

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, MANUFACTURING PLANT
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)
12200 East Jefferson Avenue
Detroit
Wayne County
Michigan

HAER No. MI-24-A

HAER
MICH
SS-DETRO
01A-

~~PHOTOGRAPHS~~

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

National Park Service
Northeast Region
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

HAER
MICH
82-DETRO,
61A -

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, MANUFACTURING PLANT

(Chalmers Motor Corporation)

HAER No. MI-24-A

Location: 12200 East Jefferson Avenue
Detroit
Wayne County, Michigan

UTM: A: 17.338125.4692420 C: 17.338740.4691900
B: 17.338410.4691760 D: 17.338500.4692500

Quad: Belle Isle, Michigan, 1:24,000

Dates of Construction: 1908-1955

Architects: Albert Kahn; Smith, Hinchman & Grylls

Present Owner: The Chrysler Corporation
12000 Chrysler Drive
Highland Park, MI 48288

Present Use: Demolished in 1991

Significance: This sprawling complex of factory buildings was a principle manufacturing facility for the Chalmers-Detroit and Chalmers Motor Company in 1908-1917; for the Maxwell Motor Motor Car Company in 1917-1925; and for the Chrysler Corporation in 1925-1990. It included typical examples of Albert Kahn's reinforced concrete factories from the period 1905-1920 and later examples of single-story steel-framed designs by Kahn and by Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, another important Detroit architectural firm.

Project Information: This documentation is the result of a Memorandum of Agreement among the Chrysler Corporation, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the City of Detroit as a mitigative measure prior to demolition of these buildings. It was completed in March 1993 by Charles K. Hyde, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan 48202

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Summary of the History of Property Holdings and Land Use
Patterns to 1920

Between 1907 and 1917, the Chalmers Motor Corporation and its immediate predecessors assembled ten large parcels of land to create this industrial site of approximately 60 acres. Most of the land was sold by the estates of Richard Henry Connor (1812-1903) and Joseph H. Berry (1839-1907). A summary chain of title will be presented below.

The parcels that Chalmers acquired in 1907-1917 were parts of three original land grants made by the French during the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The U.S. Government examined and confirmed these so-called Private Claims between 1807 and 1823. In 1814, Henry Connor (1780-1840), the father of Richard Henry Connor, acquired two of these tracts (Private Claims 385 and 386), containing 197 and 202 acres respectively. He settled on the Detroit River near the mouth of a creek that took his name. In 1851, Henry Connor's estate was divided among his heirs, including Richard Henry Connor. At some point in the early twentieth century, the street at the eastern edge of his lands, originally Connor's Creek Road, became Conner Avenue, while the one at the western edge remained "Connor's Lane." Connor's Creek is now canalized south of Freud, while it is carried by a covered brick and concrete conduit north of Freud.¹

By the early twentieth century, Joseph H. Berry owned much of the land in this district. Berry had begun a successful varnish manufacturing business in 1858, at age nineteen, and by the early twentieth century was involved in the manufacture of charcoal iron, wood alcohol, and barrels. He was also a major landowner on the east side of Detroit. Berry was directly responsible for developing this area as an industrial district. He had combined his ironmaking enterprises into the Lake Superior Iron & Chemical Company in 1907, intending to build a major ironworks at this general location. He was more important, however, in almost single-handedly developing and promoting the Detroit Terminal Railroad. Berry provided the right-of-way to the new line south of Jefferson Avenue at no cost. His death in 1907 came before development of this district had gone forward.²

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Original and Subsequent Owners

The following is an incomplete chain of title to the segments of Private Claim 386 (Lots 1-3) between Freund and Jefferson Avenue. Reference is to the Tract Books in the Clerk's Office of the County of Wayne, Michigan.

- 1906 Patent, 7 May 1906, recorded in Liber 662, p. 236.
(Private Claim 386)
United States, by President James Monroe, to Henry Connor, Assignee of Joseph Leonard Trombly.
- 1851 Partition of Estate of Henry Connor, deceased,
13 September 1851, recorded in Liber 49, p. 487.
Lot 1 to Benjamin H. Connor; Lot 2 to Andrew H.
Connor; and Lot 3 to Sally Connor.
- 1867 Warranty Deed, 21 February 1867, recorded in Liber
132, p. 184. (Lot 1)
John H. Connor to Richard H. Connor.
- 1909 Warranty Deed, 5 August 1909, recorded in Liber 721,
p. 528. (Part of Lot 1)
Trustees of the Estate of Richard H. Connor to William
W. Hannan.
- 1910 Warranty Deed, 4 January 1910, recorded in Liber 721,
p. 530. (Part of Lot 1)
William H. Hannan to the Chalmers-Detroit Motor Co.
- 1911 Warranty Deed, 28 July 1911, recorded in Liber 784,
p. 491. (Part of Lot 1)
Trustees of the Estate of Richard H. Connor to the
Chalmers-Detroit Motor Co.
- 1917 Warranty Deed, 20 April 1917, recorded in Liber 1166,
p. 274. (Part of Lot 1)
Trustees of the Estate of Richard H. Connor to the
Chalmers Motor Co.

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Original and Subsequent Owners (Continued)

- 1852 Warranty Deed, 15 September 1852, recorded in Liber 46, p. 200. (Lot 3)
William Chapoton to Eustache Chapoton.
- 1854 Warranty Deed, 4 April 1854, recorded in Liber 53, p. 123. (Lot 2)
Andrew H. Connor to Augustus Chapoton.
- 1867 Warranty Deed, 25 June 1867, recorded in Liber 123, p. 359. (Lots 2 and 3)
Eustache Chapoton to John Kelly.
- 1873 Warranty Deed, 20 August 1873, recorded in Liber 172, p. 12. (Lots 2 and 3)
John Kelly to William Wreford and George Beck.
- 1907 Warranty Deed, 8 July 1907, recorded in Liber 672, p. 451. (Lots 2 and 3)
William Wreford and George Beck to the Union Trust Co., Administrator of the Estate of Joseph H. Berry.
- 1907 Warranty Deed, 2 August 1907, recorded in Liber 672, p. 494. (Parts of Lots 2 and 3).
Union Trust Co. to the E.R. Thomas-Detroit Co.
- 1909 Warranty Deed, 16 June 1909, recorded in Liber 703, p. 75. (Parts of Lots 2 and 3).
Union Trust Co. to the Chalmers-Detroit Motor Co.
- 1917 Warranty Deed, 20 April 1917, recorded in Liber 1199, p. 163. (Part of Lot 2).
Trustees of the Berry Estate to the Chalmers Motor Co.
- 1923 Warranty Deed, 23 February 1923, No. 670717 (Parts of Lots 2 and 3).
Trustees of the Berry Estate to the Maxwell Motor Co.
- 1925 Warranty Deed, 24 June 1925, recorded in Liber 1142, p. 373 (Parts of Lots 2 and 3).
Maxwell Motor Corporation to the Chrysler Corporation.

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Original and Subsequent Owners (Continued)

- 1929 Warranty Deed, 2 August 1929, No. B92518 (Parts of Lot 3).
Trustees of the Berry Estate to the Chrysler Corporation.
- 1934 Quit Claim Deed, 23 August 1934, recorded in Liber 4283, p. 548 (Parts of Lots 1 and 2).
Huron Farms Company to the Chrysler Corporation.
- 1934 Quit Claim Deed, 24 August 1934, recorded in Liber 4283, p. 544 (Parts of Lots 1 and 2).
Trustees of the Berry Estate to the Chrysler Corporation.

The following is an incomplete chain of title to the segments of Private Claim 385 (Lots 4-6) between Freud and Jefferson Avenue. Reference is to the Tract Books in the Clerk's Office of the County of Wayne, Michigan.

- 1814 Warranty Deed, 7 June 1814, recorded in Liber 2, p. 448. (Private Claim 385)
Louis Trombly, Sr. to Henry Connor.
- 1906 Patent, 7 May 1906, recorded in Liber 662, p. 237. (Private Claim 385)
United States, by James Monroe, President, to Henry Connor, Assignee of Leonard Trombly.
- 1851 Partition of the Estate of Henry Connor, deceased, 13 September 1851, recorded in Liber 49, p. 489. (Lots 4-6). Assigned to John H. Connor, et al.
- 1867 Warranty Deed, 13 November 1867, recorded in Liber 132, p. 134. (Lots 4 and 5)
Jane Seligman to John Kelly.
- 1873 Warranty Deed, 20 August 1873, recorded in Liber 172, p. 12. (Lots 4 and 5)
John Kelly to William Wreford and George Beck.

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Original and Subsequent Owners (Continued)

- 1907 Warranty Deed, 8 July 1907, recorded in Liber 672, p. 451. (Lots 4 and 5)
William Wreford and George Beck to the Union Trust Co., Administrator of the Estate of Joseph H. Berry.
- 1909 Deed, 16 June 1909, recorded in Liber 703, p. 75. (Lots 4 and 5 between Edlie St. and Connor's Creek)
Union Trust Co. to Chalmers-Detroit Motor Co.
- 1917 Warranty Deed, 20 April 1917, recorded in Liber 1166, p. 272. (Part of Lot 6 south of Connor's Creek).
William J. Connor, Trustee of Richard H. Connor, deceased, to the Chalmers Motor Co.
- 1920 Quit Claim Deed, 20 April 1920, recorded in Liber 1193, p. 7. (Lots 6, between Connor's Creek and Jefferson Avenue.
William J. Connor, Trustee of Richard H. Connor, deceased, to the Chalmers Motor Corporation.
- 1923 Warranty Deed, 26 February 1923, recorded in Liber 1595, p. 402. (Parts of Lots 4 and 5)
Trustees of the Berry Estate to the Maxwell Motor Corporation.
- 1925 Warranty Deed, 24 June 1925, No. 868155 (Parts of Lots 4 and 5).
Maxwell Motor Corporation to the Chrysler Corporation.
- 1929 Warranty Deed, 2 August 1929, No. B92518. (Parts of Lots 4, 5 and 6)
Trustees of the Berry Estate to the Chrysler Corp.

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Physical Development of the Manufacturing Plant Through 1929

The beginnings of what became a vast automobile manufacturing and assembly plant south of Jefferson Avenue and west of Conner can be traced to 28 June 1907, when the City of Detroit issued a building permit (No. 1798) to the E. R. Thomas-Detroit Company to construct a "Cement Manufactory" three stories high, measuring 60 feet by 400 feet, at an estimated cost of \$100,000. This was the first of six large reinforced-concrete buildings constructed at this site between 1908 and 1917. Four of these, each measuring 60 by 400 feet, ran parallel to each other and reached four stories in height. Smaller wings extended out from the main buildings, which were also interconnected by four-story bridges. By 1918, the complex included eight additional substantial buildings of various designs. The construction of the major buildings will be delineated in detail below. This report will also include site plans for the complex at key benchmarks - 1910, 1918, 1929, 1946, and 1955.

The buildings constructed by Chalmers (1908-1918) were mainly of reinforced concrete design, with several exceptions. Albert Kahn (1869-1942) designed virtually all of the Chalmers complex, which included some of his earliest industrial work in reinforced concrete. Kahn's first concrete factory building was the Packard Motor Car Company Plant Number Ten (1905) in Detroit. The following year, Kahn completed the designs for a multi-building manufacturing complex for the George N. Pierce Company, an automobile manufacturer in Buffalo, New York. The first three reinforced concrete factory buildings of the Chalmers complex predate the first building Kahn designed for the Ford Motor Company Highland Park plant, completed in late 1909. Kahn established himself as the principle architect to the Detroit automobile industry during the period 1905-1920 by completing substantial factory designs for Packard, Chalmers, Ford, Dodge Brothers Company, Hudson Motor Car Company, Lozier Motor Car Company, Continental Motor Company, E. F. Goodrich Rubber Company, and U. S. Rubber Company, among others.

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Kahn designed almost all of the structures completed by 1918. The earliest factory buildings were originally constructed as three-story structures, with a fourth floor added later. The first unit was finished in early 1908, while the second and third parallel three-story concrete buildings (Permit No. 1438, issued 30 June 1909), were finished in 1909. Chalmers also received a permit on 3 December 1909 (No. 718-A) for additions to two of the buildings already standing, probably to add a fourth floor to each. In 1912, the two easternmost buildings were linked by a four-story "bridge" 134 feet long with its own wing 192 feet long extending to the south (Permit No. 3335, issued 17 August 1912). Building permits do not show when the third main building received a fourth floor, but a Chalmers catalogue of 1913 shows a fourth floor on all the wings. The company filled in the open court between the two easternmost wings with a one-story steel-framed building with sawtooth roof monitors (Permit No. 2729-A, issued 8 July 1915). A freestanding two-story concrete building measuring 60 feet by 200 feet was erected south of the main complex in early 1916 and enlarged to four stories later in the year (Permits No. 11194, issued 1 November 1915 and 164-A, issued 3 February 1916). Finally, a fourth major wing, 60 feet by 400 feet (Permit No. 2647, issued 1 May 1916), was completed in 1917 on the site of a one-story cement block warehouse built in 1908. A connection bridge (Permit No. 2542-A, issued 19 October 1918) linked the new wing with the one to the east.⁴

By 1918, the complex included more than a dozen additional buildings of various designs, but only one of these (Testing Building) survived a later construction boom of 1925-1929. The Vinton Company erected a one-story "Warehouse of Cement Blocks," measuring 60 feet by 256 feet, just east of the first three-story reinforced concrete factory building (Permit No. 1410, issued 20 July 1908). Kahn designed a one-story steel-framed building, described as a "Testing Building," in 1910. Measuring 52 feet by 152 feet overall, it extended from the southeast edge of the complex (Permit No. 278, issued 21 February 1910). He also designed a two-story steel-framed storage building, measuring 70 feet by 177 feet, with a height of 21 feet, located south of the main factory buildings (Permit No. 4476, issued 2 December 1911).

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Finally, Kahn designed a one-story steel-framed building, 60 feet wide by 150 feet long, with a large central roof monitor extending the length of the building (Permit No. 11675, issued 12 December 1916). This building, located at the south edge of the complex, was part of the stamping plant.

By 1918, the Chalmers complex also included four substantial wood-framed buildings, along with dozens of smaller sheds. The building permits for these frame buildings were issued to the Chalmers Company and not to an architect, suggesting that the automaker designed these structures internally.

The first of these was a one-story storage shed measuring 148 feet by 160 feet, located at the rear of the property (Permit No. 5240, issued 4 December 1912). The second was a one-story structure measuring 60 feet by 152 feet, located west of the 1908 factory building (Permit No. 7571, issued 7 May 1913). This frame building served as an auditorium and restaurant for the plant. A one-story frame office building, 20 feet by 60 feet, was constructed in 1917 in front of the 1908 concrete factory wing and attached to it (Permit No. 9095, issued 10 October 1916). Finally, a frame storage building, 44 feet wide and 69 feet long, was built toward the rear of the property in 1918 (Permit No. 825, issued 16 April 1918).

The Jefferson Avenue plant expanded in the late 1920s, with four major new steel-framed buildings and smaller additions to the existing plant. The Detroit architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls (SH&G) designed the new buildings. Its predecessor, Field, Hinchman & Smith (FH&S), had specialized in industrial work during its brief life (1903-1906). FH&S designed the Olds Gasoline Engine Works (1904) in Lansing, Michigan, and the Ford Motor Company Piquette plant (1904) in Detroit. Before beginning its work at the Jefferson Avenue plant, SH&G designed the Dort Motor Car Company plant (1910) in Flint, most of the Dodge Brothers' Company plant (1910-1928) in Hamtramck, Michigan, and the General Motors Corporation Central Forge Plant (1918) in Detroit.⁵

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The first major new building SH&G designed was the Enameling Building (Job No. 6003), built directly south of the 1908 concrete factory. The construction contract was dated 6 December 1927, but the building was not completed until 1928. The W.E. Wood Company of Detroit was the contractor and did the work for \$118,746. This steel and glass building was 60 feet wide and 420 feet long, with its western half two stories high and the eastern half one story high.⁶

The second new building was the Shipping Dock (Job No. 6132), measuring 107 feet by 280 feet, and located west of the 1908 concrete building on the site of the restaurant built in 1913. This was a steel and glass structure that covered a large concrete loading platform split by railroad tracks extending the length of the building. It included a one-story attached brick headhouse (office) measuring 60 feet by 131 feet. The W.E. Wood Company of Detroit built this facility at a cost of \$132,002. The construction contract was signed in July 1928 and the building completed later that year.

SH&G's third project was the Assembly Building (Job No. 6125), a long, rectangular steel and glass building measuring 110 feet wide and 1,000 feet long, with a rectangular center roof monitor 40 feet wide. It was connected with and extended south of the major reinforced concrete wing completed in 1917. The Walbridge, Aldinger Company contracted on 10 May 1928 to construct the building at a cost of \$502,105. Although the contracts and drawings call this the "Assembly Building," the 1929 Sanborn map of the area showed the building housing spraying and drying ovens.

The last major SH&G building of this period was the Machine Shop (Job Nos. 6201 and 6429), a rectangular steel and glass building, 162 feet wide and 770 feet long, with four rectangular roof monitors running the length of the building. The contractor for the original building was H. G. Christman-Burke, who completed the project for \$360,574. The drawings were produced in September - December 1928 and the building was finished in 1929. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls also designed the first addition to the Machine Shop in September 1929 and this was completed the following year. The addition made the building 1,100 feet long and extended it south to Freud.

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The Chrysler Corporation had SH&G design several "in-fill" buildings to better utilize the available space at the site. The firm designed a four-story rectangular reinforced concrete building to fill in the "court" between the second and third concrete factory wings at the north end of the complex (Job No. 6200, drawings dated 20 September 1928). SH&G also designed a four-story reinforced concrete addition to the south end of the third concrete factory wing (Job No. 6199). It measured 100 feet by 125 feet. The building contractor was R. H. Hidey, who completed this project in late December 1928 at a cost of \$146,326.

Two previously-open "courts" were also filled in with one-story steel and glass buildings with sawtooth roof monitors to allow for natural lighting. The largest, which filled in the space between the legs of the "H" at the northeastern corner of the complex, measured 190 feet by 110 feet. The second, located between two of the older wings and in the middle of reinforced concrete buildings, was 60 feet wide and 210 feet long. The precise dating of these steel-framed additions is not known, but they were probably built in the late 1920s, and in all likelihood, were designed by Chrysler's building engineers. They are absent in the 1923 Baist real estate atlas of the area, but are clearly shown in the 1929 Sanborn insurance map of the complex.

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Physical Development of the Manufacturing Plant From 1929 to
the Recent Past

Although Chrysler added four major new structures to this plant after 1929, along with major additions to existing buildings, the complex was not fundamentally changed between 1929 and 1955, when the last major new construction was finished. Between 1955 and 1990, no significant changes took place in the number and layout of the major buildings.

The first major new building completed after 1929 was the Office and Display Building (1933), designed by Albert Kahn. A significant building on its own merits (see accompanying report, HAER No. MI-49-B), it blocked the view of the assembly plant from Jefferson Avenue. The second was a large steel-framed building measuring 130 feet by 550 feet along the southwest edge of the property in 1939. Designed by SH&G, it housed an employment office and hospital at the north end, while more than three-quarters of the building was used to ship exported vehicles. It was demolished sometime in the 1970s. The third new building was the Service Building at the corner of Jefferson and Terminal (Job No. 1646-AK), designed by Albert Kahn Associates (AKA). This steel and glass structure, finished in 1946, was 135 feet wide and 475 feet long. Finally, AKA designed a conveyor bridge (Job No. 1646-CF) which crossed Jefferson Avenue and connected the Kercheval (body) plant directly with the Jefferson plant. Completed in 1955, it consisted of one steel-framed segment measuring 30 feet wide and 210 feet long, which crossed Jefferson Avenue at the second floor level, and a second steel-framed segment, 25 feet by 325 feet, which extended along the front of the original concrete buildings.

Other changes included a 105 foot by 260 foot addition to the Shipping Dock, completed in 1938; a large (153 feet by 1100 feet) addition to the Machine Shop, completed in December 1944; and a 110 foot by 575 foot extension to the Assembly Building, completed in December 1945. AKA designed all three additions and the W. E. Wood Company of Detroit built them. With these additions, the Shipping Dock was 800 feet long, the Assembly Building extended back to Freud, and the Machine Shop doubled in size.

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The Jefferson Avenue Plant's Place in the History of the
Detroit Automobile Industry and the Chrysler Corporation

Edwin R. Thomas, a manufacturer of automobiles based in Buffalo, New York, established a Detroit branch of his firm in 1907, the E.R. Thomas-Detroit Company. Hugh Chalmers (1873-1932), a successful executive with the National Cash Register Company, bought most of Thomas's shares in the Detroit company and renamed it the Chalmers-Detroit Company in June 1908. He introduced a popular mid-priced car, the Chalmers 30, the same year. Hugh Chalmers changed the corporate name to the Chalmers Motor Company in 1910 and to the Chalmers Motor Corporation in December 1917. The firm produced increasingly expensive cars that did not sell. In 1917, Chalmers leased all of its plant and equipment to the Maxwell Motor Car Company for five years. At the same time, Maxwell relocated its corporate headquarters to the Chalmers plant on Jefferson Avenue.

Maxwell already owned a considerable share of Chalmers stock in 1917 and virtually all of the shares by 1920. The two firms had practically merged by the late 1910s. Walter E. Flanders served as president of both companies starting in 1917. When Maxwell-Chalmers teetered on the edge of bankruptcy in 1920, the creditors replaced Flanders with Walter P. Chrysler, who reorganized and merged the two firms to form the Maxwell Motor Corporation in 1922. The new company produced Chalmers cars until the end of the 1923 model year. Sales of the Maxwell remained strong until 1924, when Walter Chrysler introduced an entirely new 6-cylinder car that carried his own name. The new Chrysler car outsold the Maxwell, which Walter Chrysler discontinued in 1925, when he reorganized the firm as the Chrysler Corporation.⁸

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Walter Percy Chrysler (1875-1940) was born in Wamego, Kansas, the son of a Union Pacific Railroad locomotive engineer. He became a master locomotive mechanic and worked for the American Locomotive Company in Pittsburgh in 1910-1912, before serving as the works manager for the Buick Motor Company in Flint, Michigan in 1912-1916. He proved to be a mechanical and production genius at Buick, where he was promoted to president and general manager (1916-1920). Chrysler also held the post of executive vice-president at General Motors in 1919-1920. Chrysler resigned from his posts at General Motors in March 1920, angered over William C. Durant's interference in Buick's internal operations. Chrysler then became the savior of failing automobile companies.⁹

Shortly after leaving Buick, Walter Chrysler received an invitation to save the financially-troubled Willys-Overland Company. The firm's creditors offered Chrysler a base salary of \$750,000 and fringe benefits that would bring his pay up to \$1 million. He served as executive vice-president of Willys-Overland in 1920-1921 and rescued the firm from bankruptcy through cost-cutting and reorganization. The historic intertwining of the Chrysler and Willys corporate histories is filled with irony. Thanks to Walter Chrysler's efforts, Willys-Overland survived, designed and built the Jeep for the U.S. Army during the Second World War, and a civilian version thereafter. The Kaiser-Frazer Corporation acquired Willys in 1953 and continued making the profitable Jeep. The American Motors Corporation in turn took over the firm known as Kaiser Jeep in 1970 and the Chrysler Corporation subsequently bought American Motors in 1987, largely to acquire the Jeep product line. Chrysler's replacement plant for the historic Jefferson Avenue complex now manufactures the Jeep Grand Cherokee.¹⁰

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In 1920, the bankers who were owed \$26 million by Maxwell-Chalmers convinced Chrysler to reorganize and manage the firm. He agreed to do so if they would grant him complete control and an additional \$15 million in working capital. Chrysler liquidated the Chalmers operations and its cars in September 1922 and introduced successful new Maxwell models in 1922 and 1923. The pathbreaking Chrysler Six introduced in 1924 assured his success. Production began at the Jefferson Avenue plant in late December 1923 and Walter Chrysler showed the new model at the New York Auto Show in January 1924. Available in six different body styles, the new model sported a six-cylinder, high-compression engine and four-wheel hydraulic brakes, both firsts among mass-produced cars. The car impressed investment bankers enough to convince them to grant Chrysler a \$5 million loan to go into full-scale production. The success of the Sixes enabled Walter Chrysler to take complete control of Maxwell, which he reconstituted as the Chrysler Corporation on 6 June 1925. Later that year, he discontinued the Maxwell car, and in 1926 introduced three additional Chrysler models.¹¹

Chrysler's purchase of the Dodge Brothers Company in July 1928 and the completion of the Plymouth Lynch Road assembly plant later that year, gave the Chrysler Corporation enough factory space to produce its expanded lineup of models - the Chrysler, Dodge, De Soto, and Plymouth automobiles. The new manufacturing capacity enabled Chrysler to increase its sales from 192,000 cars in 1927 to 450,543 in 1929, making it one of the top three U. S. automobile companies. Chrysler weathered the Great Depression much better than Ford or General Motors. Production in 1933 had rebounded back to the 1929 level and in 1940-1941, Chrysler averaged over 900,000 passenger cars per year. Chrysler became the number two U.S. automobile manufacturer in 1933, trailing only General Motors, and Chrysler maintained that position until 1952. That is not to say, however, that Chrysler did not suffer from the Great Depression or make costly errors along the way. The Chrysler and De Soto Airflow models, radical in design and in styling, appeared in the 1934 model year and survived through the 1937 model year, but were a disaster in terms of sales and profits.¹²

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The Jefferson Avenue plant played an integral part in the United Automobile Workers' (UAW) successful organization of much of the U.S. automobile industry in 1937. The UAW initially won recognition from General Motors in mid-February 1937 following a 44-day sit-down strike at select General Motors plants in Flint. Because of Henry Ford's rigid opposition to unions, the UAW leadership picked Chrysler as its next target. On the afternoon of 8 March 1937, workers at all nine Chrysler plants in the Detroit area simultaneously sat down and about 17,000 barricaded themselves inside the plants. A Wayne County judge issued an injunction ordering the men to leave the Chrysler plants by 17 March, but pro-union crowds of more than 10,000 gathered at the gates of the Jefferson Avenue and Dodge Main plants and prevented any police action. The UAW finally vacated the Chrysler plants on 25 March after Governor Frank Murphy pledged to keep the factories shut during the negotiations that followed. CIO president John L. Lewis and Walter Chrysler signed an agreement two weeks later recognizing the UAW.¹³

At the same time that the manufacturing and assembly operations south of Jefferson Avenue were expanding through the late 1930s, the Kercheval (body) plant north of Jefferson grew as well. By 1941, the two plants had a combined employment of 14,000 and produced 850 cars per day. All the bodies were manufactured at the Kercheval plant and then transported across Jefferson Avenue on flatbed trucks, which could carry only eight bodies at a time.¹⁴

Chrysler, along with the rest of the Detroit automobile industry, was a major supplier to the federal government during the Second World War. Jefferson Avenue was one of Chrysler's most important wartime plants, building a wide range of products, including industrial engines (119,814), marine engines (21,131), and multi-bank engines (9,965). Much of the production had naval applications - submarine nets (1,994), marine tractors (8,228), fire apparatus (20,404), mainly for use on ships; and the "Sea Mule" Harbor Tug. Jefferson also turned out 9,002 pontoons, 1,550 search light reflectors, 352 air raid sirens, and 253 smoke screens. Wartime production included wings for Curtis-Wright airplanes and parts for the B-26 Martin "Marauder" bomber.¹⁵

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The Jefferson Avenue complex reached its peak production and employment in the late 1950s, after Chrysler built a \$20 million addition to the Kercheval plant in 1955. The new buildings housed modern Body-In-White assembly lines and painting facilities, which enabled Chrysler to produce welded bodies prior to painting. In the late 1950s, the complex employed 16,500 and produced 1,200 cars per day. To eliminate the costly and harmful practice of transporting bodies to the assembly plant across the street by truck, Chrysler built a bridge over Jefferson Avenue in 1955 to house body conveyor lines. The bridge connected the two plants at the second floor level.¹⁶

The Jefferson Avenue plant remained a significant automobile assembly plant until it closed in February 1990. During the energy crises of the 1970s set off by OPEC, the Chrysler Corporation suffered more than General Motors or Ford because Chrysler had emphasized large, fuel-inefficient vehicles. When the entire U.S. auto industry weathered a major downturn in 1974, employment at Jefferson Avenue dropped from 6,000 to only 2,000 workers. Chrysler later spent \$100 million to re-tool the plant to produce the new line of compact cars, the so-called "K-Cars" (Dodge Aries and Plymouth Reliant). Jefferson Avenue produced its first K-Cars in August 1980 and their success helped save the Chrysler Corporation from bankruptcy. Despite its age and decrepid appearances on the outside, Jefferson Avenue was a "state of the art" automobile assembly plant in the early 1980s, with Unimate welding robots and the Robogate body framing and welding system. Jefferson Avenue produced K-Cars until February 1989, when Chrysler moved the production of the subcompact Dodge Omni/Plymouth Horizon twins there. Extremely slow sales of the Omni/Horizon soon forced Chrysler to discontinue production. Chrysler permanently closed the Jefferson Avenue assembly plant in February 1990, temporarily laying off 1,700 workers and ending eighty-two years of operations at this site. Most of those workers were subsequently re-hired to work in a new assembly plant built on the north side of Jefferson Avenue.¹⁷

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NOTES

¹Silas Farmer, History of Detroit and Wayne County and Early Michigan (Detroit: Silas Farmer, 1890), pp. 17-23 and Clarence M. Burton, The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701-1922 (Detroit: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), Volume 4, pp. 88-93.

²Burton, The City of Detroit, Michigan, Volume 3, pp. 16-20.

³Grant Hildebrand, Designing for Industry: The Architecture of Albert Kahn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), pp. 28-45, 54 and W. Hawkins Ferry, The Legacy of Albert Kahn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), pp. 12-13.

⁴Chalmers Motor Company, Chalmers Motor Cars, 1913 (Detroit: Chalmers Motor Company, 1913), pp. 58-59.

⁵Thomas J. Holleman and James P. Gallagher, Smith, Hinchman & Grylls: 125 Years of Architecture and Engineering, 1853-1978 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), pp. 71, 75, 84-85, 94.

⁶Information concerning the six SH&G projects described in this section comes from two sources - the SH&G job files, preserved at SH&G's offices in Detroit, and from building contract summaries found in the Chrysler Historical Archives in Highland Park, Michigan.

⁷The information on additions is gleaned from Sanborn fire insurance maps; from the job records of Albert Kahn Associates and Smith, Hinchman & Grylls; and from wartime photographs in the Chrysler Historical Collection.

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⁸ George S. May, "Hugh Chalmers" and "Maxwell-Briscoe Motor Company," in George S. May, editor, The Automobile Industry, 1896-1920, pp. 76-78, 329-333 and Clarence M. Burton, The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701-1922 (Detroit: Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), Volume 1, pp. 583-584.

⁹ Richard P. Scharchburg, "Walter Percy Chrysler," in George S. May, editor, The Automobile Industry, 1920-1980 (New York: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1989), pp. 52-56.

¹⁰ George S. May, "John North Willys," in George S. May, editor, The Automobile Industry, 1896-1920, pp. 463-467.

¹¹ Walter P. Chrysler, in collaboration with Boyden Sparkes, Life of An American Workman (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1937), pp. 181-182, 191 and Scharchburg, "Walter Percy Chrysler," in May, The Automobile Industry, 1920-1980, pp. 57-61.

¹² W. Hawkins Ferry, The Legacy of Albert Kahn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), p. 24; George S. May, "Chrysler Corporation," in George S. May, editor, The Automobile Industry, 1920-1980, p. 65; Michael Moritz and Barrett Seaman, Going For Broke: The Chrysler Story (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1981), pp. 39-41; and Steve Jefferys, Management and Managed: Fifty Years of Crisis at Chrysler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 50-51.

¹³ Steve Babson, Working Detroit: The Making of A Union Town (New York: Adama Books, 1984), pp. 75, 80, 84, 86.

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¹⁴ Jefferson Assembly Plant Quality Improvement Team, Jefferson Avenue Assembly Plant, 1907-1984: 77 Years of History! (Detroit, 1984), no page numbers.

¹⁵ Chrysler produced a statistical summary of its war work, "Shipments of War Products," by year and by plant, and this is found in the Chrysler Corporation Historical Collections.

¹⁶ Jefferson Assembly Plant Quality Product Improvement Team, Jefferson Assembly Plant, 1907-1984: 77 Years of History! (Detroit, 1984), no page numbers.

¹⁷ Moritz and Seaman, Going For Broke: The Chrysler Story, pp. 322-323 and Helen Fogel, "Chrysler Stuns Detroit: 1,700 Jefferson Workers to Lose Jobs in February," The Detroit News, 4 November 1989.

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SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural Drawings: Original drawings have survived for the Jefferson Avenue plant buildings designed by Albert Kahn. They are preserved in the corporate archives of Albert Kahn Associates, Architects and Engineers, the Albert Kahn Building, 7430 Second Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48202. Original drawings have also survived for most of the buildings designed by the architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. These also survive in microfiche form in the office of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates, Inc., 150 West Jefferson Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48226.
- B. Historic Views: Three major sources of historic views were identified. The largest collection, approximately 1,500 views, is found at the Chrysler Historical Collection, the Chrysler Corporation, 12000 Chrysler Drive, Highland Park, Michigan 48288. The National Automotive History Collection at the Detroit Public Library, 5201 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48202, has roughly 600 historic photographs, primarily interior views. The office of Albert Kahn Associates in Detroit also has approximately 150 views.
- C. Bibliography
1. Primary and Unpublished Sources:
 - Albert Kahn Associates, Architects and Engineers, Detroit, Michigan. Job Book, a chronological listing of the firm's commissions.
 - Chrysler Historical Collection, Highland Park, Michigan. Miscellaneous materials, including summaries of building construction contracts for Jefferson Avenue plant buildings.

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C. Bibliography (Continued)

1. Primary and Unpublished Sources (Continued):

Detroit, City of. Building Permits, Department of Building and Safety Engineering, City-County Building, Detroit, Michigan 48226. Indexes to building permits issued by the Detroit Fire Marshall, 1880-1926 are found in the Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library.

Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates, Inc. Job Files, including the job number and construction costs for the SH&G designs at Jefferson Avenue.

Wayne County, Register of Deeds, Land Tract Index, International Center Building, 400 Monroe Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48226.

2. Secondary and Published Sources

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C. Bibliography (Continued)

2. Secondary and Published Sources (Continued)

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BELLE ISLE, MICHIGAN QUADRANGLE



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CHRYSLER CORPORATION, MANUFACTURING PLANT
12200 East Jefferson Avenue
Detroit
Wayne County
Michigan

HAER MI-24-A
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FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001