

16-30 MONROE AVENUE (COMMERCIAL)
(Second Williams Block)
Detroit
Wayne County
Michigan

HABS No. MI-321

HABS
MICH
82-DETRO,
51-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
Mid-Atlantic Regional Office
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

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51

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Location: 16-30 Monroe Avenue
Detroit
Wayne County
Michigan

U.S.G.S. Detroit, Michigan Quadrangle
UTM: 17.331420.4688480

Present
Owner: Community and Economic
Development Department
City of Detroit
150 Michigan Avenue
Detroit, Michigan 48226

Present
Occupant: None

Present Use: None

Significance: The Second Williams Block is significant as a remnant of commercial architecture in Detroit dating from the early 1870s, although two-thirds of the building was demolished following a 1973 fire in the south part of the structure. It is also significant as an example of the work of Mortimer L. Smith, a renown Detroit architect and painter. John Conatantine Williams, who built this commercial building to develop part of his real estate holdings in Detroit, was a member of one of the city's wealthiest families during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1872-73.
2. Architect: Mortimer L. Smith (1840-97)
Mortimer L. Smith was born in 1840, the son of noted Detroit architect Sheldon Smith. Mortimer Smith learned architecture from his father and formally joined his father's practice in 1861. Following his father's death in 1868, Mortimer Smith continued to practice architecture on his own until 1883, when his son, Frederick, joined as a principle partner in the firm of Mortimer Smith & Son. Mortimer Smith was a noted painter of landscapes in the late nineteenth century and one of Detroit's most important architects.

His most notable work, primarily completed in the 1870s and 1880s, included several elaborate residences for wealthy Detroit businessmen; institutional work, including the Michigan State School for Boys (1871-74) in Coldwater, the State House of Correction (1877) in Ionia, Michigan, and the Art Loan Exhibition Building (1883), Detroit's first art museum; and two Gothic-style Detroit churches, the Second Congregation Church (1872) and the Woodward Avenue Baptist Church (1887). Smith's major commercial buildings included the Ferry Building (1877), the Campau Building (1883), and the first major segment of the J.L. Hudson Company department store (1891).

Following Mortimer Smith's death in 1897, his son, Frederick, took over the firm, which he combined with others in 1903 to form the partnership of Field, Hinchman, and Smith. The latter then became the firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, which remains a major Detroit architectural firm today.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the structure stands. Reference is to the Clerk's Office of the County of Wayne, Michigan.

- 1816 Deed, April 17, 1816, recorded in Liber 3, p. 80. John and Sally Harvey to John R. Williams.
- 1848 Deed, June 28, 1848, recorded in Liber 33, p. 470. Mayor, Recorder, Aldermen, City of Detroit, to John R. Williams.
- 1859 Report in Partition, August 3, 1859, recorded in Liber 77, p. 236. Theodore Williams et al to John Constantine Williams.
- 1859 Report in Partition, August 3, 1859, recorded in Liber 77, p. 236. Theodore Williams et al to James Mott Williams.
- 1887 Warranty Deed, April 5, 1887, recorded in Liber 309, p. 14. John Constantine and Sarah Williams to Edward Kanter.
- 1905 Deed, May 19, 1905, recorded in Liber 609, p. 614. Henry M. Duffield, Trustee for the estate of James Mott Williams, to James E. Scripps.
- 1932 Quit Claim Deed, May 3, 1932, recorded in Liber B 264909. Gertrude Fried to Book-Cadillac Properties, Inc.
- 1944 Warranty Deed, June 8, 1944, recorded in Liber 7019, p. 581. Book-Cadillac Corporation to the State of Michigan.
- 1973 Quit Claim Deed, December 6, 1973, recorded in Liber 18675, p. 24. State of Michigan to TC & M Company.
- 1975 Warranty Deed, January 24, 1975, recorded in Liber 19014, p. 701. TC & M Company to the City of Detroit.

4. Builders, suppliers:

a. Builder: John Constantine Williams (1817-92)

5. Original plans and construction: A Detroit Tribune article on January 26, 1872 estimated the cost of construction at \$100,000. No original architectural plans have been found. The original building, which occupied the corner of Monroe and Michigan Avenues, had a curved plan to fit the street pattern, and was more than twice the size of the surviving remnant.

6. Alterations and additions:

The building has had no additions during its history. The southern two-thirds of the building was demolished following a 1973 fire which destroyed the Family (Follies) Theater. Most of the building was gutted and converted into the Family Theater in 1909. City of Detroit building permits show more than two dozen alterations to the building between 1909 and 1958, with virtually all of these consisting of alterations to storefronts.

B. Historical Context:

John Constantine Williams (1817-92) was one of seven sons of John R. Williams (1782-1854), the first elected mayor of Detroit (1824-25) and reputedly the wealthiest man in Michigan at the time of his death in 1854, with most of his wealth in Detroit real estate. In 1858, the Williams children inherited their father's real estate, including property on the east side of Monroe Avenue between Michigan Avenue and Farmer. This was a prime commercial location in the heart of Detroit's business district. John Constantine Williams erected a small, five-story commercial building (the First Williams Block) on the property in 1859 and it is still extant. Adjoining it, he built a much larger office building, the Second Williams Block, in 1872-73. John Constantine Williams maintained a real estate office in one of the two buildings from 1859 until the mid-1880s. He moved to Florida for health reasons in 1875, and lived there until his death in 1892.

The original building has had a variety of owners and uses over time, including retail stores, offices, several hotels, and a movie theater. It served as an office building through the 1870s, with retail stores on the ground floor.

B. Historical Context (Continued):

This commercial building underwent a major conversion in 1880-81, when it was transformed into the Kirkwood Hotel, also known as the Kirkwood House and the Kirkwood. The proprietor of the new hotel, Commodore P. Howell, obtained a ten-year lease on the building from the owners, John Conatantine and J. Mott Williams, and spent \$23,000 on renovations and furnishings. The second floor included three dining rooms, a public drawing room, and several suites. The three upper floors contained 123 guest rooms, including 23 suites, all provided with steam heat, and hot and cold running water. The majority had baths as well.

Howell opened the Kirkwood in August 1881, but transferred his lease to Harzell & Company in April 1882. The building owners closed the hotel in July 1882 after the lessees failed to pay their rent. John C. Williams reopened the hotel in 1883 under his own management. Lew B. Clark managed the hotel for Williams in 1885-1887. The Detroit City Directory of 1887 promoted the hotel as as "The New Kirkwood, Nelson and Little, Proprietors."

John O. Plank, operator of Plank's Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, bought the Kirkwood in July 1888 and reopened it as the Plankington Hotel in October 1888. The Detroit Tribune reported that "the place has been refitted, repapered and refurnished throughout." The venture was a failure and Plank sold the hotel in November 1889 to Lew B. Clark, a previous manager. The building was then known as the Kantor Building from 1891 through 1908. The upper floors were used for general office space until the Hotel Campua operated there in 1901-1905, followed by the Hotel Fowler in 1906-1909.

During the time span when different hotels occupied the building, the hotel lobbies and public areas were situated on the second story. The first story was occupied by a variety of retail shops selling men's clothing, hats, shoes, jewelry, and cigars. Most of the Second Williams Block was gutted in 1909 and turned into the Family Theater, a 934-seat facility designed by the architect Fuller Clafflin for vaudeville shows. The Family Theater was converted for movies in 1914 and it remained one of Detroit's most popular theaters into the 1950s. The Chinese Imperial Restaurant opened in 1911 in the segment of the building adjacent to the Family Theater, changed its name in 1913 to the Chinese Republic Restaurant, and remained there until 1938.

B. Historical Context (Continued):

This area of Detroit, including Cadillac Square, Campus Martius, and the adjacent sections of Monroe Avenue, was the city's first major theater district, with vaudeville houses, nickelodeons, and movie palaces, including several designed by C. Howard Crane and Albert Kahn. Although renamed The Follies in 1967, the Family Theater remained open until it burned to the ground on July 28, 1973, in a spectacular fire which destroyed two-thirds of the Second Williams Block. A few shops remained open on the ground floor of the surviving section of the building until the late 1970s, when the City of Detroit, which owned the property, vacated the building and boarded it up.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Second Williams Block at 16-30 Monroe is significant as a remnant of mid-19th century commercial architecture in Detroit. Built in the early 1870s, it is also significant as an example of the work of renown architect and painter, Mortimer L. Smith. He designed the structure in the Italianate style which was fashionable from the 1850s through the 1870s. Historic photographs show that the surviving segment is typical of the original building. The Italianate character appears in the use of a widely overhanging cornice supported by large decorative brackets; horizontal belt courses; tall narrow windows; and the combination of rectangular and segmental- and full-arch window tops that are crowned by bracketed hooda and pediments.
2. Condition of fabric: While the existing remnant of the Monroe Avenue facade retains nearly all of its original detailing, the overall structural system of the building is in poor condition. A corner at the rear of the building was destroyed during the demolition of the adjacent structure, and subsequently the roof and floors in this area have collapsed. The roof has suffered extensive damage because of water seepage from the roof.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The structure is five-stories tall, plus basement. The surviving segment of the original building is triangular in layout, with a right angle formed at the northernmost corner, and measures 72 feet wide and 80 feet deep. The principle facade, fronting on Monroe, is divided into three vertical sections or bays, each of which contains three windows per floor above the first story.
2. Foundations: Basement walls are made of brick masonry.
3. Wall construction: Exterior walls are masonry load-bearing and consist of common brick. The Monroe Avenue facade is sheathed in grey-colored cut sandstone panels, each 6-8" thick. The wall ornamentation on this facade consists of belt courses, which are located above and below windows, quilloches, various bas-relief carvings, and an intricate cast-iron entablature. The wall area between windows on the second and third stories is more extensively ornamented than on the fourth and fifth floors. The shapes of window tops vary by floor: rectangular for those on the second floor, segmental-arch on the third and fourth, and full-rounded arch on the fifth floor. Pediments crown windows on the second, third and fourth stories, while bracketed semi-circular hoods crown the fifth floor windows.
4. Structural system, framing: Wooden floor joists and roof rafters bear on interior cast iron beams which, in turn, are supported by cast iron columns and masonry load-bearing exterior walls.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways: The surviving Monroe Avenue frontage has three entrances located in each of the bays. There are two service doors at the rear of the building.
 - b. Windows: Aside from a few windows at the rear of the structure, virtually all fenestration appears on the Monroe Avenue facade. Fenestration on the third through fifth floors consists of double-hung sash with one-over-one windows surrounded by wooden frames. The second floor has single-hung single-light pivot windows with wooden frames.

B. Description of Exterior:

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The building has a flat roof with a parapet, and is moderately pitched to the rear.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The entire roof-line entablature is made of cast iron. The overhanging cornice, which is broken intermittently by decorative triangular projections, in turn is supported by nine large ornamented brackets. The frieze contains decorative square panels separated by small, plain brackets and the narrow architrave features fan-shaped ornaments.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: See sketch plans. Only the basement, first, and second stories are accessible because the easternmost third of the building has collapsed, destroying the stairwell leading to the upper floors.
2. Stairways: The only remaining stairway, linking the basement, first, and second stories is situated at the southwest corner of the building.
3. Decorative features and trim: The only large room reasonably intact, located on the second floor, includes two cast iron columns with Ionic plaster capitals supporting a timber ceiling joist with decorative plaster cove moldings. This room was either a dining room or a drawing room serving the hotels that occupied the building over the years.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The original building extended along Monroe Avenue to the Campus Martius, and then continued to Michigan Avenue, with a substantial bend in the building facade to reflect the street pattern. The Monroe Avenue-Campus Martius facade was approximately 200 feet in length, while the Michigan Avenue frontage was about 80 feet. The portion of the Second Williams Block remaining faces northwest and overlooks Campus Martius, one of Detroit's first public squares, named in 1788 after the more famous square in Rome. Detroit's Campus Martius was the site of a blockhouse in the late eighteenth century and then served as a military parade ground before becoming a public park in 1835. The Second Williams Block stands at the southernmost end of Monroe Avenue, one of Detroit's major commercial centers and thoroughfares from the early nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural drawings: None have been found.

B. Historic Views: The best views are found in the collections of Manning Brothers, Commercial Photographers, 26761 John R, Madison Heights, MI 48071. These include views shot in 1908, 1916, 1933, 1936, and 1951. The Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library has overall views of Monroe Avenue.

C. Bibliography

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Reading Room File, "John Constantine Williams."

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2. Secondary and published sources:

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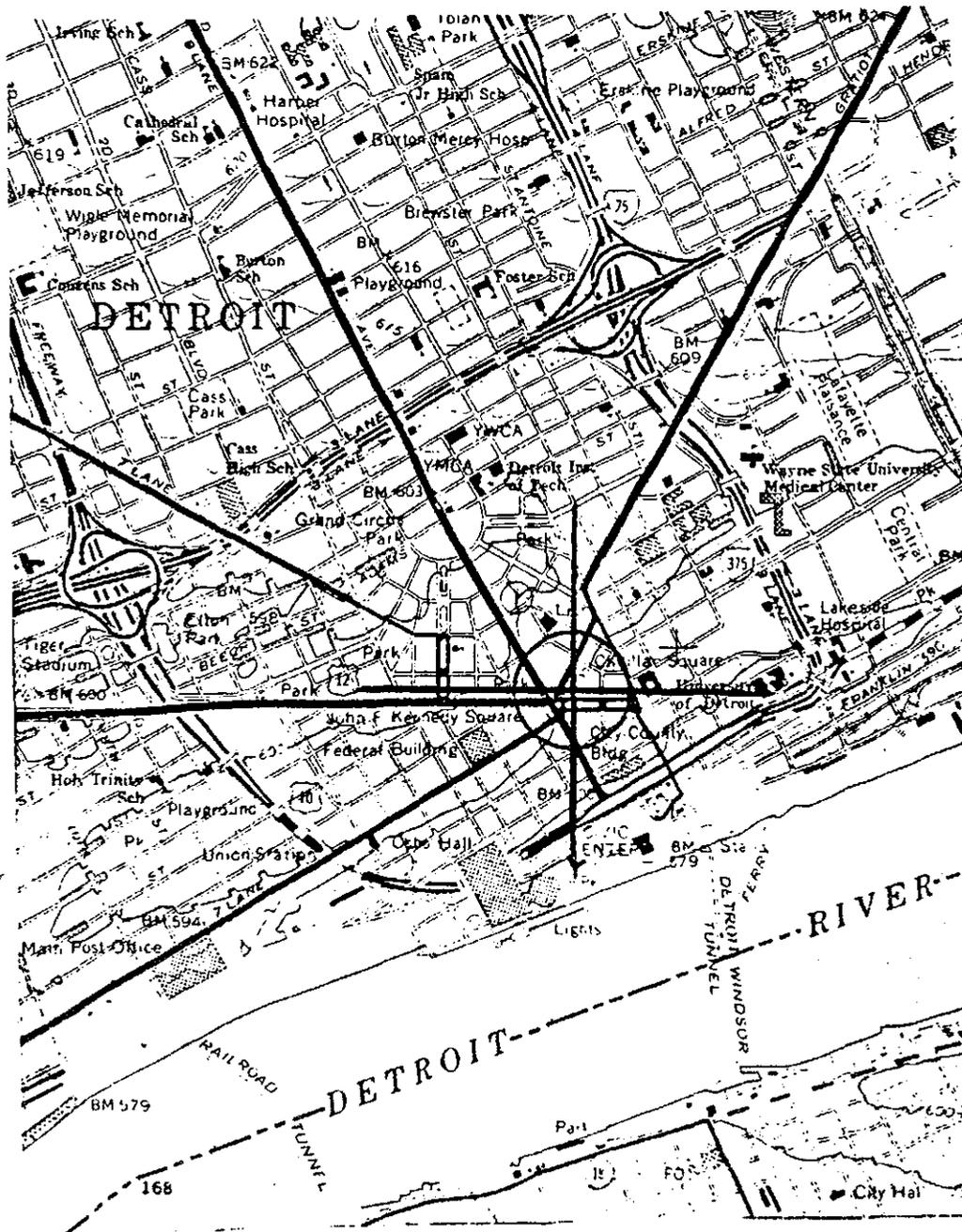
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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

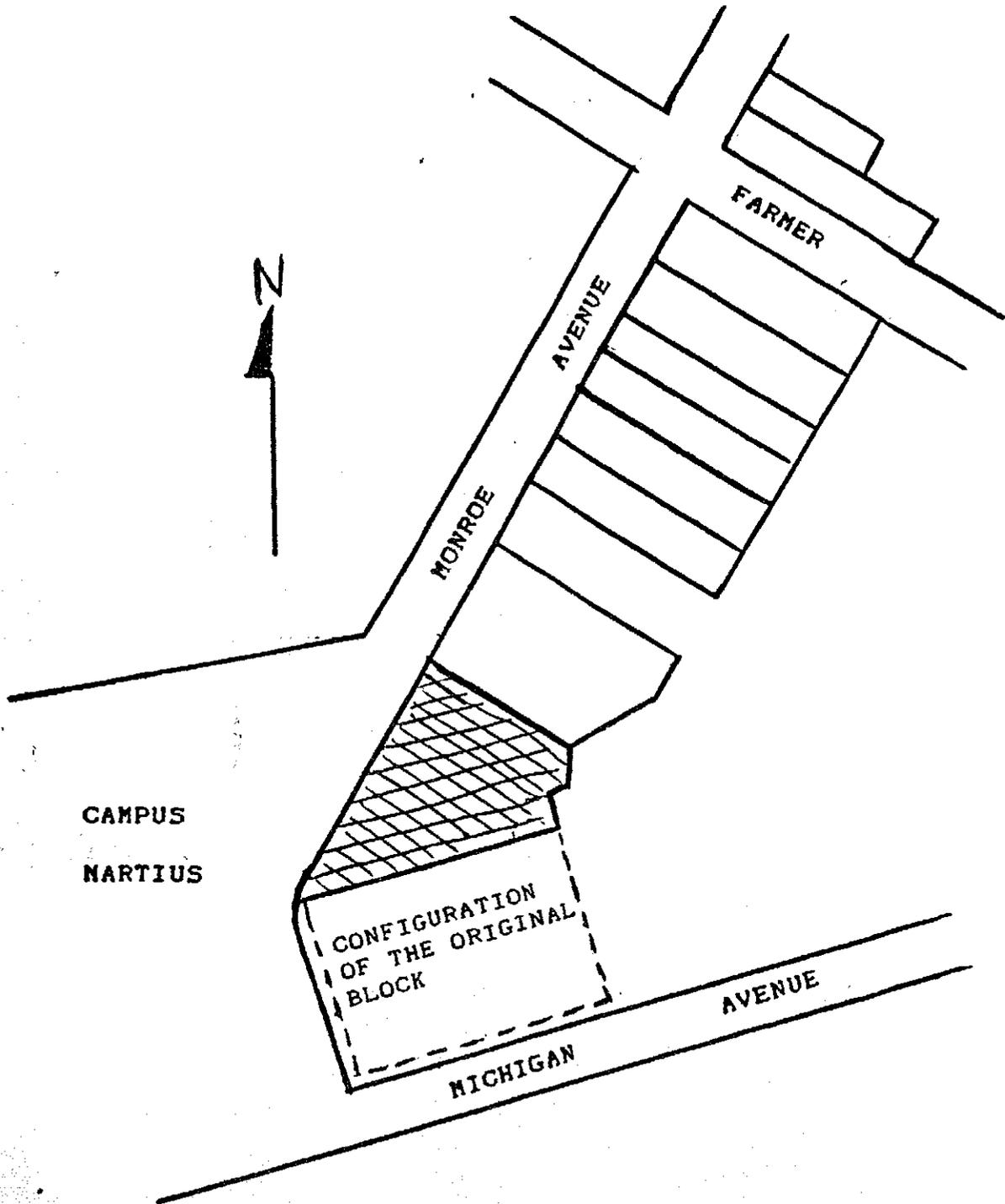
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Date: July-August 1989

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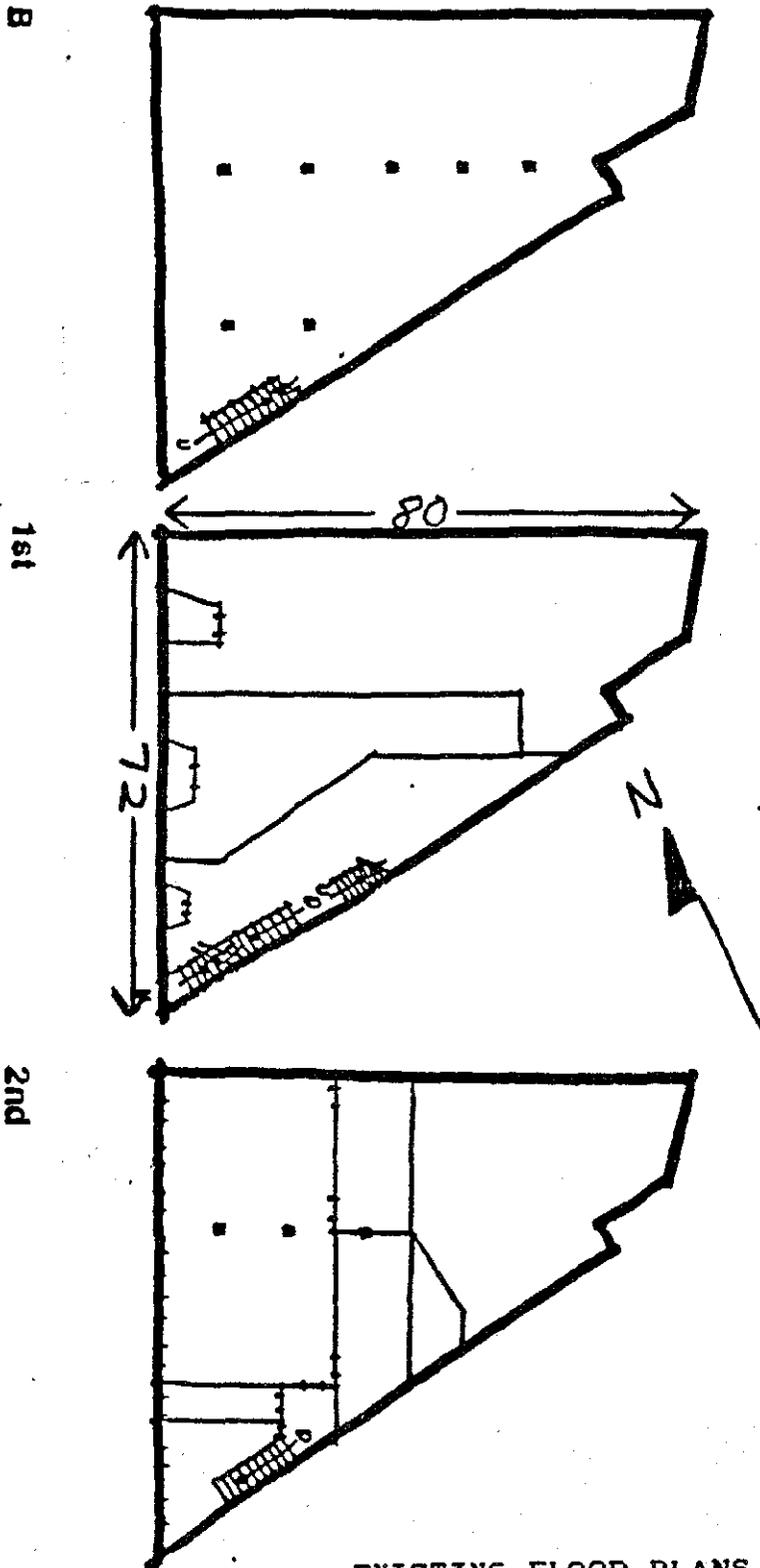
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16-30 MONROE AVENUE (Commercial Building)
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EXISTING FLOOR PLANS