late in 1920, Durant, under pressure from the DuPont interests which had helped finance his comeback, relinquished control of the company. His departure, however, "resulted less

(continued)

¹⁰Lawrence R. Gustin, Billy Durant, Creator of General Motors (Grand Rapids, 1973), 176, 181.

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CONTINUATION SHEET General Motors ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE four

from financial mismanagement within the corporation," says Chandler, "than from his own personal financial difficulties" caused by an attempt to maintain the price of General Motors stock.¹¹

Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., president of General Motors from 1923 to 1937 and chairman of its board from 1937 to 1956, emerged as the company's most dominant figure in the post-Durant era. In 1921 Pierre S. Dupont, Durant's successor as president, began to implement a reorganization plan developed by Sloan. Sloan's decentralized management plan, says Chandler, "transformed General Motors from an agglomeration of many business units, largely automotive into a single coordinated enterprise . . . by successfully creating a general office to coordinate, appraise, and set broad goals and policies for the numerous operating divisions."¹²

Sloan also played the major role in developing a marketing strategy which offered "a car for every purse and purpose," which in effect made the automobile a symbol of the individual's financial status.¹³ By emphasizing styling improvements and offering a wide variety of color combinations and personal comforts, the annual model, based on planned obsolescence, was popularized. By 1926 this strategy had enabled General Motors to surpass the Ford Motor Company in total car sales with a 30 percent share of the market, a figure which by the 1950's would reach well beyond 50 percent.

The Sloan era also witnessed an expansion into nonautomotive fields like mechanical refrigeration, diesel locomotives, and aviation. Automotive operations were expanded abroad, and foreign manufacturers like Vauxhall in Great Britain and Opel in Germany came under the control of General Motors. Although the company has reduced its involvement in some fields like aviation, it has expanded in other areas. In the 1975 fiscal year General Motors manufactured over 6.6 million motor vehicles and reported total sales from of over \$35.7 billion.

¹¹Chandler, Giant Enterprise, 72.

¹²Chandler, Strategy and Structure, 130.

¹³Quoted in Chandler, Giant Enterprise, 16.

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General Motors Building
3044 West Grand Boulevard
Detroit, Michigan

West Grand Boulevard

Second Boulevard

General Motors Building

Cass Avenue

← ca. 504 ft. →

← ca. 322 ft. →

Annex

Milwaukee Avenue



Prepared by:
G.R. Adams, AASLH
March 1977

NOT TO SCALE